

The view from fifth place

BY JIM WALSH
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IN FLIGHT TO SEATTLE — The race is over, and I'm on my way home. No medal this year. I started in fifth, I ended in fifth. It was still a pretty exciting 18 laps.

Friday started clear and sunny, a little cool, with a good breeze from the south-southeast. Had a light breakfast, then headed to the track. The car was basically ready to go, as we weren't on track all day Thursday, so there were just a few last-minute checks, getting the car nice and shiny for the TV cameras, and one special task I needed to do.

I put my father's name, Joe Walsh, on the car as an honorary crew member. He passed away a couple of months ago, and he was of course a huge supporter and fan, as proud as a father could be. I did this race in his memory. When you watch the Speed Channel coverage of the GT2 race on Dec. 10, I think you might see a little something special, if they have time on the broadcast.

There was a lot of waiting on Friday, as mine was the last race of the day. I watched a couple of other races, particularly the starts, to see where the starter liked to throw the green flag. It looked like he liked to throw it fairly early, as soon as the last car was around turn 14 and onto the front straight. I checked out the track conditions, it looked pretty good, the grass and dirt had dried out substantially from earlier in the week, so even when cars dropped a wheel or two off the road, they weren't dragging mud and dirt onto the track. We loaded as much as we could into the transporter, save of course the cars, and necessary gear for an emergency pit stop and the post-race tech inspection and potential teardown of the top finishers.

With about 45 minutes to go, I got my gear on. First my cool shirt, a special shirt covered with vinyl tubing, which gets ice water pumped through it to keep me cool. It wasn't a super-hot day, only 77, but it gets upwards of 130 in the car, my pulse is racing the entire time and I'm wearing five layers of clothing (basically I'm racing in a fireproof snowmobile suit), so it really helps keep my core temperature down. The Nomex gloves, the Nomex hood-sock and the

Nomex-lined full-face helmet with attached HANS device and my earpieces for my in-car radio are waiting in the car. I'll put them on at the pre-grid.

With about 30 minutes to go, I bring the car to pre-grid, while Chris heads over in the rental car with all the pit equipment, since we're paddocked quite a distance away. I stop and chat with the other drivers, we all wish each other good luck, and I have a brief chat with the Speed reporter. I make a last-minute pit stop, then get in the car, and mentally drive through the course a couple of times. As we approach 5 minutes to go, I put the rest of my gear on and strap myself in. Chris plugs my helmet into the car's radio system, and we do a radio check.

I've transported and paddocked with Pirate Racing, which is Andrew Foley and his crew, along with Matt Crandall, all from Portland, Ore., both of them driving Panoz GTS cars. Very comparable speed and handling to my Porsche GT3 Cup, but very different. They're heavier, have larger wheels and tires, a Ford 351 V8 with gobs of torque, but don't have as sophisticated a suspension, or as good aerodynamics as the Porsche. Two of the Pirate crew, Alex in the far grandstands (able to see turns 1 through 7), and Dominic in the front straight grandstands (able to see turns 10 through 14), have my radios also, so they can call in if they see a car off, a yellow flag, debris on course or any other situation that I should know about.

With all the radios working, we see the 3 minutes to go sign waved in pre-grid, and it's time to start the car. Then it's the whistle and the 1-minute warning, and then we're moving. The splitter separates us right and left, I'm on the right side of the third row, right behind last year's winner, also in a Porsche GT3 Cup, Wayland Joe. To Joe's left in fourth is Gerry Mason in a Nissan 300ZX tube-frame car, to the left of me is Mike Muren, polesitter and second-place finisher in 2006 (he didn't compete last year), and behind me is Mark Jurczyk, also in a GT3 Cup, and less than a tenth of a second slower than me in qualifying. The front row is Jim Goughary in his blindingly quick tube-frame 350Z (a 350Z only in general appearance, I doubt there are 5 pounds of stock 350Z in his car), and to his left John Black,

also in a 350Z tube-frame car. Overall there are seven or eight previous Runoffs champions in this field. It's a very, very strong lineup, even for the National Championships, so I feel privileged to be able to run competitively with this group.

The GT2 rules allow two types of cars. The tube-frame cars are a fiberglass shell giving the appearance of a street car, over a purpose-built racecar chassis, with a purpose-built race motor. They must meet requirements for engine displacement and weight, with a couple of different formulas allowed. Jim Goughary has a larger, more powerful engine, but weighs more than John Black, who has a lighter car but a less powerful engine.

Both have better power-to-weight than the production-based cars in the class, which are the Porsche GT3 Cup 996 and the Panoz Esperante GTS. Both must use the same frame and chassis as a street car, and must run exactly as their factory race series rules require, which mean we are restricted in our ride height and camber, we can't touch our factory wings or aero, we can't change any suspension or drivetrain components, our engines and drivetrains and ECUs are sealed, etc.

The tube-frame cars are much more wide open. They have full purpose-built race engines, and can run any engine electronics they want. They can use water-spray brake cooling. The SCCA watches the cars and (hopefully) makes adjustments to keep them relatively even.

Last year, Porsches finished 1-2-3. Even though we qualified 1-5-7, and three cars were taken out in a first-corner incident, and Jim Goughary then blew an engine (or a tire, depending on who you listen to) during the race, the SCCA Competition Board decided the tube-frame cars needed a little help, so they were given additional downforce — a 4-inch longer front splitter (which produces downforce with very little additional drag), and their rear spoiler was changed to a rear wing allowance. Goughary was running a massive rear wing, larger than mine on a much lighter car, with a significantly higher angle of attack, and an allowed "Gurney flag." What I wouldn't do for that much downforce at this track!