

# Twice Around the Clock

IN THE PITS WITH PFAFF MOTORSPORTS AT THE 2020 ROLEX 24 AT DAYTONA.

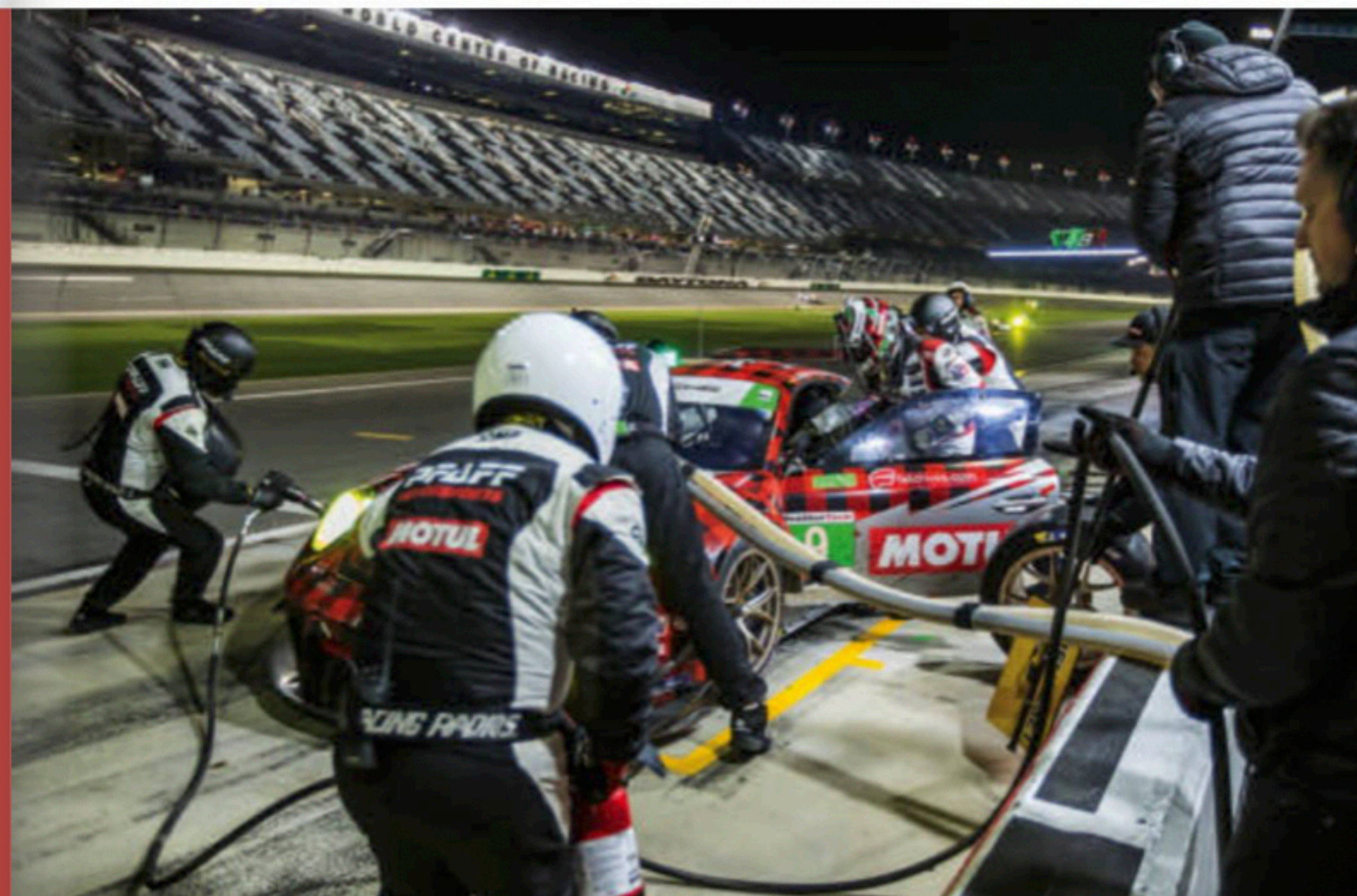
STORY BY RYAN CARIGNAN  
PHOTOS BY NATE DEREMER



# The radio crackles to life.



There's a problem, and the car is coming in. The pit stall explodes with motion as crew members grab tires and air hoses, frantically preparing for the unplanned stop. The data in front of the engineers relays the severity of the issue. On the monitor, cameras show the #9 Pfaff Porsche driving behind the wall, limping toward the garage. A solemn voice echoes through everyone's headset, "It's the drive-shaft." It is a daunting setback at an event that had started so well for the Pfaff Motorsports team and its eye-catching "Plaid Porsche."



