Race to the clouds

29/06/2019 Porsche is back in full force at this year's Pikes Peak International Hill Climb.

Tomorrow, a corner of the Colorado wilderness will echo to the glorious rasp of flat sixes as no less than 16 Porsche take on the legendary Pikes Peak hill climb. From an all-electric 1973 Porsche RSR competing in the Exhibition class (yes, you read that correctly), to a twin-turbo GT3 R EVO driven by David Donohue running in the Open category, there will be plenty of Stuttgart's finest running up the 19.99 km course.

Alongside a single 2019 718 Cayman GT4 entry, six 2016 Cayman GT4 Clubsport MRs are also back this year, running in the invitation Porsche Pikes Peak Trophy by Yokohama, with seven drivers hoping to unseat the current title holder, X-Games and AMA Motocross champion Travis Pastrana. He's joined by his friend and fellow Nitro Circus stunt rider Blake 'Bilko' Williams, as well as IndyCar driver J.R. Hildebrand, Phil Bloom, Marc Bunting, George Hess III and Gustav Lundh. Here's hoping this year's weather stays a bit kinder, as last time a sudden snow storm closed in just after Pastrana's winning run.

Meanwhile, Donohue is hoping to build on his 2018 success, when he set the Time Attack record in a Porsche GT3 R. Running in the Open class this year, there's no doubt he and the team from Porsche Colorado Springs are coming armed for the task. His GT3 R's chassis remains relatively unchanged, but the twin-turbos have significantly upped the ante for this year. Thanks to all the extra boost, the car is good for about 825 hp at altitude — that translates as nearly 1000 hp at sea level.

If there was ever a person that could handle all that power, it's Donohue. A winner at Le Mans and Daytona, as well as Pikes Peak, he's also the son of racing legend Mark Donohue (the man who, in 1975, set a closed-course speed record at Talladega in a Porsche 917-30). An impressive pedigree.

Donohue is the sole Porsche entrant in the Open class, but there are six Porsche running in the Time Attack category. For the Open class, the cars look like normal road cars from the outside, but a host of modifications can be made to the engine, transmission and suspension. Hence the reason, that although Donohue's car is based on a production car —another important rule — he can run twin turbos in a GT3.

Porsche's reliability and speed fit for the extreme conditions on Pikes Peak

Like the Open class, the cars in Time Attack 1 can be highly modified, but again, have to be based on production cars. In short, so long as it looks like a Porsche, you can alter large elements of the donor car in order to get up to the summit as quickly as possible. Seven of these 911-based machines are entered in the class, piloted by an eclectic mix of drivers from France, Japan and the United States.

Porsche's history with Pikes Peak stretches all the way back to 1958, when Bill Paine competed in a 356 A Speedster, and the cars from Zuffenhausen have featured heavily since. The hill and the Porsche brand are natural bed-fellows, with Porsche's reliability and speed a natural fit for the extreme conditions on Pikes Peak. After all, the Peak rises to a not-inconsiderable 4,302 m above sea level and features 156 corners, with all the changeable weather those variations can throw up.

With this sort of demanding terrain, it's no wonder that Porsche has enjoyed its fair share of success over the years. Here's hoping for more in 2019.

Photos: Larry Chen

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