Horst Kwech and His Modified Monzas

BY DAVID GIRLING

I drove down to Ohio recently to watch a man take delivery of his new Monza. Before you ask, "So what else is new?" let me point out that the man wasn't a typical new-car buyer. The seller bore little resemblance to your average Chevy dealer. And the Monza was in no way a standard model. For one thing, it'll move at 200 miles an hour.

The site for this unusual delivery was the sprawling 8,100-acre Transportation Research Center of Ohio, located about 30 miles northwest of Columbus. It was a locale well suited for the pre-delivery wring-out of this jet black modified Monza, one of the new All-American GT class of competition cars. TRC's unobstructed 50-acre asphalt vehicle dynamics area and 9,000-foot-long skid pad provide the safe dimensions for setting up high-performance automobiles.

This type of racing Monza is specially designed, built, and nurtured for international GT sedan competition by DeKon Engineering Limited of Libertyville, Illinois. DeKon is headed by Horst Kwech, a champion race driver and designer/builder of international reputation, and his longtime friend and associate, Lee Dykstra, the designer/engineer who rides herd on the company's Detroit engineering and marketing facility.

The purchaser of this small Chevy racer was cattleman Frank Thomas of Boise, Idaho, who runs a stable of racers in various sedan series and shares his team's driving duties. The Monza expands his racing activities into the larger engine field; he even wants to race his new car at LeMans he told me.

One of the newly developed Monza All-American GT racers made only tantalizingly brief look-me-over appearances at a couple of the 1975 International Motor Sports Association's Camel GT Challenge events. But these appearances (and one actual start at Road Atlanta) were enough to stir up the press, fans, and competitors alike.

Since the IMSA GT series began in 1972, it has been dominated by German machinery—the race-famous Porsche Carreras and, more recently, very potent BMWs. IMSA officials, sensing that such domination could eventually lead to fan

Horst Kwech

boredom, decided to stave off the ho-hums and created the new All-American GT classification. The rules are broad: As long as the basic original body lines are kept and the engine and driveline come from the same manufacturer, reworking to race configuration is relatively free.

Sophisticated racing fans know that the Monzas built by Horst

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IMSA GT racing has been dominated by Porsche and BMW models, but Monza entries may bring home some new American victories.

Kwech—and a few other competition car specialists—aren't too much like the ones available from Hometown Chevrolet Inc. But then, none of those Porsches or BMWs tearing around road-racing circuits had rolled out of dealer showrooms, either. These are out-and-out racing machines.

However, the Monza I saw wrung out in Ohio still strongly retains its Chevrolet heritage in both looks and hardware. Even the race-adapted exterior panels—front spoiler and flared fenders—are Chevrolet-developed fiberglass units. The suspension is a computer-designed race concept that includes larger-than-stock front and rear racing-type disc brakes. And the wheels, of course, are wide enough to accommodate the big 11.40/15 front, and 25/15 rear, racing tires.

