

No Powder Puff



Renée Brinkerhoff takes the racing plunge - and takes the podium, first time out

People's first reaction is usually, "Wow! Why in the world would you want to do that? Are you sure that's how you want to get into racing - and that you even want to race?"



Renée in the driver's seat at a service stop, still smiling after seven days of racing.

If you started racing in your fifties, you may have heard similar questions. But regardless of people's quizzical looks, I wasn't going to be deterred from going for my dream, no matter how crazy it sounded. I'd spent a lifetime talking about racing and hoping that one day I could give it a try. So when life presented me with both the time and means to take the leap forward, I realized I had to either get after it or quit talking. Plus, the thought of being on my deathbed and still dreaming about it seemed like "loser-ville". I wasn't going to have that regret.

After talking with a relative who had successfully raced vintage cars for over 30 years, I decided a Porsche 356 would suit me just fine; not too much power and a rear-weight bias which I was accustomed to. I also found the idea of driving an older car without all the modern "save you" features attractive - something that would require greater than average skill from the driver.

I purchased my 1956 356A in California in the fall of 2011 already restored, and it happily joined my 2007 Carrera S. Shortly after taking possession of the vehicle, I realized my "A+++ restored car" was a pretty picture at best - and everything beneath the surface needed an overhaul.

Jim Ansite in California began the work of

turning it into a race car, but as I was in Colorado and wanted to be closer to the project, we shipped the car to Denver and put it in the trustworthy hands of Greg Johnson from Eurosport. As I had no prior racing experience and was waiting for the car to be drivable, I took a couple of Porsche Sport Driving School courses, had Hurley Haywood by my side on one blessed day, and took private instruction in Denver from Michael Pettiford.

After a brief discussion on the different types of racing, I decided rally events sounded like my cup of tea: open roads with unknown turns and hazards marking the way. The closest event which was what I would call a "true old-style rally race", was La Carrera Panamericana, south of the border in Mexico. Before making a commitment that serious, however, I decided it was paramount that I go as an observer or preferably as a crew member "windshield washer" to confirm this was something I was passionate about doing. I sent out emails, made some calls and found a car owner in California who had run the event twice before, needed a new partner, and would share the driving and expenses 50/50. After that 2012 La Carrera—a horrifically difficult yet mind-altering experience—it was vastly clear: I'd found my race. Mexico, here I come!

On returning from Mexico in November 2012, Eurosport immediately started preparing the car using the event's general and "Sport Menor" class regulations. The car had to be street legal, that is, Mexico-style street legal, meaning it can endure seven grueling days, cover nearly 1900 miles of speed and transit sections, all the while driving on public country roads and highways of questionable surface quality.

Power came via a 4 cylinder, Type 4, 2-liter engine with Weber IDA carbs. We used a counter-weighted crankshaft with racing grade connecting rods. Disc brakes and oversized sway bars were installed, front and rear. We built it as a special stage rally or Targa spec car. Though we started with ample time to prepare it with the regulation modifications, the time lost on the numerous unforeseen overhauls to my newly restored car, found us unable to finish the build in time. It wasn't until two weeks before departing for Mexico that we were able to begin testing the vehicle. It was being worked on right until the night before departure. (This coming year's project is to complete the car's setup with an improved suspension and 5-speed transmission - before the last minute!)

Recruiting a crew

Shortly after starting the car prep, I started the hunt for a navigator/co-piloto. I contacted Gerie Bledsoe, the North American liaison, with my navigator wish list: young, Mexican, male and with navigating experience. Young because he might be more progressive in his thinking when it came to riding with a woman driver. Mexican because he would know the language, roads and culture, and male because I didn't like the prospect of driving through Mexico without a man in the car. It wasn't long before I heard back from Gerie. He had found just the person, if only he would agree to team up with me. Roberto Mendoza, newly married and living in Mexico City had run La Carrera Panamericana three times and was very involved with rally racing in Mexico. Not only was he a navigator, he also had driving experience - a lot more than I had. After a few email exchanges, he agreed to join me. Our first meeting was in Veracruz, this year's starting point for the race. Roberto proved to be an invaluable asset and did an excellent job navigating and coaching. We were never penalized for navigation or time-keeping errors and only lost time when we crashed and couldn't finish two speed sections.

It's important to note that no one can win or even finish this race without an outstanding crew. George Arriola, a retired engineer with the LA Fire Department and member of the COPS team that runs the Baja 1000, agreed to be our crew chief. He speaks Spanish and is familiar with Mexico's laws and culture - a Big Plus! Jake Stull, who works under the excellent tutelage of Greg Johnson, came down as chief mechanic. He knew my car intimately, was passionate about the build project, and immensely dedicated to the team. Jake was born and raised in Colorado and had rarely left the state. This would be his first trip out of the country.

Trailering a race car from Colorado to the south of Mexico was going to be quite an experience for the two of them. From start to finish, the adventure took two and a half weeks. During the race week, they rose around 4 a.m. and quit their workday around midnight. Our open trailer was equipped with a mobile shop carrying tools, parts and spare tires, and the truck carried a backup engine among other things. Getting lost is a daily occurrence for many support crews and the logistics of driving on narrow cobbled streets pulling a trailer is a nightmare! After retrieving the race car from the driving team at the finish line each day, the next challenge was finding an area suitable to service the vehicle. Several crews deserted their teams, as the stress was more than they bargained for. Carburetor jetting was another challenge, as we started at sea level and climbed daily to elevations ranging between 6 and 10,000 feet. Other than our accident on day six, we never missed one speed section or race day. Our crew kept us racing strong every day. And knowing you can trust the car, gives the driver immense confidence to push the limit!



