

Flying Dutchman

Meet Dutch-Canadian Kees Nierop—Sebring winner, factory Le Mans driver, and British Columbia's biggest Porsche proponent

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AND NIEROP COLLECTION

He's walked away from a burning 961 at Le Mans. Emerged unscathed from a Cayenne S that flipped four times and lay in several pieces on the floor of the Gobi Desert. Climbed out, without a scratch, from various Porsches over the years after contact with walls and other cars.

No wonder Kees Nierop says he loves Porsches. "I've crashed enough of them and survived without injuries, so they're safe to me," he says. "They're fast, they are exciting. They're everything to me."

Kees (pronounced "Kays") was back at the 24 Hours of Daytona this January for the first time since 1987, driving for the all-British Columbian Team Bullet. The 52-year-old Dutch-Canadian's place in racing circles was caught nicely on a YouTube video of Hurley Haywood.

"Kees, I saw you walking down the pit lane in your driving suit and I couldn't believe it was you," said the five-time Daytona champion good-naturedly. "I know you're a tad rusty so I want you to make sure during the race you look in that rearview mirror, and when you see that #59 car, drive off the road and get out of our way." Kees responded with a video clip of his own, wishing Haywood all the best, noting he'd keep his eye out for him, but vowing #59 would have to fight for every inch of track against his Maple Leaf-bedecked 911 GT3 Cup.

In the end, Haywood's #59 Brumos Racing Daytona Prototype finished 26th overall; Bullet's GT-class 911 was 20th overall, and 13th out of 30 cars in its class. The Canadian effort completed 632 laps

to Brumos's 582, thanks to a blown engine that took #59 out of the race. While the 911 looked far worse for wear by the end of the 24 hours, it soldiered on to raise just shy of \$160,000 for Children's Hospital of British Columbia.

In the near quarter-century between his appearances at Daytona, Kees has kept busy with Porsches — speaking at public events, test driving, instructing at Porsche schools, schooling journalists, acting as a private driving coach, and doing any odd job he felt was required to put food on the table, all the while racing anywhere he could. A "mitt-full" of jobs, he calls it, all so he can keep his passion and love for motorsport alive.

"To make a living in motorsport, you have to be willing to do whatever it takes

to stay with the sport,” says Kees. “You have to have an ego that is willing, that allows you to do that. I could be driving a 962 and stand on the podium with Al Unser Jr., Bob Akin, and Rob Dyson at Road America on Sunday afternoon, and Monday morning I’d be changing oil as the grease monkey at some mechanic’s shop, because that’s the only job they’d give me because I’d come and go all the time — and then have a guy complain that his windows weren’t clean enough!”

It’s a beautiful spring day in Mission, British Columbia, which is about an hour east of Vancouver in the Fraser Valley. Mount Baker — an active, glaciated volcano just over the border in Washington State — looms on the horizon and the Fraser River rushes past as Mission Raceway hums with activity.

An Aston Martin DB7, a Lotus Esprit V8, a couple of Shelby GT500s, a Maserati GranTurismo, two Audi TTs, a Nissan 350Z, and a Dodge Viper dot the lot, but mostly it’s Porsches zipping around the short 1.4-mile road course that’s a killer

empire and also owned a marina, hotel, and restaurant in the Netherlands, raced as an amateur in the old country. A young Kees would hang out at the track on race weekends until his dad walked away from the sport when Kees was six years old.

“We’d been dragged down to the track as babies — and then when I was old enough to want to be part of it, that’s when dad quit,” chuckles Kees. “And my dad, being a stubborn Dutchman, when he quit, he quit. He would never go back to the track again. He sold all the equipment, everything. So as a kid I’d get onto the train on my own and go to Zandvoort to watch races.”

In 1974, Klaas moved the family to Kelowna, in the B.C. Interior above Okanagan Lake, where Kees still lives today. In much of Europe, you can’t get a driver’s license until you’re 18, and it was no different in the Netherlands — so that’s the first thing 16-year-old Kees did in Kelowna.

“Forget the boats, let’s go do something with cars,” he told his dad. Kees went to mechanic school so he could build and fix

