

King of the hill

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13/07/2020 As Jeff Zwart prepares to tackle Pikes Peak with Porsche's new 935, the legendary filmmaker reveals how the Colorado hillclimb – and the Porsche cars he's taken there – captured his heart.

There are few people more synonymous with Pikes Peak than Jeff Zwart. The filmmaker and Porsche collector has raced the famous Colorado hillclimb no fewer than 17 times in a dozen different 911. To date, he has won the event on a remarkable eight occasions and now coaches for Porsche Motorsport in the single-make GT4 Clubsport Class.

For 2020, Zwart returns to the mountain aboard the 700 PS 935, entered into the new Time Attack class that pits production-based sports racers against each other and the clock in a mile-high sprint to the snow-capped summit in the Rocky Mountains.

It sounds like a daunting challenge, but Pikes Peak is home from home for the laidback Californian, who

first fell for the event's extraordinary atmosphere when covering it as a young photographer.

"Road and Track first sent me to Pikes Peak to photograph it in 1982 or '84," says Zwart. "I was already attracted to rallying and when I got there, I just thought this was the ultimate rally. Especially bearing in mind at this point the mountain was completely dirt. It was hugely influential on me both as a motorsport event and visually the altitude, drop offs and cliffs really ticked a lot of boxes as a photographer too."

Zwart's first attempt at Pikes Peak was aboard his Mazda rally car in the late 1980s. Crowned 'Rookie of the Year' he was immediately hooked. Following some national rallying success aboard the newly released all-wheel drive 964 Carrera 4, Andial and Porsche Motorsport approached Zwart with the offer of support to take on Pikes Peak once again. Out went the naturally aspirated engine, and in came a 550hp single turbo unit from the contemporary IMSA programme. "We went up the mountain with the car and it was just a monster to drive up there," he recalls. "Naturally we wanted to do well as it was a Porsche programme and I ended up winning the Open Class that year, which is how the whole thing really started."

Zwart would go on to race a wide variety of 911 variants in numerous different classes, exploring the potential of purely stock 911 road cars alongside heavily tuned bespoke rally specials. But when the course began being paved a decade ago, the opportunity arose to abandon the rally-derived underpinnings in favour of an out-and-out circuit racer, and Zwart returned in 2010 with a GT3 Cup car. Despite substantial parts of the course still being gravel, Zwart broke the class record by 38 seconds.

The following year, he entered a road-legal GT2 RS press car, driving it more than 1,600 kilometres from his home in California. Although Zwart missed the class win by just two seconds that year, he still set a production car record. "Taking something with 620hp up the mountain was a real eye-opener," Zwart says. "I'd never driven with that much horsepower and it would just pull like crazy all the way to the top."

Having now witnessed the benefits of both an out-and-out racing chassis and Porsche's advanced turbocharging, Zwart resolved to combine the two, returning the following year with a GT3 Cup car into which a unique turbocharged engine had been dropped. At the third attempt, he again won his class.

"The 911 is in many ways the ideal car for Pikes Peak," says Zwart. "I grew up driving 911s of course, and they're the basis for all my race cars – understanding the way they rotate and move under you, and having all that weight over the rear axle, is a real advantage at Pikes Peak."

This year, that familiarity with both car and course will go one step further as Zwart enters the new Porsche 935 for the very first time. The car is owned by Porsche collector Bob Ingram and run in support of Road Scholars, the specialist Porsche restorer run by Ingram's son Cam. For Zwart, it's a dream come true.

"When the 935 debuted at Rennsport Reunion in 2018, naturally I thought it would be a great Pikes

Peak car because it's twin-turbocharged and basically a GT2 RS road car underneath, so it has all that road-going drivability, which is important for Pikes Peak, yet it's got the whole motorsport chassis built around it."

He sought support from Michelin and Mobil 1 and the car was entered into the new Time Attack class that requires all runners to be factory standard. But as an initial test at Willow Springs last week has revealed, this is anything but a problem.

"The car has three things I've never experienced in a race car at Pikes Peak before," he explains. "Only two pedals because it's PDK, traction control and ABS. But it feels light and nimble and the TC and ABS are both amazing. By lap three I was totally comfortable in the car. It just felt fantastic. It's probably the most approachable race car I've driven in years."

There are still some unknowns. The start line at Pikes Peak is 9,000 feet high and the challenges that altitude brings to both car and driver are difficult to replicate on a conventional circuit. Now that the course is fully paved it is also more susceptible to dramatic changes in weather.

"It's certainly an intimidating place and one with huge consequences. Competitors rarely spin at Pikes Peak – there is always something to hit or fall off. But as the years have progressed, so has my knowledge of the place. It's such a complex mountain to run. There are 156 turns and it finishes at over 14,000 feet. With so much to take in I always say you're not racing the other competitors, you're racing the road. That's the way I approach it anyway. I keep my head down and don't get too worried about what people are doing around me."

Info

The 2020 Pikes Peak International Hill Climb will now run on 30 August. Stay tuned for further updates on Zwart's preparations across the summer.

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Path: King of the hill/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: Jeff Zwart, 935, Willow Springs, USA, 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Jeff Zwart in the Porsche 935

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