## QUALIFYING

With four minutes left in the 15-minute session, the Plaid Porsche comes to a perfect halt inside the Day-Glo green taped square in the pit box. Pfaff team driver Zacharie Robichon has the fastest time of the session; in fact, he sets a new track record for the Grand Touring Daytona (GTD) class. There's nothing more he can do but park the car and wait. Four minutes later, it's official; Pfaff is on the pole.

High fives and cell phone pics abound as the team celebrates a perfect qualifying effort. "I think it's pretty special, especially when we look back at where we were with our Porsche," said Robichon. "We've made a lot of improvements, and obviously it's a 24-hour race, so if there is one race where qualifying isn't as important, it's this one."

In case you're not familiar, Pfaff Automotive is one of the largest automotive retailers in Canada, with a long history of selling, servicing, and racing Porsches since 1967. Pfaff Motorsports is a Porsche Motorsport North America customer racing team with a proven track record of cultivating Canadian racing talent. Each year, Pfaff sponsors a budget track car challenge across its dealerships, encouraging employees to get involved in motorsports. Most members of this IMSA team have "day jobs" as Pfaff Automotive employees and technicians, and they are proud to represent their company.

## FINAL PRACTICES

During pit stops, spectators focus on the action over the wall, but there is an equal flurry of activity on the other side. For every tire changer, someone behind the wall is wrangling an air hose to ensure it isn't tangled or positioning fresh tires for the changer to grab. The pit crew chief monitors everything, waiting to spring into action should something go awry. The ballet is intense, fast-paced, and well-rehearsed, which is critical since a flawed pit stop will cost a team dearly on track.

Practice sessions focus on the critical ingredients of endurance sports car racing: changing tires, refueling, and driver swaps. At Daytona, there is another task the crew must handle: changing the brakes. They will have to swap rotors, calipers, and pads at least once, and do so in just about a minute or risk losing a lap or more under green flag race conditions. Any DIY owner who has done similar jobs to their own cars watches in awe.

Modern racing is as much about data analysis as it is horsepower and torque. Each team engineer has up-to-the-second presentations of what is happening on the race car. In front of lead engineer Andrew Marangoni and lead strategist Tyler Neff sits the primary tool of race engineers, a laptop. Above them are four to six monitors configured to display whatever they need. More than 1,100 sensors on the car send real-time data to the team.



Above: The LED panel on the car's side window shows a green #1 for first in class as the Pfaff Porsche completes a lap. Facing page: Red and black plaid on display at Daytona.

Outside of an on-track shunt or catastrophic failure, the engineers probably know something is wrong with the car before the driver does. Engineers also have access to the 16 camera views from race control, covering every section of the track at all times, as well as the race broadcast. The arrangement would look at home in a NASA mission control room and is the current IMSA paddock standard. Welcome to customer racing in 2020.

Not all data comes from sensors, though. After Thursday night's practice, Marangoni asks the team photographer for photos from the heavy braking sections. He's specifically looking for the glow from the rotors to determine if the brake settings are working as they should. What fans view as a cool picture of glowing rotors at night, the team uses for data analysis of the car's performance.

### RACE DAY

The sun is shining, there is zero threat of rain, and the temperature will top out in the mid-60s. It is a perfect day for racing.

