

THE VINTAGE AND HISTORIC RACING NEWS MAGAZINE

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VARA at Willow Springs





## Pepto Pink

The #3 Camaro Z28 IROC on display at the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance.

### The Saga of the #3 Camaro Z28 IROC

— story by *David Lawrence*  
— photos by *David Lawrence*  
and *Jutta Fausel*

During the late 1970s the following activities were changing our lives forever: The Rubik's Cube, the Sony Walkman, a failed U.S. hostage rescue in Teheran, the Pac-Man and Asteroids video games release, the creation of CNN by Ted Turner, and the first computer dial up being offered by CompuServe, alongside the eruption of Mount St. Helens. During that time — 1978-1980 — the International Race of Champions Series was taking place on ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, being viewed by millions in the first and only made for TV world series of car racing.

#### Beginnings of IROC

In the early 1970s Roger Penske had the good fortune to share a ski lift with TV super agent, Mike Phelps, at Aspen. As Phelps explained it, by the time they arrived at the top of the mountain, they had created the concept of a true "World Series" of car racing. The concept was to pit drivers from different race series and disciplines in cars that were set up to be as similar as they could in every race car set up characteristic. The only items that could be changed were the seat, as each driver was issued his own seat, and the location of the seat in reference to the pedals.

At some point very early, Les Richter, former pro football star and President of Riverside International Raceway, was brought in as one of the partners, and I believe trusted with more of the day to day running of the series. Phelps was instrumental in packaging the race series in its infancy and selling the concept to Boone Arledge at ABC Wide World of Sports. Phelps was also responsible for bringing in Goodyear as major sponsor. He was was one of the original pioneers of packaging TV shows where the agents became power brokers as they controlled the shows by booking every actor on the show, keeping it all in-house in the same agency. It was the perfect coming together of three powerhouses

Jay Signore joined IROC in a very interesting way, as the story goes. He was a close friend of Mark Donohue as they had raced Elva Couriers against each other for a few years. Back then, as a high school shop teacher, he would spend his summers hanging around his friend Mark, and helping out here and there. One day, Penske came up to him and said "I have seen you here

quite a bit. Did I hire you?" Signore said no and went back to work on whatever he was working on and Penske walked away, perhaps a bit bewildered. A few years later, Signore would be working as the extremely long running president of Penske's IROC Series.

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The race series was a major hit with phenomenal demographics of households watching. According to an IROC publication, from 1977, after the completion of three IROC Series seasons, more than 113 million US households were exposed to the series, with an average of 9.4 million households tuned in to each of the 12 race broadcasts. Only the Indianapolis 500 and the Daytona 500 received comparable television audiences.

The IROC Series started in 1973 with Porsche's RS Coupes, then after one year went to the 1974 Camaro Z28s because some of those NASCAR drivers were a bit hard on those foreign cars. After three years of running 1974 models, the 1977 Camaro Z28s were introduced as full-blown race cars as the modified production cars could not take the beating from the racers. The 1977-1980 Camaro Z28 was followed by the 1984 Camaro Z28, the 1990 Dodge Daytona, and the 1994 Dodge Avenger. The last car used in the Series 30-year history was the 2000 Pontiac Firebird.

My car, the pink #3 competed from 1978-1980, which were also the last years the series included Formula One drivers. These three years are known as IROC Series #5 (1977-1978), Series #6 (1978-1979), and Series #7 (1979-1980). The reason the IROC Series are listed as lasting two years is that the Series would start in the previous year, and complete all but the final race. For example, in Series #6, there were four races in 1978 – two at Michigan International Speedway and two at Riverside International Raceway – with final championship-deciding race was at Atlanta in March of 1979.

The IROC Series was a scheduling juggernaut, with Signore's super talented and efficient wife Barbara, at the helm of the scheduling. She juggled racers from the US and Europe, in three different series, in addition to the drivers' race schedules.



**Bobby Unser drives the #3 Camaro Z28 IROC in an IROC race at Riverside.**

She would match the drivers to race events and venues they'd already be competing in, allowing IROC to be the support race for currently existing races.

The true "World Series" nature of the IROC Series could never be complete or taken seriously, if the best from European Formula One were not invited to participate. Whether Formula One, NASCAR, or the Indy Series, you had to be invited and you usually were invited because you most likely had just won your championship.