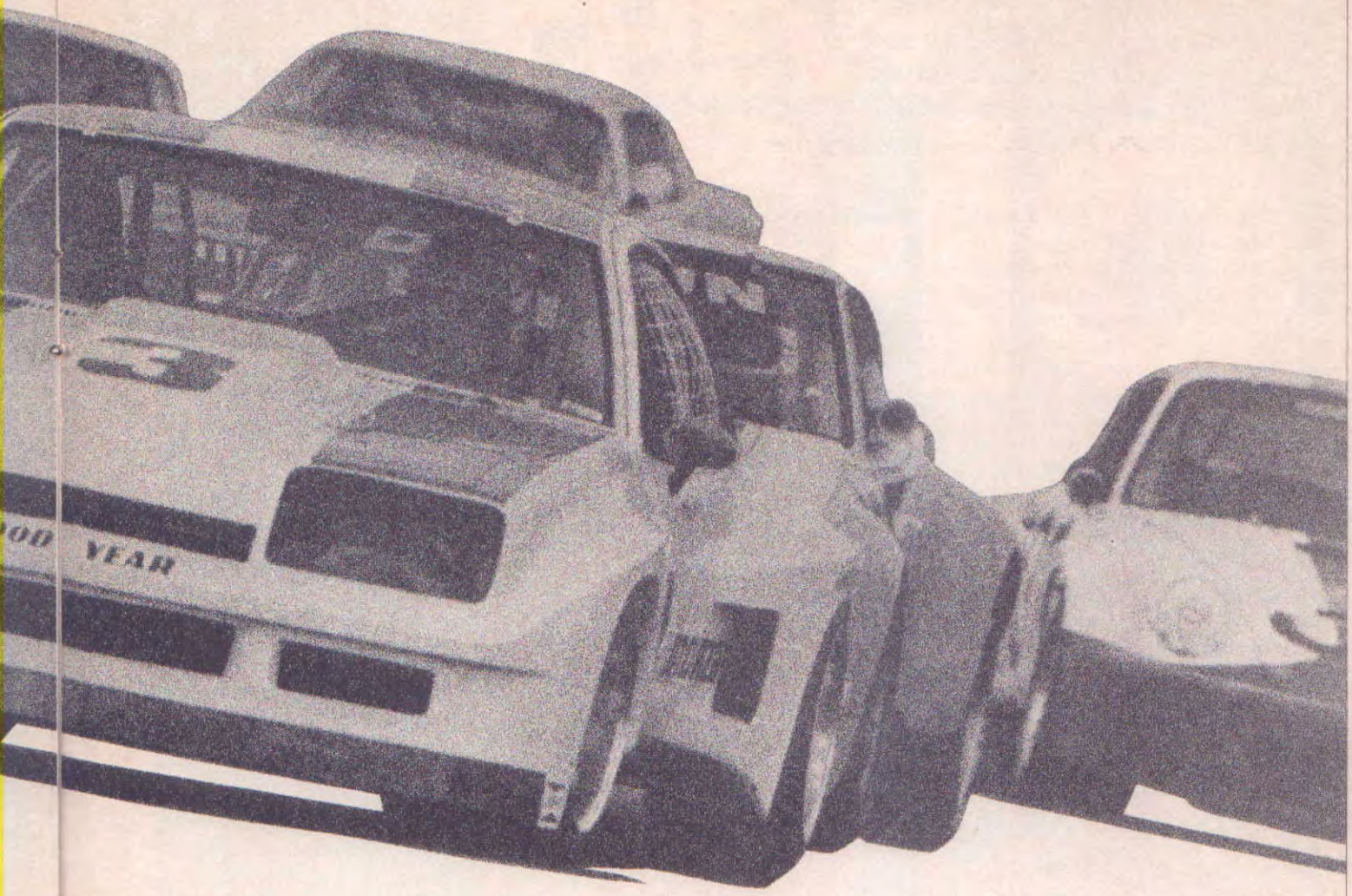
Road racing fans got their first real hint of things to come when Kwech showed up with one of DeKon's cars at the Camel GT Challenge event at Road Atlanta last spring. His brand-new, untried gleaming white Monza qualified for fifth position in the starting lineup—fairly impressive—and was in the lead by the second lap and opening that lead with every subsequent lap. It looked like racing history in the making—until the driver of a slower moving car inadvertently forced the Monza into a guard rail. The car was wrecked along with the opportunity to make history. Fortunately, Kwech was not injured.

The Monza I saw in Ohio was the latest in the same line of race cars coming out of the DeKon works. (These cars actually are marketed by an associate company, Ausca Limited, a name Kwech created in Australia back in the late '50s when he first started spending more time in his backyard building race cars than he did attending to his engineering studies. When he moved to the U.S. in 1962 the name came with him.) Still free of its identifying numbers and sponsor decals, the all-black car exuded a sense of mystery. (Why black? "I like black," Thomas answers straight out.) But the flared fenders, big tires, and massive front spoiler, just clearing the road surface in the car's slightly forward-leaning attitude, left little doubt as to what this machine was all about.

Kwech (left) talks to business associate Lee Dykstra between races. Below he carries out a quick tuning adjustment. Driver Allan Moffat (below left) buckles up in a Kwech-prepared model.

