

A large, faint target graphic is centered in the upper half of the red background.

# Bulletproof

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AFTER BEING USED FOR TARGET PRACTICE, THIS 1958 SPEEDSTER BECAME A VINTAGE RACER.

# "How did it begin?"

Mark Eskuche thought a bit before answering the question. "Well, for me it began in 1958 when I was in junior high.

I was at the old Pig 'n Whistle Drive-In on Capitol Drive [Milwaukee] with some friends when I saw a Lime Green Porsche Speedster, obviously repainted, with a cut-down windshield and loud pipes.

I thought that it was just about the coolest car I'd ever seen. That car kind of cemented it for me."

Before rising to a status akin to the Holy Grail or Golden Fleece, the 1600N Speedster was simply Stuttgart's Poor Boy Racer. It was marketed to compete with Austin-Healey, MG, and Triumph, with a base retail south of \$3,000. Minimalist in every sense of the word, the Speedster offered very little in the way of creature comfort. Fancy trim and crank windows? Gone. Adjustable backrests? Who needs 'em. Padded leather seats? For sissies.

What it did have was panache, an unmistakable style that made it cool. With its raked windshield and simple chrome body strip running from the front fender through the door handle and to its shapely hip, it was

as distinctive then as the bulgy-fendered, fat-tired, rear-winged beasts are today. The Speedster looked great and went like stink. Best of all, it stayed together for the trip home from the track, to the office on Monday, and to the local ice cream stand on Saturday night. It soon became the weapon of choice for the "go-fast" road racing gang.

**THE CAR FEATURED HERE,** Mark's 1958 Ruby Red 1600N Speedster, isn't now, nor has it ever been, a trailer queen or garage princess. It has always been the "driver" Ferry Porsche meant it to be. A survivor by any measure,

this car was rode hard and put away wet. It was raced, wrecked, and left to rust in a farmer's field. Mice and other critters called it home. Bovines bellowed at it for years. Locals used it for target practice. Yet this Speedster, chassis number 84426, survived. And Mark has enjoyed 47 years of mayhem and monkey business behind its skinny steering wheel.

This is not the first car Mark owned; that was a 1949 Plymouth Business Coupe, followed by an MGA and then an Austin-Healey 3000. In fact, this wasn't even his first Porsche. That was a white over red 1957 356A Speedster basket case that he bought in the summer of 1968 for \$500,

**With nerf bars for a front bumper and a bullet hole punctuating its door, this low-slung Speedster has an interesting story to tell.**

followed quickly by a 356A coupe. Mark's plan—restore the Speedster with parts from both cars. He bought yet another Porsche in the next year or two. By the time he graduated from college, Mark owned three 356s. "They were just clunky cars," he said with a chuckle. "I did drive one a little, but not very much."

While his Porsches were in varying degrees of reconstruction, Mark autocrossed the Healey. In 1970, he got serious about racing. He attended a racing school presented by the Midwest Council of Sports Car Clubs (MCSCC) and began campaigning his Healey at local tracks. "The problem was that the Healey came back





after each race worse for the wear. It was hard to keep up with, so I began to look for an alternative.”

How did Mark come by the '58 Speedster? It was late spring 1971. Mark and his father, Bob, were driving down the newly completed Rock Freeway, heading to the Air Troy Estates where Bob kept his plane. Then... “Dad, Dad, there’s a red Speedster in that field! We gotta go see it.” They took the next exit and backtracked until they saw the Speedster from the road. Mark knocked on the front door of the farmhouse, but no one was home.

Bob said, “You know, I think I know whose car that is. I think it belongs to a pilot friend who runs the Fixed Base Operation at Mitchell Aero in Milwaukee. His

**Above: The Speedster looks right at home on the farm.**  
**Below: Mark Eskuche with his mother, Jan, and his Austin-Healey 3000. Keeping the car running helped him hone his mechanical acumen as well as his racing skills.**

name is Sam James.” It did not take long for Mark to convince his dad to pay Sam a visit.

“Yeah, that’s my Speedster,” said Sam. “It’s probably really derelict by now.” Mark confirmed the car’s sorry state, telling Sam that they found the rubber floor mats lying on the ground, nothing beneath them but yellow weeds. The floor pans had simply rotted away. It had no engine, no transmission, no rear wheels.

Sam replied, “Yeah, darn it...well, I had to move it out there. Lost my storage space. Anyway, are you interested in it?” Mark replied that he was indeed interested. “Well,” said Sam, “you can have the car for free, but if you want the transaxle, you need to pay me \$200 and pick it up from my Mom’s house in Fox Point. I think it’s still in the basement. It cost me \$200 to have it rebuilt a few years ago.”

Mark agreed, and the deal was struck. Borrowing a trailer, he dragged yet another beater 356 home to join his growing collection of crippled Porsches.