Formula One world champions who participated in the series included Emerson Fittipaldi, Graham Hill, Jody Scheckter, James Hunt, Mario Andretti, Alan Jones, Nicki Lauda and Keke Rosberg. Other Formula One drivers who participated were Ronnie Peterson, Brian Redman, Jacky Ickx, Gunnar Nilsson, Patrick Depailler, John Watson, and Clay Regazzoni. But somewhere between the end of the 1980 IROC Series, and when they restarted up the Series in 1984, Bernie Ecclestone banned all of his participating drivers to compete in any other series or race events other than Formula One, which struck

a hard blow to the international flavor of the series.

Indy 500 winners who participated in the series were AJ Foyt, Al Unser Sr., Rick Mears, Johnny Rutherford, Bobby Unser, Gordon Johncock, Emerson Fittipaldi, Tom Sneva, and Mario Andretti. NASCAR champions included Richard Petty, Dale Earnhardt, David Pearson, Cale Yarborough, Darrell Waltrip, Benny Parsons, and Bobby Allison.

#### The Cars

The 1974-1977 IROC Series Camaros had been based on production cars, but had trouble taking the pounding they were receiving by the racers during the series. Once the series shifted to super speedways, the production based race cars were too weak to handle the speeds at these tracks. Given this situation, 15 cars were purchased as incomplete "Body in White" chassis and bodies from Chevrolet for IROC/Penske. These 15 Body in White vehicles were delivered to Banjo Mathews Racing Shop in Arden, N.C., who developed the chassis while Holman-Moody designed and created the suspension.

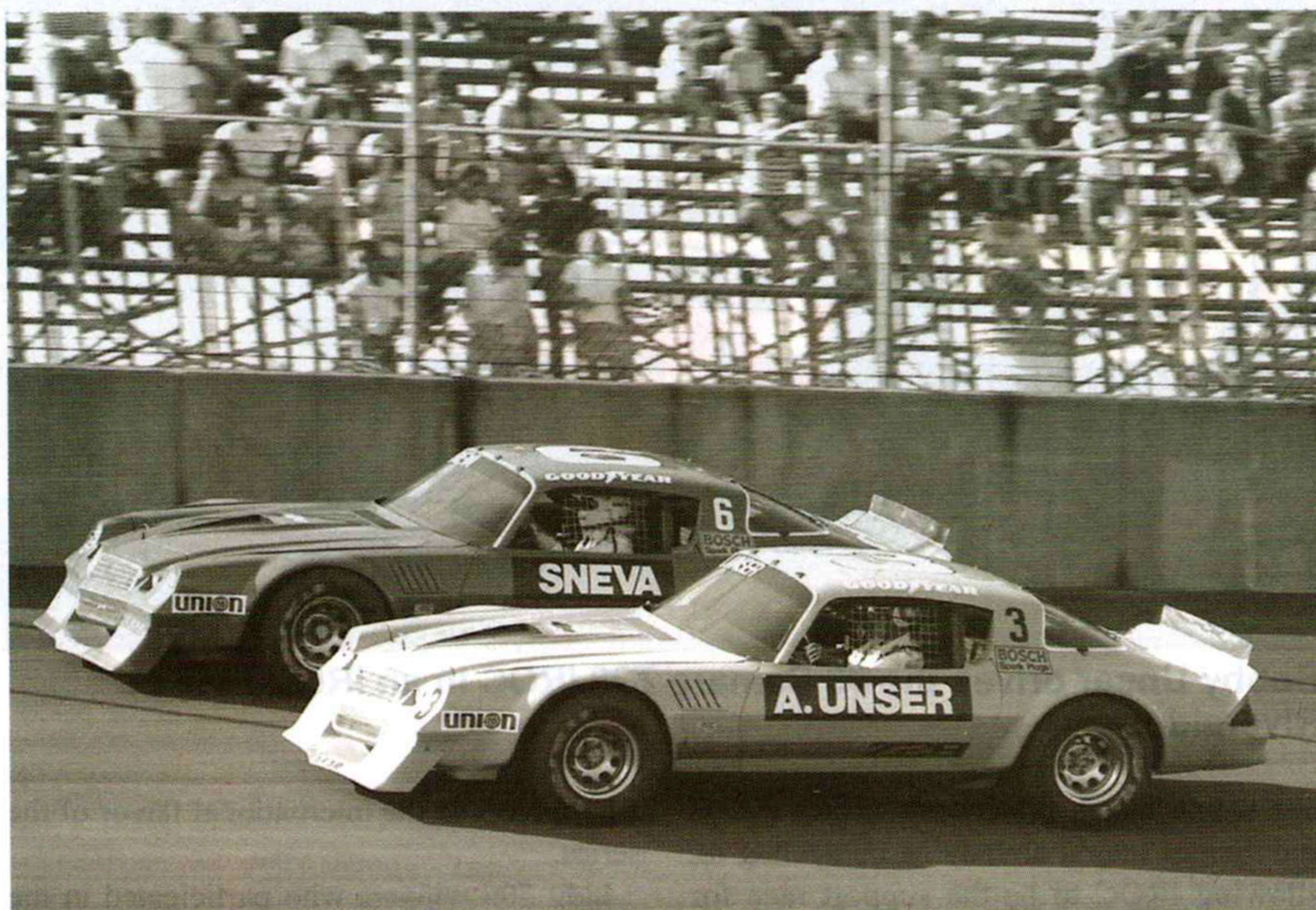
The 15 completed race chassis' were then sent to the Penske Racing facility in Reading, Pennsylvania, for fabrication and assembly. Parts added included, Norris Wheels, 12.0 in. Hurst Airheart vented discs front and rear, Monroe Shocks, 10,000 rpm tach, Phil Henny Radiator, Moon Eyes Oil Reservoir, Holly Carburetor, Traco Full Race Engine, Super T10 Transmission, and Trailing Arm Rear Suspension.

