

Frances Goes to the Races at Laguna Seca (continued...)

the unrelenting pressure of my right foot. No engine freshening, no limited slip, no high performance clutch, no chassis bracing, his list went on, which helped boost my confidence and morale. If he was trying to make me feel better, it worked. I decided that I was simply going to do my best, and however we finished, I would be satisfied with it.

At last race day was upon us. We decided as a team to take it easy on Sunday. The Mule was as ready as she was going to be, and so was I. Besides after all their hard work over the last two days, it was definitely time for some serious team R&R. We watched the support races, and about half of the CART race, visited the gift shop, ate some great food and generally relaxed and had a good time. Chip Ganassi used me for an apex while riding a scooter through the paddock! Finally about an hour before the race I could feel the apprehension building up inside of me, but I figured better to get it out of the way now and be ready for the race. I was worried, nervous, uptight, whatever you want to call it, I was definitely feeling the pressure. Everything we had all worked so hard to prepare for over the last month was coming to a climax. I let the apprehension wash over me until it simply faded away. We assembled again as a team and got ready to go. Everyone was great; I dressed while the team attended to last minute details on the car and the work space. Finally we got set up on the grid. Team members took their positions; Jason was on pit row, Chris and Carol were up on the hill in front of turn 2 (the Andretti Hairpin). Mike was up in the bleachers between 4 and 5, and Chuck was strategically placed at the bottom of The Corkscrew, all in radio contact with me in the car. They were my eyes around the track. Finally the MazdaSpeed Protege pace car led us out onto the track for a warm up lap. Coming around the backside, the pace car pulled off and the green flag was thrown. Suddenly everything fell into place; 70 cars instantly battling it out down the front straight at Laguna Seca, man, this race was ON!

Fortunately everyone made it through Andretti Hairpin with no incidents, the only race of the day to do so. A couple laps went by and the field had settled down, but there were battles going on at every point on the track. Talk about traffic, everywhere you looked there were groups of cars scraping for every last inch of tarmac and ounce of horsepower they could get, and then some. It was total vehicular carnage! Due to technical difficulties, we immediately lost a couple spots at the start of the race. After settling in, I was able to move up through the field and gain a number of positions. About midway through, the only yellow of the race was thrown in order to pick a hapless Miata out of the wall at the end of the Corkscrew. Upon restart, we picked up a couple more positions with a good run down the main straight, and then the unthinkable happened! Coming down off the hill turning onto the last section before the main straight, I went off track on the left side by the paddock! AARRRGH!

Five cars shot by me in the time it took to get back on track and re-establish my position. We made some of it up, but before you knew it, they were throwing out first the white, and then checkered flags. The entire week came to a climax; the race was over, and we had finished in one piece and in what I considered a quite respectable fashion!

Frances ended up finishing 29th overall, with a best lap time of 1:52:022. For the record, the front running cars were turning 49's. SpeedVision Challenge racer and local resident Ken Dobson took top honors. But what we took with us was more than a trophy, it was the memory of a once-in-a-lifetime event that none of us would ever forget. Each and every person on our team contributed to the total effort, and there is no way it would have happened without every one of the team. As a beginning race driver, I learned more in one weekend than all of my previous races combined, both about my car and my skills. It truly was a character-building experience that is still with me today.

I would like to thank everyone on my team. They made this happen, and deserve all the credit for the weeks of preparation, getting us there and back 5000 miles later, working to exhaustion, from dream to reality. You'd be hard pressed to find a more dedicated, passionate group of people.

So, who wants to go next year?

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