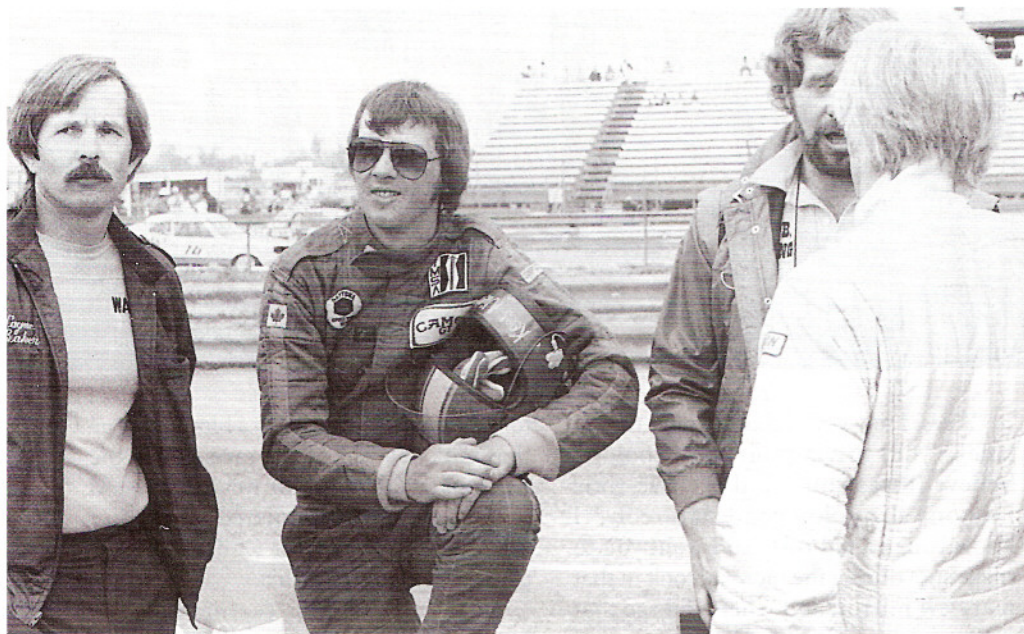
his own cars. He soon bought a Datsun 240Z, which he later converted into a racing 280Z and still owns today.

Although he flipped the Datsun on his first attempt at racing, he twice set the record at the Knox Mountain Hillclimb, a paved road course with ten major turns that climbs 800 feet in 2.2 miles over Okanagan Lake. After winning rookie-of-the-year in British Columbian ice racing and then the 1978 Canadian GT1 cham-

ampionship as a 20-year-old, Kees was ready for bigger things. He moved into Porsches, driving for Dick Barbour’s IMSA 934 team at Portland and at Road America in 1979, then competed at Daytona in 1980 in a 911 and at Sebring in the Apple Computer-sponsored 935, driving with Bobby Rahal and finishing sixth.

“I didn’t know of him until we met at Sebring,” recalls Rahal from his Ohio home today. “We were kind of the B-Team at the time and didn’t have everything the A-Team had — and Kees did a very good job.” Rahal wasn’t the only one who took notice; Kees impressed Porsche’s engineers with how he drove and how he took care of the equipment.

Some would say that Kees’s moment came in 1983, when he won the 12 Hours of Sebring with Wayne Baker and



on brakes. Kees is in one of them, teaching Ken Whittall, a mathematical physicist, how to get the most out of his 435-hp, 3.8-liter 2010 911 GT3.

“You get immediate feedback with Kees,” says Whittall. “He can feel what is going on with the car and tell me if I’m going safe before the instruments know.”

Kees’s interest in cars and racing comes from his father. Klaas Nierop, a Dutch businessman who built up a small retail

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Jim Muller in a turbocharged 911, a GTO entry that beat all of the GTPs — the only time a GTO won overall in IMSA history. But you have to jump ahead, to 1986, to unearth Kees’s golden season.

It was the year of Vancouver’s Expo. It’s hard to believe, looking at the 2010 Olympics, but before Expo the area was an insular backwater in many ways. So when Andrew Field of Field Racing asked Kees to drive for a shoestring Western



entry in the new Rothman's Porsche 944 series back east, the competition didn't know what was coming.

"Kees was a great driver, I knew that," says Field. "But we went east and no one knew who he was." That wouldn't last: Kees took pole position in his first race of the series at Mosport, where he'd never raced before, and led a hard-charging Richard Spenard until a late corner, where he got sideways just a bit. Spenard

jumped on the mistake, got alongside Kees, and won the drag race to the finish.

"That first race was great, it was a battle every lap," says Spenard today from his home near Montreal. "It's funny how you remember something like that from so far back. I didn't know much about Kees, but word spread quickly (about) what kind of driver he was."

That race set the tone for a season-long rivalry, one that came down to the last

event at Mont-Tremblant. The driver lineup included Paul Tracy, Scott Goodyear, and Claude Bourbonnais. Spenard needed to finish third — where he had qualified — to clinch the championship.

On the first lap, Bourbonnais rear-ended Spenard, and when the latter got going again, he was in 14th. Spenard worked his way up to fourth, finishing three feet behind Scott Maxwell, but Kees won the race and the championship. "That was the cliff-hanger of all races," recalls Field. "We didn't even watch Kees. We knew he'd win. We were all-eyes on Spenard."

Kees was on top of his world, with no idea of the dark year to come. "Richard and I kept it clean, and we had some great races," Kees says. "That's what racing is all about, and to this day I think back to 1986 — that was my year."

Like some kind of exclusive heritage car-rental agency, the \$130,000,000 Porsche museum in Stuttgart has a vehicle waiting for Kees to race. It's the 961 in which his dream of racing at Le Mans took flight before, literally, crashing.