It cost \$28,000 to create each car, while a stock fully loaded street Camaro Z28 was \$6,115 off the dealer's showroom. In 1979 they made 84,877 Camaro Z28s, while Penske Racing built fifteen racing IROC Series Camaro Z28s. Additional cars were built to replace race damaged cars. The race cars were adjusted cosmetically yearly to mirror the factory trim packages and decals that were on the streetcars in the showrooms, as GM was the major sponsor.



**The #3 Camaro Z28 IROC with Emerson Fittipaldi at the wheel.**





**Al Unser, behind the wheel of the pink Camaro, vies with Tom Sneva in an IROC race at Michigan International Speedway.**

### **Pink #3**

After the final race of the Series #7, on Mar. 15, 1980 at Atlanta Motor Speedway, the IROC Series shut down, as they were in need of a new corporate sponsor. At some point, all of the cars ended up in a leaky barn in Pennsylvania owned by Penske (making these the proverbial barn find). The pink #3, and possibly the #8, were purchased by Chauncey T. "Jocko" Maggiasco of Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Jocko took delivery at Lime Rock, in the presence of his sponsor's son, Rick Fluegel. Rick's father owned a large chrome company called Qualchrome. Jocko blasted the car around the track the second it was taken off the trailer. The car was altered with wider tires, wheels, and fender flares to run in a few 1980 and 1981 Trans-Am races here in the US and Canada. The original Norris IROC Series wheels were widened, as were the fender flares. Luckily, very few other alterations were made to the car.

Maggiasco sold the car to his Fluegel several years later. Now located in Florida, Fluegel began to do a full nut and bolt restoration of the car to bring it back to its full former glory as an IROC Series Car. Halfway through the stripping and re-painting of the body, Chuck Stevens walked into his shop and decided that he simply had to own it, no matter what the price. The car then eventually changed hands again in 1993 being bought by Dick Thomas, who owned the car for 15 years. While in the ownership of Thomas, the car entered into an extensive and very costly restoration. Thomas was contacted by the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance and invited to participate in the 2005 Concours as part of the Race Car Driver Special Honoree Class for Bobby Allison. Although an expensive restoration, the restorers were not

that sensitive to the actual history of the car, and left the modifications that had been done for the car to compete in Trans Am racing, 25 years earlier.

It is unknown who the buyer was, who purchased the car from Thomas back in 2005, but the car ended up on the block at the RM Auction in Monterey, California, in 2007, where it was purchased by Paul C. Suter of Classy Classic Cars of Houston. The car went back to auction again with Mecum in May 2010 and was bought by another vintage car dealer, Motorama Classic Cars, of Monroe, N.C. I then purchased the car from this dealer in 2013. Once I saw the car, I intended to race it, enjoy it, and never sell it.

