

COMPETITION



FEW men are as qualified to talk about the recent Florida 12 Hour Grand Prix of Endurance as Ronnie Bucknum. The 32-year-old Southern Californian is one of America's ace drivers in sports, Indianapolis, and formula race cars, and one of the top threats in this year's Trans-Am sedan series. At Sebring, Bucknum co-drove with another outstanding name, Mark Donohue. They were favored to win. Their Lola-Chevy had earlier won the Daytona Beach, Fla., 24-Hour. Yet at Sebring the car expired after only four and a half hours. The reasons why—plus insight into the difficulties and frustrations of long-distance racing—are explained by Bucknum in the following article.

MARK DONOHUE and I knew we had a good chance to win the Sebring 12 Hours. But in a long distance race you can't say that you "think" you're going to win it. Too many things can go wrong, particularly at Sebring.

The course gets rougher and there seem to be more holes in the pavement every year. Sebring is an abandoned airport, of course, and the runways are laid out in concrete squares. Running flat out over those things is just like racing up a flight of stairs. The chassis of a car always takes a tremendous beating. And something else that tends to tear up a chassis is that the brakes on today's racing cars are so much better. You can dive into a corner at least twice as deep as you used to be able to.

So the rough track is hurting the chassis to begin with. Then you stab brakes hard. Boy, you can just feel all the pounding in the chassis.

That was one of the reasons Mark and I had no intention of going out

RONNIE BUCKNUM (right) shared grief with Mark Donohue.



and trying to lead the race from the start. We wanted to save the car. We wanted to finish the 12 hours. Fortunately, Mark and I share the same philosophy about racing: pace yourself, be there at the end, try not to get too excited in the first few laps and don't damage your car.

Another reason we didn't want to go straight for the lead was because we didn't feel we had to. Our pit crew had trained for weeks and we were sure they were the fastest crew at Sebring. Actually, our mechanics had a score to settle. You'll recall that at the Daytona Beach 24-Hour in February (which Mark won, co-driving with Chuck Parsons) our Lola had had trouble with the fuel transfer system. It was a farce—something totally unexpected. The fuel pick-up went bad and each time the mechanics could only add 21 gallons of gas, total. Actually, the Lola's fuel tank could have held 37 gallons. It meant that the car

had to make more gas stops at Daytona than any other, and it nearly cost Donohue and Parsons the race. Well, that fuel pick-up problem had certainly been solved at Sebring. For example, we knew our mechanics could dump in 37 gallons in 15 seconds. We knew they could, because they had done it before. None of the other pit crews—the Porsches or Ferrari—were close to being that fast. But there was more to it than having fast pit work. The gas tank filler neck of our Lola was twice as big as either the Porsche or the Ferrari and that meant our gas was getting inside twice as fast.

The Porsches and the Ferrari were our competition. Our Lola, unfueled, weighed 1950 lb. with the 305 Traco Camaro engine. A Porsche Spyder, unfueled, weighs 1500. The one factory Ferrari, driven by Mario Andretti and Chris Amon, weighed about 1700.

In practice, we purposely squared off against the Porsches to see how our

Lola compared. It was—like we'd expected—a standoff. We'd accelerate dead even with the Porsches up to 175 mph. Above 175, our car, being bigger and heavier than the Porsches, seemed to run into a brickwall. It wouldn't go any faster. The Porsches, I'd guess, were getting near 180.

But the Amon/Andretti Ferrari... Well, that was a different story. That three-liter Ferrari just pulled our corks something awful. It really had power. We'd had no idea it was going to be that fast. During the very first night practice session, Amon got down to a lap of 2:43.6, and the old track record was around 2:49. He was six seconds under the track record, driving at night. Right then Mark and I got a little suspicious. The best we'd been able to do was a 2:48.

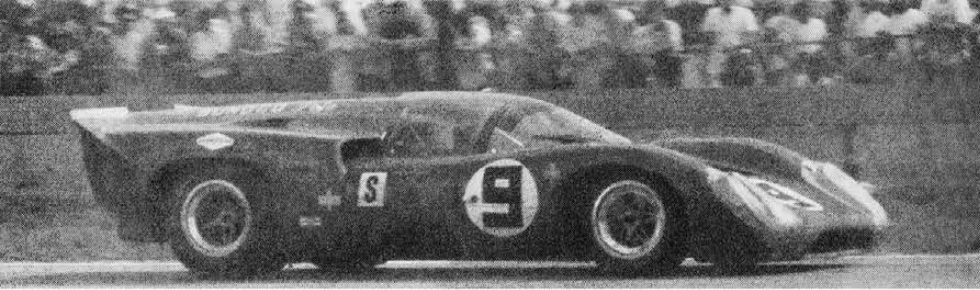
Friday morning, though, Mark got down to 2:40.9. That made us happy. We packed up the car and took it to our garage to let the mechanics "mas-

UNDERPOWERED and out-driven, No. 22 Ford GT40 bores on through the Sebring night, drivers Jacky Ickx and Jack Oliver slaving away trying to keep up with leaders. Upstart Ford was to become upset winner.



'LIKE RACING UP A FLIGHT OF STAIRS'

Ronnie Bucknum's Short, Sad Sebring



BUCKNUM/DONOHUE Lola-Chevy, winner of Daytona 24-Hour, died at Sebring.

SEBRING

continued

sage" it for the race. While we were in the garage, we got word from the circuit that Amon in the Ferrari had gotten around in 2:40.3, beating our time.

As for our car, we knew that our Traco Chevy was practically indestructible. We had set a limit of 7000 rpm for the 12 Hour. Our pit stops were good. And our brakes, as far as we could see, were the best in the race. We could go deeper into the corners than anyone. Our brakes were so good that we figured they canceled out any speed advantage the Ferrari or the Porsches might have over us.