From left: Jake Stull, Roberto Mendoza, Renée Brinkerhoff and George Arriola.

The race has ten classes and each has its own prep regulations. This year, the race started with 84 cars and 62 finished. After the qualifying round, we started Day One in 51st place. At the conclusion of Day Three, we were in 28th place overall - our best daily standing. Oddly, after driving that day, I was really down on myself as I was sure we had lost 10-15 places. Funny how that works sometimes. At the conclusion of the race, after seven days of racing, we finished 36th overall and were first in our class. We finished first in class everyday we raced, except for day six when we wrecked, and day seven when our strategy was to stay on the road, finish every section and cross the finish line in Zacatecas. We knew if we could accomplish that, we had first place overall securely in hand as our lead was too great for our class competitors to catch us. In addition to winning our class, my 1956 356A won the award for most beautiful 2013 La Carrera Panamericana race car - a cherry on the cake!

This year's event saw more precipitation and related fog than several earlier years and definitely presented me with challenges. Days Four and Five were spinout days on the wet, mossy roads. Day Six saw several cars, including mine, off the road on one speed section corner. We all got in the trailing oil of a preceding car that chose to drive the line while leaking fluids after wrecking on an earlier turn. The first car, a beautiful Alfa Romeo, rolled and was totaled. We were fourth and last to go off. To prevent further wrecks, my co-piloto Roberto went in advance of the corner and waved the following cars to slow their speed. Numerous others would have crashed had he not warned them. Now that's a class act!



Day six: Into the weeds, but it could have been worse. Aside from a dented rear fender, the car was ready to carry on.



Every day, a test

The race is challenging for professional and amateur drivers alike. Crashes and mechanicals are daily occurrences with cars strewn alongside and sometimes *in* the road. Gravel on the driving line, boulders in your path, bumps, dips and potholes, blind curves and summits; you can drive to the limit but only if you dare! This race has seen numerous deaths as recently as last year, 2012, when there were two fatalities: on the morning of Day One when a race car rolled and another on Day Seven during the last speed section before the finish line. This year, on Day One, “Memo” Rojas, Jr., an international racecar driver and three-time winner of 24 Hrs of Daytona, crashed as he struggled to learn rally racing. He went on to finish the race with an overall third place finish, vowing to be back next year.

Additionally, each driving team has its own personal challenges: limited sleep, the daily moving from city to city and most of all, the stress and anxiety of driving at or near the threshold. It’s not uncommon for team members to yell and fight in the car even during the speed sections, promising never to drive together again. Be assured, this is not “powder puff” racing.

Top: Curves and pavement variations, plus elevation changes and obstacles on the road make each day a new challenge.

Right: The car is well equipped to provide the crew a safe working environment, but after a day of racing everyone is ready to relax as the cars assemble in the town square for the night. **Far right:** Another day’s class win for Renée and Roberto on Day 5 in Guanajuato.



Historically from 1950-1954, the race ran from the southern Mexico/Guatemala border to the north, ending at the Texas/Mexico line. Now, with significant drug cartel problems in the northern states, and political unrest with the indigenous peoples in the southern border states, the race zigzags its way through central Mexico with its high plateaus and mountain passes. Mexican Federales protect the participants in the destination cities and local police assist along the way. Road hazards during speed sections are numerous, with sheer drop-offs lacking guardrails, and donkeys, dogs and people randomly crossing the road. Every day hundreds of enthusiasts line the streets, cheering the race cars along their way. Thousands of spectators await as the cars cross the daily finish line and a Mexican Fiesta ensues with live entertainment and gaiety. People throng the cars to have their photo taken and collect the signatures of the driving teams; rock stars for a week!

On an entirely different note, which will no doubt sound grossly naïve, it wasn’t until I looked around the orientation meeting to make some girlfriends at La Carrera Panamericana 2012, that I learned car racing is a man’s sport. I was stunned! Why weren’t there more women involved? We could write a thesis on this but let’s not!

This year there was just myself and one other woman driver. So given those odds and the race’s history, there was an opportunity to come home with an historic outcome as the first woman driver to have a class win for the day and more significantly, for the entire event. No woman has ever, in the history of the La Carrera Panamericana, podiumed first. Wow! Maybe telling my experience will get more lady drivers involved. (I sure hope so.)

The men in the race could not have been more supportive or encouraging. I never felt odd or treated differently than the male team members, except that they may have used alternate language when I wasn’t around. This race is famous for an amazing esprit de corps. Many competitors assist each other in keeping their race cars on the road, even if they may beat you the following day.

As a new driver, I’ve become well aware that to be competitive, or even average, there’s an immense depth of experience and knowledge needed, coupled with seat time acquisition that is downright staggering. How in the world can I make that up? Well, I can’t. But that doesn’t mean I can’t give it a full-out effort. Next year, I plan to get that immensely needed seat time and hopefully, figure out the challenges of driving on wet and slippery roads. We may never finish on top again but we had a great go of it this year. It was worth the years of dreaming. 🚗