The absolute clincher came when Kwech climbed aboard, switched on the electric fuel pump and hit the starter button. The specially prepared 350 CID Chevy V8 came to life with more than 500 horsepower blatting through the monstrous side-mounted pipes.

Kwech slowly moved the car off. He made a circuit of the 50-acre black top vehicle dynamics pad, ac-



celerating with a fair burst, braking, accelerating, braking. He brought the car back to where a dozen or so DeKon/Thomas/TRC/FRIENDS people were grouped near the DeKon equipment van. Brake balance rod adjustments were made. Another run. Heavier acceleration; heavier braking. More adjustments.

These initial runs to set up the balance of the dual braking system, are made by Kwech before he delivers each car. He is a thorough test driver with a fine sense for minute handling detail.

Then owner Frank Thomas took the driver's seat (the only seat in the stripped interior), hooked up the six-point safety harness, and set out for some lively maneuvering over the test pad. When he braked the Monza to a stop at the sidelines, his first comment was (with feeling): "Super! Just super! You can really get on it early."

Kwech and Dykstra didn't seem at all surprised. Kwech told me that (for professional drivers) the car doesn't require a lot of getting used to. It's not tricky or unpredictable.

"We find that with this car you can indeed get on the power early. When we tested our first prototype, we couldn't believe how it all came together in such a driveable package. The basic design is aerodynamically suited to a race configuration."

Racing driver Lee Mueller who co-drives with Thomas on the Thomas race team was next to pull on a helmet and put the Monza through some hot paces. Winding up through some hard turns, Mueller punched the car through a pylon-marked course at speeds I guessed to be about 130 mph ("Pretty close," I was told later). The brand-new engine never missed a beat. Its throaty roar made some highway patrol cars running tire tests in another section of the TRC facility seem whisper quiet by comparison.

Mueller was beaming as he cut the switch and let the car roll to a stop beside our little group. Through the safety net in the windowless left door he called: "Hey, it does what it's supposed to do! No doubt about it!"

We moved from the vehicle

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dynamics pad to the 9,000-foot-long skid pad, a multi-lane high-acceleration straight stretch of track with circular high-speed turnarounds at each end. Thomas put the car through some heavy acceleration runs, hitting well over 150 mph—but still far short of what the Monza is capable of. After his first runs at building the G-forces, his reaction was spirited: "What a bomb! My head was against the roll bar right through the gears."

The rest of the day went that way—short runs, adjustments, trying different tires. Not at all like the little delivery ceremony and handshake that came with my last Chevy purchase (a Monza, incidentally).

So what does the future hold for Monza GT racers? Kwech says he expects to see at least a dozen All-American GT Monzas (from his and other shops) in this year's Camel series. And foreign sports sedans are going to be up against Monzas on their own turf, too. Kwech expects the car will appear in the Silhouette Series in Europe where a world manufacturers' championship is at stake. Also, two DeKon Monzas are challenging the major circuits in Australia and New Zealand.

That day at TRC, and several times since, I've talked to Kwech about what effect racing has on the cars you and I drive on the street. He's convinced that professional road racing contributes to the development of safer, better handling, more durable cars for the public.

"You can take the computer readouts and engineers' theories only so far," Kwech says. "The race car is a final test bed—a proving ground for new types of parts and components. The ultimate test is in the action—in this case, hard, gruelling race action.

"In recent years much has been learned about braking systems and tires on racing circuits. That goes for metallurgical processes, too—using and heat treating various alloys and metals to withstand extreme stress. Eventually such knowledge benefits all drivers."

Pit crew members in fire-resistant suits ready for fuel stop.

When you consider the credentials of a man like Horst Kwech—he has won two national championships, the President's Cup, was first in the Trans-Am series twice, and runner-up in that series three times—the words have to have some validity.

So, if the future unfolds as Kwech and Lee Dykstra are convinced it should, the DeKon Monza may well be the car to beat on many GT circuits throughout the world.

That's *Monza* by Chevrolet. With an *American* accent. □