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THE SECOND-PLACE NATIONAL 911 CUP CLASS
CHAMPION IS A FORCE TO RECKON WITH ON
TRACK—DESCRIBED AS **"ONE HELL OF A DRIVER."**

By DAVID MATHEWS



KRISTINA CILIA

“YOU KNOW, I’VE GOT ONE of these wonderful ideas that women should be all dressed in white like all the other domestic appliances.”
Bernie Ecclestone, 2005.

If ‘F1 Supremo,’ (former Chief Executive of the Formula One Group) Bernie Ecclestone, made this chauvinistic comment around Sacramento Valley Region PCA Club racer Karen Holmes, more than likely, he would have needed to duck. Pretty good with her right hand, she would have a memorable right hook. Holmes, a no-nonsense 911 Cup racer, is a top contender and frequent podium finisher in her Chartreuse 1973 911T. In 2022, she placed second nationally in the 911 Cup class.

For Holmes, the knack for driving race cars fast was hereditary. “When I was a kid, my dad, Mike Hansen, raced Formula B open-wheel cars. He was good, making it nationally for a while. But in

the mid-’60s he faced a decision—continue racing, or give it up and focus on his business. During his racing days, I went to lots of racetracks with him. [I] was in the pits at Laguna Seca, did track time at Willow Springs... I really thought I would become a driver with my dad. But he quit... he quit cold turkey. He sold his car, concentrated on work, and it was all over. It was the right decision for him. I thought my dream of driving was over.”

Life moved on for Holmes. She married, had children, ran a business, and put the idea of racing on the back burner. However, her interest in cars, especially Porsche, remained.

“I always thought Porsche was a cool car. For my 20th wedding anniversary, my husband gave me a 1984 911 Cabriolet. I had it for about three months when I asked my husband if he minded if I put a roll bar in the car. I started doing driver education (DE) events, and continued for two years, before crashing it at Sonoma. The crash was

bad enough that my insurance company totaled it, but I bought it back. At the time, I had enough money to buy a proper race car. I needed a coupe, not an open car.”

Holmes searched for the right car, finding it in Seattle, Washington. “I bought a one-way ticket, and with cash in my pocket, went to buy the car. The guy who owned the coupe told me he owned a restaurant, things were tight, and he was strapped for cash. He never should have told me that. At the time I was running a restaurant and knew exactly what he was going through. When I put \$12,000 cash on the table, he jumped at my offer.”

It was off to the races with Holmes’ new acquisition. What would make a purist cringe, made perfect sense to a racer. She immediately began modifying what was a 1984 Carrera Garage Queen, into a track car. After ten years of DE events, Holmes made the leap to racing.



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“In 2014, I decided to go racing. There was a group out here called Porsche Racer Club (PRC.) I knew they were racers. I knew they raced my kind of car. So, I showed up at one of their events. I went out the first session, and when I came back, all the boys were sniffing around my car. One of the guys, Andy Simpkinson, looked at me and said, ‘You are DONE for the day!’ I was like, wait... what... what? Andy told me to look at my wheels. Sure enough, both rear wheels were cracked. I was really mad, but he probably saved my life. Anyway, I went home, bought new wheels, and got ready to give it another go.”

Was the good ole boys’ club at PRC put off by this female interloper? No way. “They were so wonderful, so helpful. They cheered me on, coached me. I was terrible in the beginning. But in that first moment, when I made it to an actual race and got the green flag, I literally grabbed my leg, and shouted, I’m doing it! I’m doing it! It’s happening! And then there was the checkered flag, and I made it, and I was dead last by a mile, but it was all fine. I loved it.”

Holmes never went to a drivers’ school. Instead, she got her chops from doing 10+ years of DEs. “I got to the point where I wanted a green flag. I wanted a checkered flag. Yeah, I had to do some ‘official’ things to get my provisional license,



KRISTINA CLIA (2)

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— Karen Holmes,
Sacramento Valley Region
PCA Club racer





RYAN CARIGNAN (2)