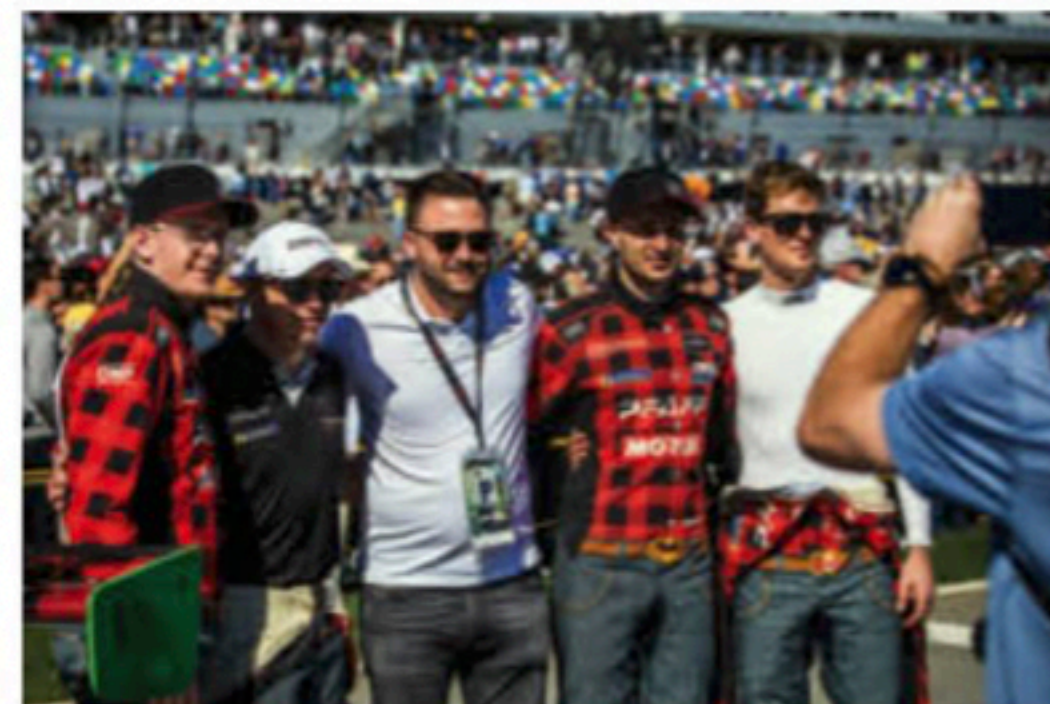
The Pfaff team's unique livery celebrating its Cana-

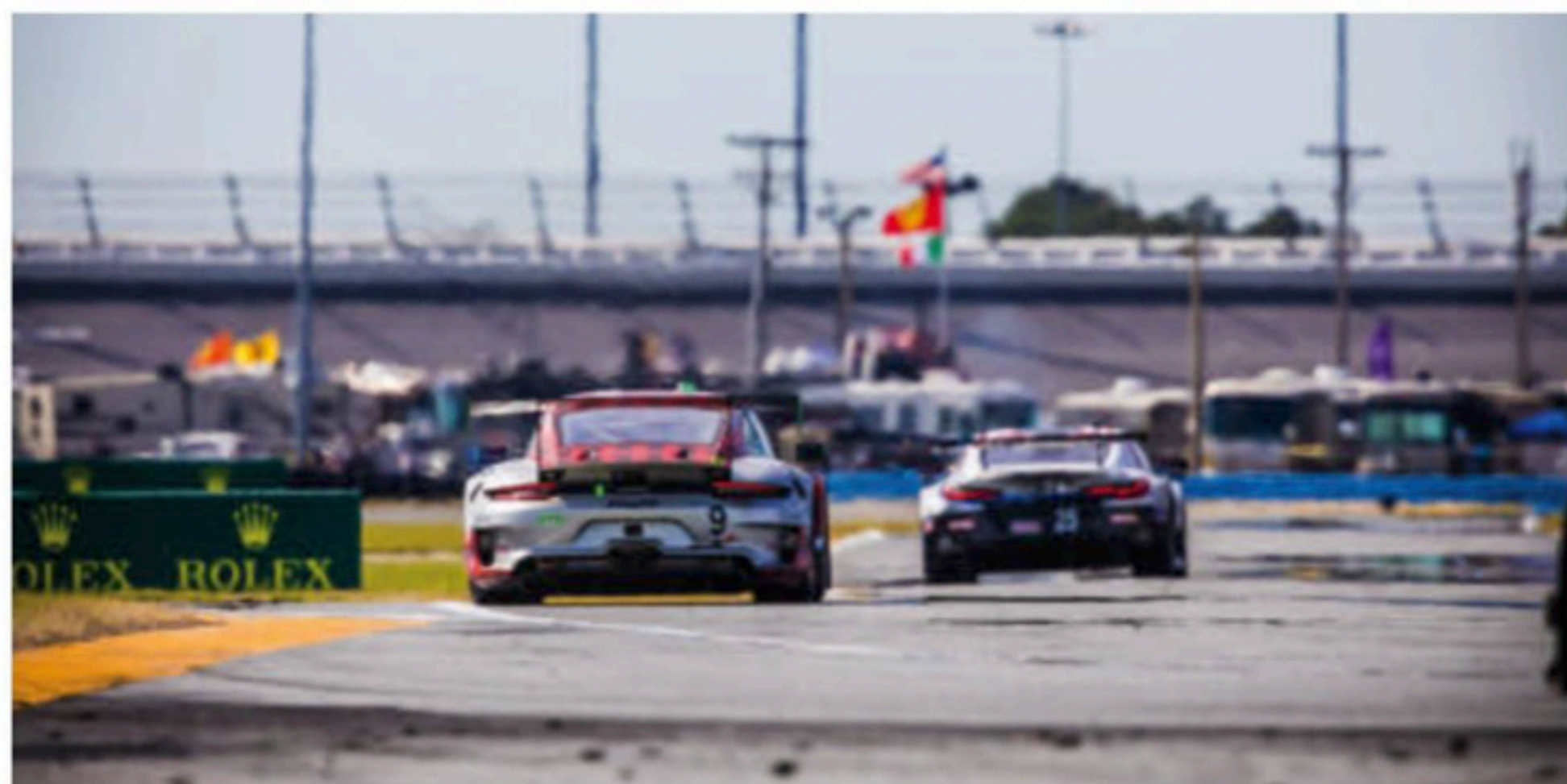
dian roots makes them a definite fan favorite. You can't miss the car, which has a red and black plaid pattern covering the front and gradually tapering to the roof and wing. Starting behind the front wheel arches, silver with red accents flow down the doors. The silver and red colors are inspired by the team's new primary 2020 sponsor, Motul. "There's something more about Pfaff," said Guillaume Pailleret, Motul's executive vice president of the Americas. "It's about the people. The fact that the mechanics at the shops participate in the race team, this is what racing is all about."