I went to bed early Friday night before the race, and then got up and watched television for awhile. Some movie about racing came on and I went next door and woke up Mark—he was in the room next to mine—and told him about it. I watched for a while, dozed off, woke up, turned the television off and went to bed.

Mark was starting the race for us. It was a big responsibility. Those first few laps at Sebring are really hectic. If you should happen to get into the wrong place at the wrong time there's nothing you can do about it. After the start at Le Mans, the field moves immediately onto the Mulsanne Straight and traffic strings out. But at Sebring you go through a couple of sweeper corners and then right into a slow hairpin. It's a good place to get the car banged up, even to put yourself out of the race.

Mark got off to a sensible start. Jo Siffert's Porsche was the first car I saw move, then more Porsches, then Mark. Amon's Ferrari kicked over very slowly. He was one of the last cars to get going. But he took off fast and I knew he'd be up front soon enough.

Those first few laps are nerve-racking. You stand there in the pits and you worry about all the traffic out on the course, knowing it's the most logical time for an accident to happen . . . maybe to your car. Every lap I was straining for the first glimpse of our car, timing it, anticipating it. Mark moved up steadily to third place, but I was nervous—just as he would have been nervous if I'd been driving and he was waiting.

The plan was for each of us to drive in three-hour stints, stopping every hour and a half for fuel. Siffert was leading in the Porsche. Amon, charging, was up to second in the Ferrari. Mark was third.

Our first fuel stop was beautiful. Twenty seconds, flat. The Porsche took over a minute, and the Ferrari a minute and 10 seconds. If you multiply those times in a 12-hour race, you can see that we were really looking good.

The time drags while you wait for your turn to drive. You drink coffee, you time your partner, you wait. Finally, after three hours, Mark rolled into the pits and I jumped into the car. The mechanics dumped in gas, and changed the brake pads. I asked Mark how the course was, and he said, "watch out for the oil in the road in the esses just past the MG bridge."

Then I was on my way.

Now the race was three hours old, but I still had the butterflies in my stomach. It always takes a couple of laps before you get into the rhythm of driving. You watch out for the slower cars in the road. You watch out for the oil (Mark was right; the esses were slippery. If you went smoking in there too hot, the whole car would go sideways and you'd come close to leaving the road).

Nothing eventful happened my first few laps. The car was pretty warm inside, like all race cars. We'd decided to run with the passenger window open to let in some air. But above 150, the wind would blow the window closed, so I gave up on that.

Then, bang, just like that, we were out of the race.

On the seventh lap that I drove there was a big "clunk" behind me. The rear radius arms of the chassis had broken loose—but I didn't know it. First I thought it was the gearbox. Every time I let off the throttle for a corner, it would jump out of gear. A bent shifting fork, I thought. Then the tail end began breaking loose violently in fast corners. Well, the limited-slip unit is also going out, I thought. I didn't want to signal the pits that something was wrong, knowing that it would alert all the other teams as well.

But Mark and the crew could tell I was having trouble, just from the way my lap times were dropping. I was about seven seconds a lap slower than

before, and the car was feeling stranger and stranger.

Finally I came in and stopped. Mark took the car out, did a couple of slow laps, and came back in. He had engineered the car and had helped prepare it. "Look for something broken in the rear end," he told the mechanics. They popped up the deck lid and right away saw the broken pieces.

The car was wheeled away and our race was over after four and a half hours.

For a while I stood around watching the others. There was a heck of a battle for the lead going on between Amon in the Ferrari and Joe Buzzetta in one of the Porsches. Every time the Ferrari downshifted a great cloud of white smoke would come out. Overheating. It wound up costing them the race.

Later on I went back to the hotel, took a shower and cleaned up, then came back out to the circuit to watch the finish. It was one of the most competitive 12 Hours ever run—and disappointing as hell to Mark and me. I think the lead changed 13 times during the 12 hours. It was a sprint race, and every team got to take their best shot.

In the end, of course, the old Ford GT40 of Jacky Ickx and Jack Oliver won. They did a good job. Very, very steady. Their lap times didn't fluctuate from beginning to end. During the first hour while I'd been waiting in the pits for Mark, I remember saying something about the Ford that came back to haunt me.

The Ford was far back, not even in the top 10, and I said to a friend: "Boy, isn't that sad? A few years ago the Fords were winning here. Now they can't even get into the race."

That's long distance racing at Sebring for you. ■

12 HOURS OF ENDURANCE—SEBRING

Winner: Jacky Ickx-Jack Oliver, Ford GT-40 239 laps; 2—Chris Amon-Mario Andretti, Ferrari, 238 laps; 3—Joe Buzzetta-Rolf Stommelen, Porsche 908, 235 laps; 4—Alex Soler-Roig-Ruy Lins, Porsche 907, 233 laps; 5—Gerhard Mitter-Udo Schutz, Porsche 908, 232 laps; 6—Ed Leslie-Lothar Motschenbacher, Lola-Chevrolet, 229 laps; 7—Vic Elford-Dick Attwood, Porsche 908, 228 laps; 8—Dick Smothers-Fred J. Baker, Porsche Carrera 906E, 215 laps; 9—Ricardo Rodriguez-Charles Kolb, Ferrari, 215 laps; 10—Don Yenke-Bob Grossman, Chevrolet Camaro, 209 laps; 11—Armando Capriles-Alfredo Atencio, Porsche Carrera 906E, 209 laps; 12—Gerard Larrousse-Andre Wicky-Jean Sage, Porsche 911T, 199 laps.