

Call of the Racetrack

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13/02/2017 Atlanta, Zuffenhausen, Nürburgring. Thomas Eduard Park picks up his new Porsche Cayman GT4 from the factory in Zuffenhausen and heads straight to the Nordschleife of the Nürburgring, where a Cayman R is waiting for him.

Thomas Park frowns as he looks up at the sky, which is becoming more overcast by the minute. He's wearing his racing suit. A Porsche Cayman R stands ready to go. He'll be on the track in half an hour. The 35-year-old is not thinking about the track's left and right bends, but rather about what is happening to the weather. “The Nürburgring is so hard to drive when it's wet that I'll need another line,” he says. And he hasn't been able to test that because so far it hasn't been raining. Former Formula One world champion Jackie Stewart called the Nürburgring's legendary Nordschleife the “Green Hell,” because he drove there faster in the fog than he ever wanted to do again in his life. Even today, people still say that if you want to master the Green Hell you have to drive like the devil. Park is aware of this. “A little fear won't hurt,” he says, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “Today it's just a matter of survival.”

A few minutes before entering the 2016 RCN (Rundstrecken-Challenge Nürburgring, or Circuit Challenge Nürburgring), Park is quiet. He is listening to his coach, Domenico Solombrino, who is talking about the major flags and the speed limit in the pit lane. Park nods, but his thoughts are clearly elsewhere. After all, he has known those details for years. He has driven thousands of laps on the Nürburgring on a computer simulator with a full steering wheel and pedal setup, so of course he is familiar with every curve. But will he be able to draw on that knowledge when zooming through the Fuchsröhre at 250 km/h with the rain slamming into the windshield?

The sun has disappeared behind the clouds, and the roar of the engines drowns out conversation. Park won't be driving the race in his new GT4—at least not this time. Instead, he climbs into a white and blue, fully race-modified Cayman R, which is not legal for road use and instead is intended purely for racing. Mechanics mount the guards, test the engine one last time, and check the tires. Park adjusts his helmet and places his hands on the steering wheel—the final steps in a long journey that began some thirty years ago at his parents' home, close to the famous Indianapolis Motor Speedway. A journey that brought him to Stuttgart nine days before this race.

Porsche fan from Atlanta

It's late in the evening at a pub in downtown Stuttgart. Park arrived yesterday from Atlanta. He has had very little sleep, but is wide awake. He tells his story. "I was fascinated by cars at the age of three. I knew all the brands and types just from passing them on the road. How many horsepower there are in a certain special model from 1987. Or the strengths of a Porsche GT3 in curves." Park has it all stored in his mind and says, "Sure, I'm a nerd."

While in high school he bought cars, drove them for a year—preferably on racetracks—and sold them if at all possible for a profit. He worked his way up through a series of automotive classes. Up to Porsche. "My hobby is, unfortunately, on the expensive side," he remarks. "But what can I do?" His day job is as a computer specialist. He also works as a driving instructor at a racetrack. He is single, but has a special relationship with speed. All of his money goes into fast cars. It feeds his dream of being a race-car driver and, maybe someday, becoming a pro.

Dream car Porsche 911 GT3

He has already acquired his dream car. A Porsche 911 GT3 stands in his garage in Atlanta. "The best car for racing," he says with pride, and calls it his baby. But now he pauses as if something has just occurred to him. "I guess I'm a little nervous," he says, like someone preparing for his first date. Park has come to Germany for two reasons. He wants to take his first step as a race-car driver and experience the legendary Nürburgring, which seems so far away from Atlanta. He'll be entering the amateur RCN series—and hopefully place in the top half of the field—in order to enter the VLN (Veranstaltergemeinschaft Langstreckenpokal Nürburgring, or Endurance Championship Nürburgring) as soon as possible. And he also wants to test his new car on the "most famous racetrack in the world,"

as he himself says. He will pick up his new Cayman GT4 tomorrow. “I hope I can sleep,” he says before leaving.