### **My History with #3**

Early in 2013, I had been getting track time at Willow Springs International Raceway at

Bobby Cee's Racers Edge Driving School. I had known Bobby Cee for many years, and I remembered he had owned, back in the 1990s, two IROC Series cars from the 1978-1980 seasons. One night I was looking for potential race cars to buy, and searched for IROC race cars on the internet. The pink #3 Camaro Z28, in Bobby Allison livery, popped up on the RM Auctions website and I instantly remembered the car: in 2007, it was parked right out front of the RM Auction in Monterey, right next to a few multimillion-dollar Ferraris.

In the paperwork I received after buying the car, it mentioned someone named Chris Tyler, also of Florida, who was a good friend of Fluegel. It mentioned after having done some work on the car, Chris Tyler was given the original racing seat from the car. This seat had been Emerson Fittipaldi's personal seat, used during his races in the Series. (Remember, the only item that was changed from driver to driver or car to car was the driver's own personal seat.) Once I had purchased the car, I immediately called Tyler to try and get the seat. I also contacted Fluegel. After a few conversations with Tyler, he stopped returning my calls. I then asked Fluegel to intercede on my behalf, as they were close friends and try to get me the seat. He told me I better send him the money ASAP if I wanted ever to see that seat. I immediately and nervously sent a check to a man I have never met, for a seat I have never seen, that was owned by another man I had never met. At this point, if you had a bridge you want to sell, I would have taken that too.

But car guys are car guys, and when you get out of California, you can usually trust them with your life (and I am from California). I sent the check, the seat showed up, and I realized I was dealing with a stand-up guy. We kept talking and he said "why don't you send the car back to me so I can actually restore it the right way."

Here we go again.



**Bobby Unser at Riverside.**



shop—Rick Huegel Antique Auto of Fort Pierce, Florida—that I had never been to. It may sound like a recipe for disaster, but I had a good feeling about him, and in the end, he did an excellent job restoring the car to a very high Concours level, at a fair price, and did so just in the nick of time for the Amelia Island Concours.

### Recent Race History

I have the good fortune to do two mega race weekends with the car during the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017 with my trusty crew chief, Nick Jennings. These were both VARA races that took place at Willow



**The #3 Camaro Z28 IROC has thrice been included in the display for Grand Marshals of the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance.**

make sure the car was doing what it supposed to do, when it was supposed to do it. Willow Springs, is a very imposing 2.2-mile track carved out of 550 acres of the California desert, about an hour and half from Los Angeles. It was a blast, and the car was so much fun to drive at Willow Springs. The Big Bore Bash was covered by *Victory Lane Magazine*, and featured a photo of me driving down the hill (i.e. holding on for dear life) after Turn 4. After the May Madness race, the car did get restored, and has since been doing more shows than races.

### Recent Show History

Jay Signore had mentioned to me that they were looking for an IROC car that Al Unser Sr. had driven in the Series, as they were about to honor him at the 2017 Amelia Island Concours. I contacted the Amelia Island people, and they were interested, I couldn't believe it! The car was featured in the special race driver honoree class for Al Unser Sr, where he signed the dash.

The car sat directly in front of Al's four winning Indy 500 cars, and the actual Borg Warner Trophy.