Pre-race activities are just some of the great things IMSA does for its fans. It is one of very few racing series that provide an opportunity for any ticket holder to be on pit lane with the cars, crew, and drivers immediately before a race. On this day, thousands of fans swarm pit lane. The "Plaid Porsche" is easily one of the biggest draws. Hordes of fans pose for selfies in front of the car, or with the drivers and crew. The drivers are loose, all smiles as they playfully engage with fans, waiting for the action to begin.



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The now signature plaid livery debuted in 2019, but Pfaff raised the bar in 2020 when it unveiled driver suits featuring a printed graphic that turned the heads of fans and race officials. Each driver appeared to be wearing blue jeans, a brown leather belt, and a red and black plaid flannel shirt. The sight of a driver climbing into a race car in “blue jeans” caused us to do a double take, even after being with the team for days.

#### GREEN FLAG

As the green flag waves for the 58th Rolex 24 at Daytona, no one exhales until all 38 cars are safely through turn one. To paraphrase an old racing cliché, “You can’t win a race in the first turn, but you sure can lose one.” Thankfully, everyone plays nice, and the first lap is clean. Only 832 to go.

The first three and a half hours of the race go by without drama for the Pfaff team. They are comfortably in first place, and the crew has been nearly flawless on pit stops. In between the action, crew members clean equipment and dust tool chests; their attention to detail is admirable.

The team seems to have better fuel economy than any other car in the GTD class, including two other Porsches. The engineers discuss how this could lead to “penalties” from IMSA for the next race. Yes, three hours into a 24-hour marathon that starts the season, the team is discussing strategy implications for future competitions. With a smile, Marangoni and Neff admit this is an issue they’ve never encountered before. How do you make a race car go slower while burning more fuel?

Porsche development driver Lars Kern is in the car when a two-car incident on the front straight causes the race to go under a full-course yellow. The spotter guides Kern through the debris field, and the safety car waits to enter the track to pick up the race leader.

Technology has changed racing for the better in many ways, but it is not perfect. The team is having a difficult time hearing Kern. His microphone is picking up too much ambient noise, and it takes multiple attempts to discern what the driver is saying. The safety car finally has the field under control. Somewhere in the process, Kern illegally passed the safety car. Confusion

Consistency and speed were hallmarks of the Pfaff Porsche throughout the race, whether they were in first place or thirteenth.