After bringing home the Speedster, Mark drove to Sam’s mother’s home to pick up the transaxle. While there, he noticed a Speedster windshield nestled in the garage rafters. Mark phoned Sam. “Oh, yeah,” said Sam. “That’s the original windshield for the car, but it got chipped so I had my insurance company replace it with a new one. The insurance guys let me keep the old one. You can have that, too.” Quite a good piece of luck for



Mark, as it played out. By the time Mark found the car, its replacement windshield had been shot out—a victim of hooligan rifle practice.

Unfortunately, the windshield was not the only target for those kids; the Speedster had suffered multiple wounds. There was a hole in the front fender near the left headlight. That bullet passed through the outer fender, made a jagged right turn through the inner fender, and finally dimpled the gas tank. The bullet that hit the driver’s door did not pass cleanly through; rather, it struck an extra layer of steel in the door, bounced off the inner door panel, and came to rest inside the door frame...where Mark found it years later.

**WITH THE CARCASS** of the car and its rebuilt transaxle in his garage, Mark was ready to begin its resuscitation. But what about the engine?

Sam told Mark that he removed the engine and transaxle in 1964 because the transmission needed refreshing. Sam had a buddy, the owner of Delta Motors in La Crosse, Wisconsin, who planned to compete in the SCCA runoffs that fall. The friend asked if he could borrow the Speedster’s engine to use as a spare, and Sam obliged. After the runoffs, his buddy returned to La Crosse, planning to return the engine to Sam when time allowed. Until then, it would be kept safe and sound at Delta Motors, housed in an old wooden build-



PCA Parade and 356 Registry Holiday grille badges prove this Speedster is no stay-at-home garage queen. Below: Mark holds one of the bullets he found inside the left door panel.

Fuchs wheels and disc brakes give the Speedster a larger footprint and greater stopping power. Although it no longer has the “whoopie” engine, you can bet it still has plenty of oomph.



ing on the muddy banks of the Mississippi River.

The epic flood of 1965 altered those plans; in fact, it altered the entire landscape of La Crosse. Cresting at nearly 18 feet, six feet above flood stage, the flood caused an estimated \$225 million in property damage. Delta Motors was not spared, nor was Sam's engine. "The original Speedster engine probably ended up in St. Louis," quipped Mark.

Although the loss of the engine was unfortunate, it was not catastrophic as far as Mark was concerned. He harvested a '58 1600 Normal from his growing stash of Porsches. And here's an interesting tidbit. "Before I requested a Cardex for the Speedster, I didn't know the serial number of the original engine," said Sam. "So when I had an opportunity to sell an engine, I made sure I didn't sell any of the '58 Normals. By the time I received the Cardex I had five '58 Normal engines in my shop. And guess what? One of those engines was one serial number off from the one shown on the Cardex."

Mark finally made the car roadworthy in 1975. He replaced the original bumpers with a set of used nerf bars. "The original bumpers were shot. Besides, I always liked the look of nerf bars." He got around to painting the car in 1976. Disc brakes and Fuchs five-spoke wheels came later.

Not one to let cobwebs accumulate in the Speedster's exhaust pipes, Mark not only rattled windows in



his neighborhood, he joined PCA, competing in auto-cross and TSD rallies. He eventually raced the Speedster in Vintage Sports Car Drivers Association (VSCDA) and Sportscar Vintage Racing Association (SVRA) events.

Three different engines powered the Speedster over the years. The first engine Mark built did double duty as a race engine and a street engine from 1975 through 1986. It had a hotter cam, big bore kit, and 40mm intake valves in the heads. "That engine performed just okay, nothing special. A Super 90 or 912 engine would have worked just as well...maybe better." Mark ran with that engine through the 1986 season, occasionally losing to people with less driving ability but with real race engines in their cars.

Then came the "whoopie" engine. "During the winter of 1986," Mark recalled, "I contacted a friend, Joe Cogbill. Joe won the SCCA runoff a couple of times. He said he would sell me one of his 'special' piston and cylinder sets, and tell me where he got his heads done. So I bought his pistons and cylinders and sent the heads off to his guy in California."

After reassembling the engine, he gave it a run. Mark was disappointed—initially. "I thought to myself, this is no big deal. It had the same amount of power that the old engine had, up to around 6000 rpm." But, after that, it turned on. "At 7000 rpm, it was *holy cow!* Hold onto to your hat. In 1987, I was named SVRA Driver of the Year."

**AFTER THE 1987 SEASON**, Mark took his Speedster off the track—permanently. Two things drove his decision. First, 1988 rules required a fuel cell be installed, something he simply did not want to do to the Speedster. And second, after being pushed off the track and incurring significant front end damage during a race in the Bahamas, he knew it was time. No more wrecks. He just loved the car too much to keep hammering on it.

About that last race in the Bahamas: "In vintage racing, if you have a wreck you can't continue. If the accident is your fault, you're not allowed to compete for 13 months, or whatever. But this was the Bahamas and there was none of that. If you could fix the car, you could run it."