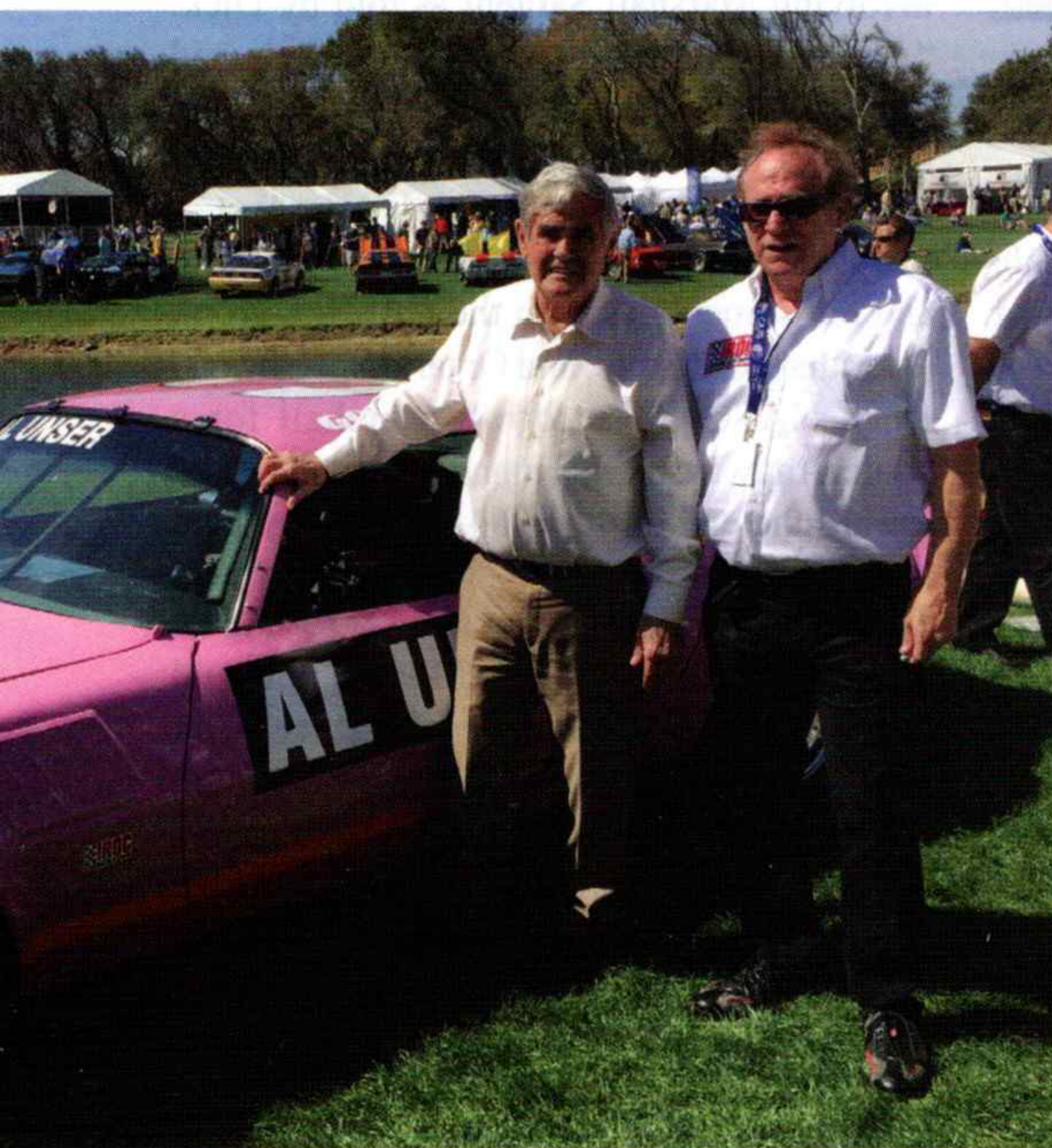
Somebody pinch me. Is this for real?

While at Amelia, I was approached by the Indy 500 Speedway Museum folks, who asked me if I would be interested in showing the car for nine months at their museum. They were planning "The Amazing Unser's" exhibit, which would run before, during and after the Indy 500. Well that took about three seconds for me to say, YES, and thank you very much. I told them however the car was being asked back to the 2018 Amelia Island Concours for the Emerson Fittipaldi Racecar Drive Honoree Class. So the car arrived at Amelia in a Reliable transporter for the one day show and that night was ramped into a Classic transporter and arrived at the Indy 500 Speedway Museum a few days later.

So the car actually has been featured in three Amelia Island Concours in the Race Car Driver Honoree Classes: 2005 (Bobby Allison), 2017 (Al Unser Sr.) and 2018 (Emerson Fittipaldi).

The car was also accepted by the prestigious "The Quail, A Motorsports Gathering" at the Carmel Valley Lodge in 2017, but I thought it would be a bit silly to show up the year that Ferrari was celebrating it's seventieth birthday with a pink Camaro.

Now to the reason the car got the name "Pepto Pink." Al Unser Sr., upon drawing the pink car, said "Augh, now I have to drive the Pepto pink car."



**The author with Al Unser Sr. at the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance.**

Springs International Raceway in Rosamond, California. Prior to the race, I was lucky to have good friend, Tomy Drissi test the car, to