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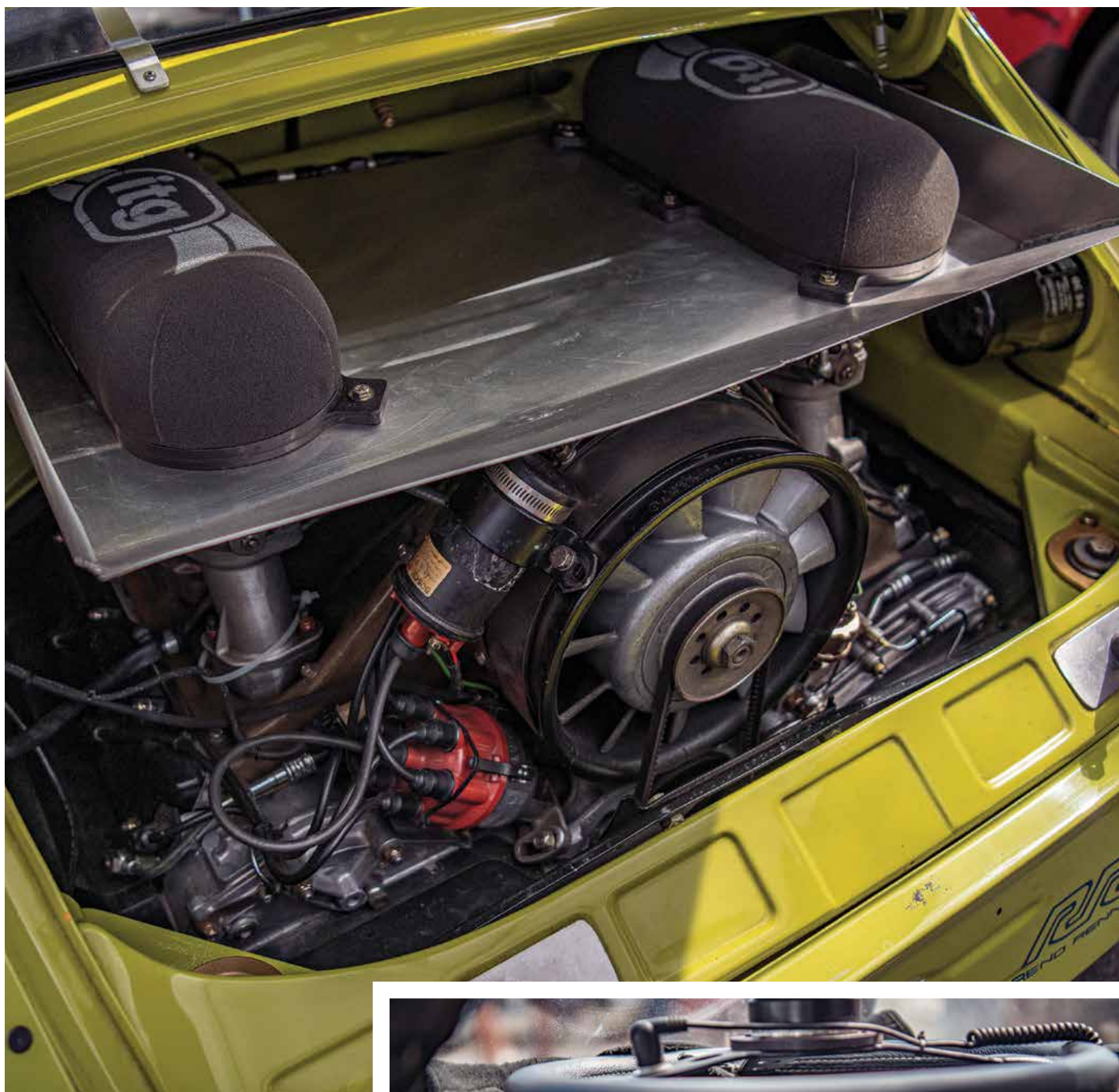
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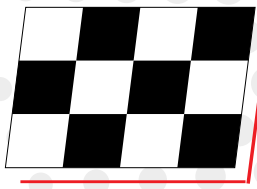
but I never got an X on my car, indicating I was a newbie. All the boys knew who I was. They knew I was still a little rough and they should just get around me. The camaraderie was amazing. So, I just journeyed on."

In 2019, Holmes went racing at Road America, in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, a far poke from those familiar West Coast tracks. That trip east was memorable. "During my second race there, my car died a warrior's death," she said. "I crashed it, coming out of Turn Eight. I went wide, got sideways, and went into a concrete wall. The car came back to the pits on a flatbed. It was not good. I smashed the front of the car to smithereens."

Back in the shop at Reno, they began pulling



KRISTINA CLIA (2)



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KRISTINA CILIA (3)

usable parts off the car. “The engine was still good. The tranny was still good. There were lots of usable parts, so I began to sell that stuff on Craigslist. Two weeks after we got back, one of the guys at the shop called to say he knew where there was another car. I thought, am I going to really do this all again? I felt like I was the gal who just got a divorce, then immediately started dating. I thought it was crazy. But then I said, ‘okay...I’ll take a look.’”

They drove to Quincy, California, to see the car—a 1973 911T that had been stored in a barn for 12 years. Remarkably, it was almost completely race-prepped. Holmes decided to buy it then and there, and brought it home. The shop did

what needed to be done to complete its race car transformation, but a reduced race schedule due to COVID-19, and because the car had not been raced prior, it took a year to get it sorted before it was solid and raceable. “I love this car,” Holmes gushed. “It is so much better than my Carrera. It’s lighter. The balance is better. It handles much better.”

“This experience has been wonderful. I’ve had lots of encouragement, lots of help, friends cheering, not to mention that it’s a real gas to drive a race car.” Prior to her visit to Road America, Holmes’ racing adventures were strictly solo. Her husband had decided it was her hobby. But then, he accompanied Holmes to Wisconsin, a first. “I



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RYAN CARIGNAN



KRISTINA CILIA

thought he would enjoy handling radio communications, so I got a set of radios, and he became my radio guy. His actual support has been very helpful."

And while Holmes' grown children think it's cool that their mother is a race car driver, her fan club extends beyond her family. Jeff Wiggins, a National Scrutineer, praised Holmes with these words, "Karen's very enthusiastic, and a strong advocate for the series, not to mention a solid clean driver. She wheels a car with no ABS or power steering."

And remember Andy, the guy who black-flagged her because of her cracked wheels? He's a former F-15 fighter pilot and current competitor in PCA Club Racing, who described Karen as, "...a hell of a driver." ■