Hard on the binders, the glowing rotors of the #9 Porsche shed light on brake pressure and pad wear as the car enters the International Horseshoe.

envelops the team, and the engineers try to determine what happened. The radio calls are painfully difficult to understand, and there is no TV replay to help. The penalty for passing the safety car could result in multiple laps lost.

The team directs Kern to go to the back of the longest line of traffic, ceding his position on the track. It is a gamble because IMSA could penalize them even after they voluntarily go to the end of the line. Tension has replaced the calm and confident demeanor of the first five hours.

It is a good sign when the green flag waves with no message from race control. It appears that the self-imposed punishment has been enough. The team may be in last place, but they are on the lead lap. Kern's radio communications with the team are still difficult to understand, but his tone is not. He is upset.

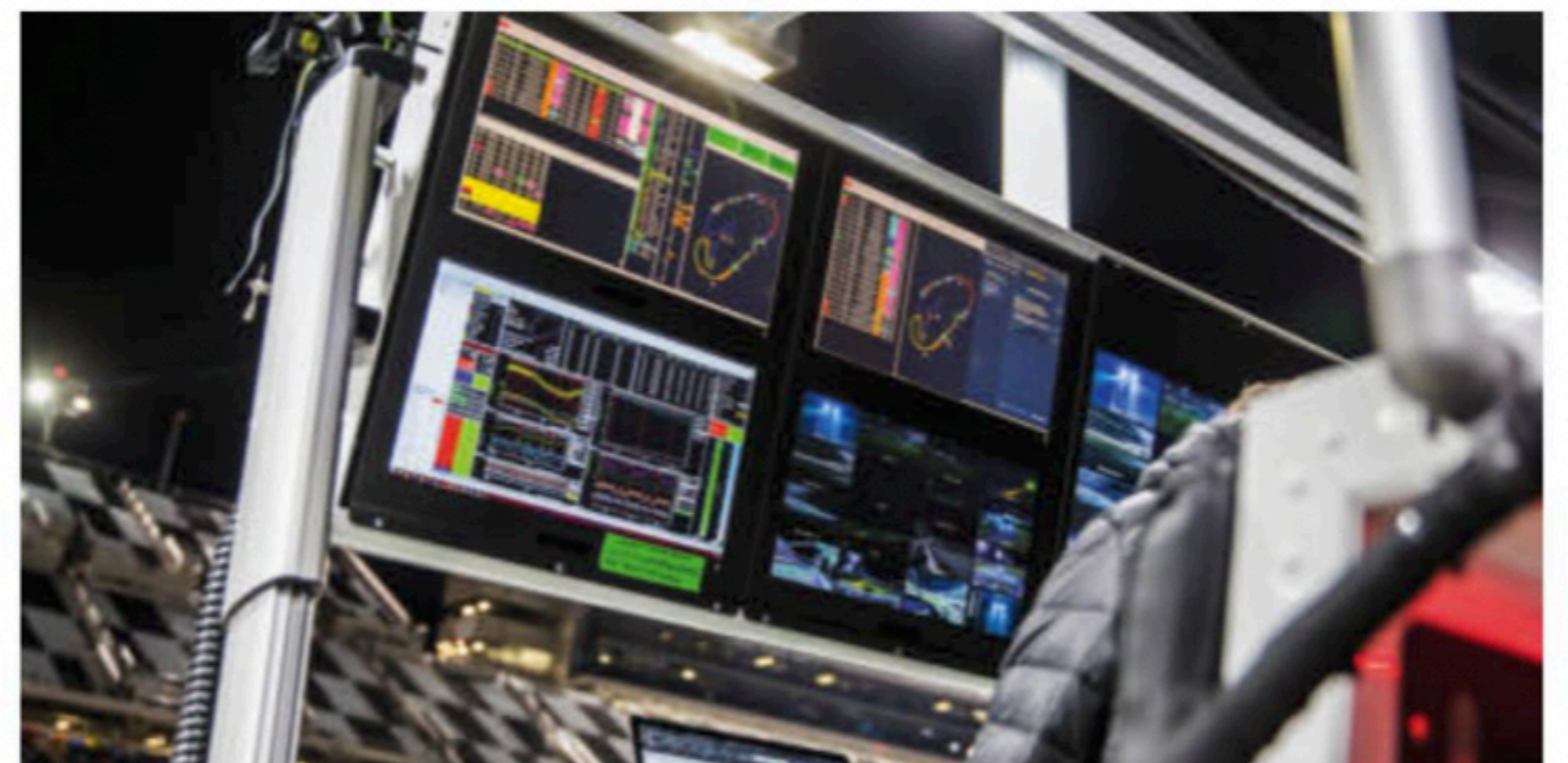
The racing intensifies after the caution, and somewhere in the ensuing laps, the driver's-side mirror is ripped off by contact with a competitor. "They are racing like it's the end of the race!" shouts Kern. No one