The next morning at the Porsche factory in Zuffenhausen, Park is tired. “It was a short night, and I’m really excited.” Porsche’s European Delivery Program lets him pick up his new Cayman GT4 straight from the factory. He is accompanied by his father and a few friends, all of whom have flown in from the United States. Mel Park (68) stays in the background, even when his son enters the hall that contains the new cars waiting in all their glory for their new owners. “It’s a big moment for him,” he whispers when his son sees his new car for the first time. “Yes!” murmurs Thomas Park, gently running his hand along the white car body.

He has eyes for nothing else and has entered his own world. Just him and his Porsche. He examines the car reverently in silence for a few minutes, and finally dares to ask himself, “Should I get in?” He adjusts the seat and the steering wheel, as he has done for years. Just as someone might carefully smooth a freshly pressed shirt before putting it on, Park has to adjust everything in the car to perfection. The perfect appearance for him also includes the number 46. Before driving the new Cayman even a meter, he applies the number—the same one used by the great motorcycle racer Valentino Rossi—to both doors.

Mel Park laughs and remarks, “He didn’t get this fascination from me.” But he is pleased to see his son’s delight. And that delight is clearly visible. Thomas Park smooths his T-shirt and poses with his father for a photo. The T-shirt shows the Porsche 956 in which Stefan Bellof drove a lap of the Nordschleife in the record time of 6:11.13 minutes in 1983—a time that has not been beaten to this day. Incredible. The four-word homage to Bellof above the photo of the car: “King of the Ring.” Park is a courteous man and would never say that he would like to be king of the Nürburgring. But a minor prince, perhaps?

Happiness on the Nürburgring

Three days later, Park arrives in the Eifel region of Germany. There are five days to go before the race. He has received the necessary license from the Deutscher Motor Sport Bund (DMSB), Germany’s motor-racing governing body. But he doesn’t have a team or a car for the race—not yet. He starts the search. Park also wants to drive a few laps in his new GT4 and possibly do some training on the course as well. At the end of the week he will say, “Every single day was more than worth it.” After several talks he reaches an agreement with Mathol Racing, a team with extensive experience that can provide a Porsche Cayman for the race.

At more than € 10,000, the program is not exactly cheap, but Park does not want to stop when his goal is so close. He arranges for training, an extra coach to drive the race with him on Saturday, and brings his own Cayman GT4 to the Nürburgring. “I’m more impressed than I expected to be,” he says after several laps. “The GT4 is utterly reliable. It’s so much fun!” If only the weather would cooperate. Park would like to see some rain, in order to practice in wet conditions. But it stays dry.

Fit for the ring

A lot of people who work at the course are impressed that a newcomer would enter his very first race in a Porsche. “The Cayman is simply faster than most cars, which means you have to make all your decisions faster too,” says coach Solombrino. He guides several hundred people a year onto the Nürburgring, but only rarely someone like Park. Thomas Park first came to the Nürburgring in 2006 as a spectator; since then he has returned nearly every year to drive the Nordschleife in his own car. And he has clocked several thousand laps on the simulator in Atlanta, to stay sharp for the Nürburgring. But this time it's for real. With a record number of 195 starters in the RCN this year, there is ear-splitting noise, the smell of fuel—and dark clouds overhead.

Park has covered only a few hundred meters when the rain sets in. In the pit lane, announcements of accidents start coming in over the loudspeakers. Mel Park stands right next to the barrier, with his eyes on the finish line. “Is that him? No.” At some point his son speeds past. Again. And then again. Several teams change tires, but Park stays on the track. “He's a clever boy, I trust him,” says his father.

Park finally drives into the pit. He is happy, because he has finished his part of the race well. “It was really hard; we saw at least 25 accidents, plus the rain, oh man.” His heart urges him to go on. But his head says to let the pro take over and to learn from him. So he climbs into the passenger seat and coach Solombrino takes the wheel. About two hours later the two of them stand in Mathol Racing's trailer and are thrilled. “Fourth out of nine in our difficult vehicle class, that's unbelievable,” says Park. Solombrino adds, “He was incredibly fast for the first time on the track. And it's all the more difficult to drive when you have to alternate between dry and wet stretches.” Park is sure that he'll be back, in fact maybe for the next race. He has taken off his racing suit and his father is getting him something to eat. He looks out the window. It's raining. He smiles.

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