

Michael Christensen
and Klaus Bachler:
Warm-up on
Daytona Beach



24 hr

Coming of age: In their first 24-hour race, Porsche juniors Klaus Bachler and Michael Christensen will face the sternest test of their young careers at Daytona. It will be the first nighttime race for both, yet darkness and sleep deprivation are just two of many unfamiliar foes.

By Charlotte Tiersen
Photos by Jürgen Tap

“The guys are used to running a half-mile sprint, but here they have to complete a marathon mentally—for the first twenty hours, you just have to try not to lose the race.”

*Life's not just a beach at Daytona.
On the oval track of the International Speedway, full load
is the order of the day—24 hours a day.*

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Exactly 86,400 seconds to go. The Daytona 24-hour race is set to get underway at 3:30 p.m. Klaus Bachler's white and red Porsche 911 GT3 Cup with starting number 62 overtakes several competitors in the first left corner. But Bachler is not in the car; he's in the pits, chewing on the antenna of the radio and staring at the monitor. "Now I'm getting a bit nervous," says the 21-year-old in his noticeable Austrian accent. Just like in a video game, he mentally steers through every corner, tries to nail the ideal brake point, the perfect line. And hopes that his teammate Marco Seefried, who is driving at the moment, makes the right decisions.

"It's a strange feeling for a race-car driver to give up control of the car," says Michael Christensen, a lanky young man from Denmark who is experiencing precisely the same feelings three pits down with his team Konrad Motorsport/Orbit. Bachler and Christensen, two Porsche Junior drivers, are sharing their cars at their first 24-hour race with three and four other drivers, respectively. Last year, each man drove for himself in the Porsche Carrera Cup Germany. Man against man. And they'll do the same in 2013 in the Porsche Mobil 1 Supercup. But in the long-distance classic in Florida, it's team against team. The object is essentially the same as in the "steady hand game": Be fast without touching anything. As if that weren't difficult enough, neither one has raced at night before, and they have to share the 3.56-mile combination oval and street circuit with almost sixty other cars, some of which are driven by amateur drivers.

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Now 83,700 seconds to go. Christensen's teammate Nick Tandy starts from the pole position with high hopes. A few minutes later, he is received in the pit with a yellow lollipop sign with a smiley face on it. But no one is in the mood to smile. The right door is dented and the right rear tire is shredded. After experiencing tire damage, Tandy had slammed into the wall. The white and turquoise Porsche with starting number 32 bears a strip of tape when it heads back out on the track.

The disappointment on Christensen's face is only faintly visible. The 22-year-old was ready for anything—anything but this feeling that leaves you gasping for air from one second to the next. But surprises are par for the course in a 24-hour race. When he learns in December that he will start at Daytona, where legends like Hurley Haywood and Hans Herrmann have ascended the winner's podium, the trained auto mechanic goes straight to his laptop and begins studying onboard videos from past races.

How aggressively do they drive? What do experienced drivers do differently? What are the rules? "I had a to-do list in my head that I went through step by step," recalls Christensen, who was an overachiever even in his

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kart-racing days. “It’s like knowing that you still have to set the alarm. Once you’ve done that, you don’t have to think about it anymore.”

The youngsters are feeling the pressure—with 22 overall victories and 73 class wins, Porsche is the most successful manufacturer in the history of the legendary race. The factory drivers of tomorrow not only receive the lion’s share of their season budget for the race series in which they will participate, as well as fitness, media, and mental training, but also are meant to boost their racing skills in Daytona. Their mentor Sascha Maassen, who was a Porsche factory driver for many years and now shares a car with Bachler on the Racing/Wright Motorsports team, puts it metaphorically: “The guys are used to running a half-mile sprint. Here they have to do a marathon mentally.” He has some practical advice: “For the first twenty hours, you just try not to lose the race.”

Still 75,600 seconds to go. The sky over Daytona has turned orange and evening has descended. Christensen has just spent one and a half hours in the car—three times longer than a Carrera Cup race. His face is red, his blond hair bathed in sweat. For minutes he can’t speak. He dunks his hands in a large ice container full of energy drinks. “I can hardly feel my legs, and my butt hurts,” he complains. “I was expecting it to be a challenge, but not this hard.” And this is a man who trains for several hours a day.

Back in the paddock, the physical therapists are charged with loosening up his muscles. The sign on the door says Suite N4. The name, however, is deceiving: inside there are two blue gurneys, a couple of chairs, and the pungent smell of a locker room. Before the race, kinesio tape was applied to Christensen’s back to alleviate back pain. The tape is intended to lift the skin and facilitate circulation. Sometimes just believing in it is good enough.