needs him to repeat that radio call. The race is six hours old, and the Pfaff crew has gone from flawlessly leading its class to the last car on the lead lap.

### HOURS SIX TO SIXTEEN

Kern recovered from the incident and holds a consistent attack on the field. He is followed by sensational driving from Porsche factory veteran Patrick Pilet and Robichon, which brings Pfaff to the lead again. A few minutes before 1:00 a.m., Robichon brings the car in for the last stop of his three-hour stint. Kern straps in to begin his three-hour tour, and the rest of the crew begin their work. That's when things go sideways, with a severe delay refueling the car.

Team manager Steve Bortolotti is furious. In one pit stop, they have gone from first to tenth in class. Bortolotti, Marangoni, and the crew chief have a chat, and a decision is made for Bortolotti to take over refueling duties for the next stop. They must determine if the incident was due to equipment problems or human error. Neff discusses strategy with Kern, telling him the fuel





rate to meet and engine map to use. At the end of the twelfth hour, the Pfaff Porsche is in tenth place.

By 2:00 a.m., a damp Florida cold has set in, and man and machine are getting tired. The crew has seen its share of stress and fatigue, but the mood is improving. The first pit stop with Bortolotti handling the refueling supports the change; data shows no deviation in fuel pressure or flow rate. Kern turns a lap within 0.1 second of the fastest lap of the race. He has gained two spots on the track, and the team shows signs of recovering from the mistakes made an hour earlier.

Even with Kern's on-track consistency and the crew's return to form in the pits, the team is in desperate need of a caution. They are clinging to the lead lap, and the leader is closing. If they do not get a caution soon, they will fall a lap down. No yellow flags come to their aid, and the leader eventually slips by. All is not lost as they can regain position if they remain the first car a lap down, which shouldn't be a problem with their pace.

### DISASTER STRIKES

It's 5:15 a.m. when news of the driveshaft failure arrives. Stunned crew members grab their gear and run to the garage. The car is towed in, and it's not looking good. Technicians slide underneath to examine the problem as Pfaff team driver Dennis Olsen stands in disbelief. He was running blisteringly fast laps moments ago, and now he's in the garage staring at the broken car. As they remove the undertray, the damage becomes visible. Parts of the driveshaft litter the tray, as do thick globs of axle grease. Thousands of metal shards make the grease sparkle like glitter under the fluorescent lights.

Techs call out for parts and tools, determined to get the car back on track as quickly as possible. They work furiously but methodically. New parts are installed, and within an hour, the Porsche is driven back to the pit. It screams out of the pits with a new driveshaft, full fuel load, fresh tires, and Robichon behind the wheel. The team is 13 laps down to the next car for position, 14th place in class. With the leader some 40 laps ahead, the new goal is to be fast and consistent, and to hope for the best.

The Plaid Porsche races for another six and a half hours, knowing it can only advance if multiple teams spend time off the track. Officially, it finishes 13th in class, far from where it could have been. However, if someone walked into the Pfaff pit at any point Sunday morning, they would have no idea the team was out of contention. The drivers, technicians, engineers, and crew exhibited maximum effort and concentration throughout.

"We all wanted to win and have a strong finish for Pfaff and for Motul," said Bortolotti. "But ultimately we did our best, and it was something out of our control, which sometimes happens in racing." His statement is spot on. They performed well and left Daytona with heads held high.

**IF YOU EVER** find yourself at an IMSA race, seek out the Plaid Porsche and the people who make it run. They are a talented and dedicated group, supporting their team and representing a broader community of Pfaff employees throughout Canada. Best of all, they represent the spirit of competition and camaraderie that make motorsports a noble endeavor, and they will make you proud to be a Porsche fan. 🏁

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