Today, you can watch the crash on YouTube, flames engulfing the car as Kees slows and pulls over in the 1987 running of Les 24 Heures. He had hit the wall approaching the Indianapolis corner, the 961's back end sliding out after an ill-advised downshift to first at 200 mph.

The car shouldn't have let him do it, he shouldn't have made the mistake — but the back end swung into the wall. Kees figured, hey, it's an endurance race, let's endure and keep going. The car, a backup 961 after

This page, clockwise from top: Nierop raced in the Rothman's Turbo Cup series in 1988—he had won the inaugural 944 series in 1986; in the early 1990s, he organized spec-Chevette ice racing near his home in Canada; Nierop's garage, circa 1988, contained his 280Z race car and 944 Turbo road car.

teammate Price Cobb smashed the 962 in practice, handled badly, but what Kees didn't know, and what crew chief Peter Falk saw on the television feed, was twisted bodywork hanging on the turbos at the back of the car. And the car had caught fire.

"Peter Falk came on my radio and told me to stop the car, to get out of the car, because of what I didn't know," says Kees. "I beat myself up afterward, wishing that he would have told me what the problem

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was. I would have gone to a fire station. As it was, I stopped because I was told to get out of the car, a long way away from the fire station, which allowed the flames to get hold of the car and do a lot of damage.”

Today, the 961 has been restored, and there's an open invitation from museum director Klaus Bischof to race it again one day. Says Kees: “I would love to do that.”

Kees has had a more recent crash in a factory Porsche. Another YouTube clip, this one more famous according to the number of viewings, takes you through Kees and navigator Laurance Yap's airborne crash in the Trans-Siberian Rally 2007 — a 15-day, 7,100-kilometer marathon from Moscow's Red Square to the capital of Mongolia, Ulan Bator.

One moment, the pair is feeling their way through the Gobi Desert along the foothills of the Altai Mountains at 80

one and everything just kind of fades out and you're like, ‘I don't know about this.’ Next thing you know, you're back on a ‘half-decent’ gravel road.

“The whole week went great,” he continues. “We were in sixth place in the rally and then...” They rolled three or four times before coming to rest at the bottom of a crest that had blended in perfectly with the horizon. “If you time it from when everything is nice and cool to the point where the rolling stops, it's about nine seconds. It's a fairly long accident, a flight actually.”

In fact, a friend gave Kees wings to pin on his lapel in honor of the event. Kees, for his part, is quick to credit the equipment. “I quite truly have to thank Porsche for giving us a vehicle that was as safe as it was, one that we could walk away from a pretty intense crash. My 30 years with Porsche paid off right there. I was like, ‘Hey man, I

there's some unfinished business at Le Mans. Kees was reminded of it at Rennsport Reunion in 2004 when he bumped into Peter Falk, Porsche Motorsport's Le Mans crew chief in 1987. They hadn't talked since Kees crashed the 961, since Falk ordered him out of the car.

Says Kees, “I asked him, ‘Are we good?’ He kind of looked at me, and then said, ‘Ja, we're all good. But you have to do one thing for me.’ I said, ‘Well, what's that?’ He said, ‘You have to take me around Daytona.’” A race was delayed by 15 minutes so racer could drive pit boss around the track twice, in a Boxster S 550 supplied by Porsche Cars North America's Bob Carlson.

“Peter Falk was all cool, all smiles,” says Kees. “He said, ‘I've never been around here and up on the banking.’ For me, being the guy told to get out of his car... For him to ask me to drive him around Daytona was a real honor.”



Above, left-right: Maple leaf and Dutch stripes decorate Nierop's helmet; Team Bullet GT3 Cup finished 20th overall at Daytona this year.



km/h, torn between trusting GPS and the tracks made by locals. In the next, the ground gives way and they tumble.

“You're kind of left on your own to decide which way you want to go,” says Kees. “They're not even dirt roads; they are tracks locals have created and there are different ones depending on which season it is. As the landscape changes with the seasons, the locals know which way to go. So you wind up with seven or eight different tracks — and you don't really know which one you should be on. You're forever switching tracks because you're on

loved Porsche before, but I really love Porsche now. We were out in the middle of nowhere. We both got very, very lucky.”

Racing at Daytona this past January fulfilled one dream Kees has held since he left pro racing and focused on promotional work. One goal remains: To race at Circuit Park Zandvoort, the track in Burgemeester van Alphenstraat where his dad drove.

“I'd really like to do one race there — and it looks like I may have an opportunity to do so this year,” he says. Then

It's been a long road and Kees has covered a lot of ground. His mortgage is paid off, but bills still have to be paid, food provided, the cost of living met, and the conversation briefly turns wistful, but not for long. He's a man who took the road less travelled, if more speedily, and has no regrets.

“Thirty years, I obviously love Porsches,” he says with a smile that wouldn't look out of place on a podium. “And I'm pretty proud to be called the Mr. Porsche of Canada — there's no money that can buy that.”