In Bachler’s case, only a bit of gymnastics will do the trick. With circus-worthy movements, he extracts his 5’10” frame from the bucket seat and exits the car over the steel tubes of the roll cage. Even the driver changes are exhausting. Before the race, he practiced the maneuver over and over again.

“Getting in is harder than getting out,” says the Austrian, who grew up 15 or so miles from the Red Bull Ring in Spielberg. Brace yourself with your right hand. Insert your right leg, followed by the left one. Bang your helmet on the doorframe. His engineer, Bob Voglioni, times him. First attempt: 26 seconds. Second attempt: 25.13 seconds. Bachler is intent on practicing more even when the others have lost interest. He always was ambitious. Since finishing his technical degree, he’s done nothing but race. “The more I train, the more the routine becomes solidified in the mind,” says Bachler,

whose right eyebrow bears a scar to remind him of the crash he suffered in Formula 3 testing in 2010. The morning before the race, he awakes at four in the morning. He sits in bed with his arms outstretched in front of him and runs through the entire choreography once again like a dancer learning his steps.

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They have 55,800 seconds to go. A full moon hangs over the Daytona International Speedway. Bachler should really get a bit of sleep before he's expected back in the pit at 3:30 a.m. The sleeplessness has been worrying him all weekend. "Lately I've been waking up at four every day, and I was getting worried that I would be too tired when I finally got in the car. I probably won't be able to sleep with all that racket anyway."

His home for the next few hours: the "American Tradition" motor home, 59 feet long, 11.5 feet wide, tiled flooring, beige leather sofas, king-size bed, washing machine, heated floors. A mansion on wheels. Theoretically. On the kitchen counter, the radio crackles incessantly. Above the driver's seat, an extra-large flat-screen monitor shows the race, and from outside the roar of the cars seeps into the interior.

Room 247, Hotel La Quinta Inn. Christensen, too, tries to get some sleep. The racetrack is a half mile away.

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Vrooom. Vrooom. The droning sounds of the engines swirl around in his head. He'd rather be in the car. But the Porsche 911 with the number 32 has unfortunately already slipped into its pajamas—it sits in the pit covered by a white sheet. A further tire defect has damaged the car so severely that the team had to throw in the towel at 9:50 p.m. "It was a roller-coaster ride of emotions," says Christensen. "But I'm glad that I was at least able to be a part of it." His only consolation: a cold beer with the team.

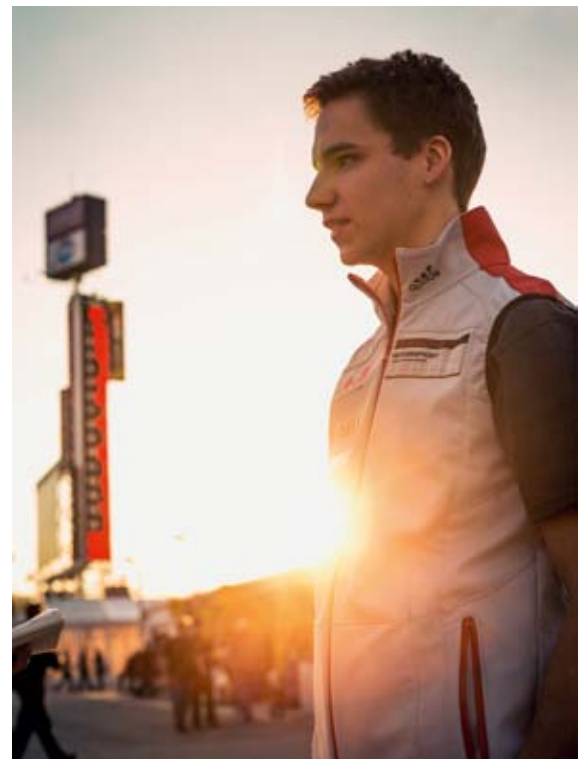
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Just 30,600 seconds to go. It's light outside, but a thick fog hangs over the circuit. No overtaking. The race becomes a parade. This gives Bachler the chance to have a bite to eat. He only managed to doze for an hour and a half. He has a headache. "It was too loud, and I was nervous about not hearing the alarm." His right eye looks like a red spider-web has been spun on it. But he doesn't complain. "I'm still motivated," he says with the air of a robot that just keeps going, come what may. Bachler takes the wheel once again before his 17-year-old teammate Madison Snow has the honor of closing out the race.

At 3:30 p.m., the Porsche with starting number 62 crosses the finish line in 11th place after 668 laps. And after 86,400 seconds in which Michael Christensen and Klaus Bachler have gained a wealth of invaluable experience. ●



Michael Christensen,
22-year-old trained auto mechanic from Denmark: "I didn't expect it to be that hard."



Klaus Bachler
undertook rigorous preparation: since finishing his technical degree, the 21-year-old Austrian has done nothing but race.