**Above: A quick check before a summer drive. Right: Mark campaigning his Speedster at the Steamboat Springs vintage auto race in 1987. That same year, he was named Sportscar Vintage Racing Association Driver of the Year.**



# On the Job

THE SPEEDSTER and Mark Eskuche are so inextricably linked that a story about one must include the other. Not only is Mark passionate about early air-cooled Porsches, his passion became his livelihood. After spending 11 years in industry, Mark opened his shop, Ecurie Engineering, in late 1979.

First renting a 20-by-50-foot space in an old downtown carriage factory, Mark moved to a larger property in Mequon, Wisconsin in 1994. He also established Ecurie South in Stuart, Florida to accommodate the winter racing crowd at Sebring and Daytona. “The racing end of it just kind of grew,” said Mark. “I started out with just one race car and a single trailer. I won races and other drivers began coming around wanting me to work on their cars.”

Mark and crew—his wife Mary Meissner, stepson Aaron Steffensen, and Wisconsin employee Dr. Zachary Buelow—now maintain and support 15 vintage Porsches for clients throughout the United States. —DM



Dairy farm turned race shop: The peeling paint and rusty roof belie the focused intensity of Ecurie Engineering's race preparation and customer support.

Mark befriended some Bahamians who offered to patch up the car at a local body shop after hours. They'd work on it all night. Mark took them up on their offer. “I drove it over there, no headlights, obnoxious exhaust, and they worked on it. The next morning, I drove it back to the track toting a can of Toyota paint for touch-up. Got everyone to sign off on the car, including the chief tech inspector. His signature included the endorsement, ‘No way, mon!’”

After Mark returned home, he removed the safety equipment, repaired the car correctly, repainted it, and installed the current engine. “It's a good runner. Don't know how many miles are on the motor; it has never been apart.”

Although his passion for driving the fastest vintage Porsche on the track morphed into building and maintaining the fastest vintage Porsches on the track, Mark, at 71 years old, regularly squeezes into his racing suit, pulls on his helmet, and straps himself into his race

car. Not his bullet-riddled Speedster, but his Ruby Red Speedster race car or his early 911 racer.

Favorite racetracks? He believes the best tracks in the country are the oldest, the ones built right after the war and into the 1950s. “After that, they became easier,” said Mark. “Less technical, less dangerous. The old tracks separate the men from the boys in terms of going fast.”

Watkins Glen was special, but Road America in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin tops his list. Mark continued, “The first time I came to Road America was in 1962 as a youngster. Then at a race a few years later, I remember a 2.0-liter 906 Porsche screaming past the stands. Its high-pitched whine was magical. I knew then I had to come back to that place as a driver.”

Mark and his wife, Mary, continue to enjoy the car, be it at Porsche events, 356 Registry Holidays, or quick runs to the local custard stand. Once on a roll, it is difficult to rein them in. The stories just keep coming:

There was the time Mark crossed Independence Pass



in the Colorado Rockies, at speed, hanging his 35mm camera over the windshield frame to capture the moment. “But I misplaced those photos. Probably just as well. As I recall, the images were pretty blurry.”

Or in 2005, when Porsche designer Grant Larson, a Wisconsin native, accompanied Mark on an enthusiastic drive to Botham Vineyards & Winery in Barneveld, Wisconsin. A year or so later, Grant purchased his own Speedster. “That drive...confirmed the idea to finally pull the trigger and seriously search one [a Speedster] out,” recalls Grant. “That I did, and I got lucky a few years later.”

Or returning home from the 2007 356 Registry Holiday in Northern Michigan, when “old car” quirkiness struck unexpectedly. After a spirited few days (Mark took third place in the hill climb event with the Speedster) they decided to take the northern route home.

**Above: A deserted road and a Ruby Red Speedster—could anything be better? Right: Wisconsin native Grant Larson joined Mark for a quick drive in 2005. Not long after, Grant bought a Speedster for himself.**



Mark’s wife Mary hails from Marinette, which is on the border between Wisconsin and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. She wanted to visit familiar haunts, including Mickey Lu’s BBQ, a local joint known for its good food and vintage decor. But the Speedster developed mule-headed obstinance, becoming very hard to start.

“It took me two hours to get it going when we were ready to leave in Michigan,” said Mark. “I knew that if I shut it off, I might not get it started again. So rather than stopping for a world-famous burger, we simply waved at the joint as we sailed by.”

“I was pretty darn mad,” added Mary. She had her heart set on a double cheeseburger and chocolate malt.

Stopping for gas was a challenge, too. “At one station, we stopped at the pump farthest from the office,” said Mark. “I didn’t shut off the Speedster, keeping it at a high idle, around 3000 rpm, while I was fueling. A lady at the pumps yelled at me to turn off the motor...that I shouldn’t be getting gas with the motor running. She was right, but...”

It’s been 47 years. The Pig ’n Whistle is gone. Lots of miles have been driven, knuckles bruised, fenders bent, and races won. Most important, though, are the memories...vivid. 🍷

