Reaching for the stars

28/01/2021 The Texan astrophysicist Kathy Mead competed in the legendary "Pikes Peak International Hill Climb" for the first time in 2020 – at the age of 61.

The Porsche community is full of remarkable characters, none more so than retired astrophysics professor Kathy Mead. The 61-year-old Texan only started racing four years ago, but quickly rose to prominence in 2020 after a stellar debut at the Pikes Peak International Hillclimb.

The modest and straight-talking Mead sees her late entry into motorsport neither as unusual nor a disadvantage, however. “There are a lot of what we still call ‘gentleman drivers’ in the US,” she says. “Because if you don’t get into racing when you’re six, then you have to wait until you have the resources to go do it. In my case my first track event was when I was 51. And frankly, I needed some judgement before I put myself in a fast car!”

Another thing that makes Mead particularly intriguing in a close-knit community of gear heads and track addicts is that she was by no means an obsessive. “I’ve definitely not been a car person all my life,” she says. “I always liked sports cars, but even now I’m still not a ‘car girl’. I did always want a Porsche 911 though.”

With a 911 Carrera of the 997 generation across the USA

Mead fulfilled this ambition in 2010, buying a 997 generation Carrera with PDK transmission, a car she still has to this day and has twice driven coast-to-coast. “I bought a 911 and learned to drive it properly because I like driving. Driving is a skill. And a Porsche is an engineering marvel. I don’t want to just park it in my garage and admire it. I admire it by honing my craft so that I can experience its potential.”

Mead enrolled on numerous driver education days put on by her region of the Porsche Club of America (PCA). At this time, however, she had no desire to go racing, and these were events that enabled her to explore the 911's dynamic abilities in a non-competitive environment.

“When I first went to the track,” Mead recalls with an infectious laugh, “there were all these people who do everything from changing their own brake pads to modifying their engine and suspension. Well that wasn't me. I just wanted to steer the car!”

From track events to competitive motorsport

And steer she did, rapidly growing both her confidence and skill set while modifying her 911 to suit with more track-oriented suspension, race seats and a roll bar.

Eventually, however, the ambitious and dedicated Mead grew impatient with the limitations of track events where her natural pace was pegged back and passing was prohibited. “So I had a conversation with myself,” she recalls. “I said you have to either be chill about this, or you have to go racing. I decided to go racing.”

The next step was a big one, with Mead buying a 981 Cayman GT4 Clubsport – a car that would enable her to compete in a variety of different race series, most of which were hosted by PCA. She hired a driver coach to improve her race craft and soon after set up a customer team to maintain the car.

Analyses and training result in a continuous learning curve

“It was very challenging, but it was awesome. The standard of driving was really good and at last I could pass people at any point! I became really studious about driving. I watched video and studied my data, spending a lot of time on this during and between events. These days I talk to driving coaches, learn about car set up and study everything that goes wrong with my car, from software to components. I now know how it feels, when, for example, my PDK needs to be recalibrated. Any time something goes wrong with one of my cars, I talk to the mechanic about it to understand the relationship between the failure I felt in the car and what actually happened.”

Mead completed the 2017 season racing against fellow Clubsport owners and was looking forward to returning before ‘life got in the way and I had to take two years off’. Following such a long break, she was reluctant to jump straight back into wheel-to-wheel racing and began eyeing up the possibility of time trials.

Driver coaching with Jeff Zwart

By now a division had been created for the Cayman GT4 Clubsport on the Pikes Peak International Hillclimb, supported by Porsche Cars North America with driver coaching from none other than Jeff Zwart. Kathy and her mechanic Mike Conn had previously discussed the possibility of entering anyway and now seemed like the perfect time.

“I was aware of Pikes Peak but mostly through videos of people crashing spectacularly and that didn’t interest me,” Mead laughs. “But one day in January of this year Mike told me the deadline for registering was that night. It was decision time. I filled out the forms and it was done.”

Hampered by travel restrictions imposed by the coronavirus crisis, Mead was unable to travel to Colorado in the months ahead of the event to try out the route and get a sense of what lay ahead. There was also the altitude to adapt to, and the small fact that Mead is afraid of heights.

“It’s a public road of course, and the first time I got above the tree line I thought the 35 mph speed limit seemed about right! That’s how intense it was for me. But I knew I could do it.”

Intensive preparation for Pikes Peak

Mead proved to be a textbook student, attending every available practice and acclimatising herself to the challenges of racing at over 13,000 feet above sea-level. She trained hard, adapted her sleep patterns to the requisite 2 am starts and studied the myriad twists and turns of the course in minute detail.

“I felt well prepared but you still have to execute,” Mead remembers. “And race day at Pikes Peak is the only time that you get to drive the whole mountain. But what I’d learned in practice was just to think about the next turn. So that’s what I did, through all 156 of them. And when I crossed the line it was the most euphoric I’ve ever felt in my whole life. It was the hardest but coolest thing I’d ever done: a complete release after a month of focus and preparation and I was literally screaming in the car.”

With a time of 11 minutes and 36 seconds, Mead was later crowned Rookie of the Year – something that gave her even more confidence to return to racing. “Life is short,” she says, “and at 61 I really want to do more. I will race with the PCA again next year and am going back to Pikes Peak. I’m not good at making plans for the future, but I’m definitely doing that.”

Image Sublines

Path: media/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: Kathy Mead, 981 Cayman GT4 Clubsport, Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, Colorado, USA, 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Kathy Mead (2nd from left) at the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb

Path: media/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: Kathy Mead, 981 Cayman GT4 Clubsport, Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, Colorado, USA, 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Kathy Mead's 981 Cayman GT4 Clubsport at the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb

Path: media/Images/img_3.jpg
Title: Kathy Mead, 981 Cayman GT4 Clubsport, Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, Colorado, USA, 2020, Porsche AG
Subline: Kathy Meads inside her 981 Cayman GT4 Clubsport

Link Collection

Link to this article
https://newsroom.porsche.com/en_US/2021/motorsport/porsche-pikes-peak-international-hill-climb-professor-kathy-mead-23513.html

Media Package
https://pmdb.porsche.de/newsroomzips/ab985c0c-068c-4f9a-b9e3-84e81bc69ef3.zip

Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft
Porscheplatz 1
70435 Stuttgart