

PROFILE

KAS

*Nissan Motorsport's
R. W. Kastner*

*By Burge Hulett
Photography by Ron Hussey*

The number of successful corporate motorsports managers is only slightly greater than that of great Botswanaian racing drivers. Try adding names to Mercedes-Benz' Alfred Neumbauer, Porsche's Huschke von Hanstein, Manfred Jantke and Peter Falk, and Aston Martin's John Wyer and you get the idea that most business people avoid racing like a root canal.

The glue of a corporation is accountability and it's crucial to its internal health to know what's happening everywhere the company colors are flown. And, because structure is also important, the best way for a company to get information is to have a company employee in charge. Therein lies the problem, because serving the needs of the company and being effective in the action-oriented world of racing is a collision of cultures as jarring as the Monsters of Rock joining the General Motors Board of Directors for dinner. It's a clash that often ends with the demise of the racing manager or the inmates running the asylum.

To be successful, a motorsports manager must be a combination of racer, corporate player and field marshal. Required of any candidate is a knowledge of engineering, politics, psychology and business, in addition to years of competition experience. Optional equipment is daring, charm and the willingness to lay a job and maybe a career on the line. The candidate's lifestyle should include workdays of 15 hours minimum, weekends away from home, months spent on airplanes, bad food, worse hotels, rude people and missing luggage.

The up side of this free-wheeling challenge is the satisfaction of being able to do a job few people want and fewer can do, and the opportunity of creating new marks of excellence. A person who thrives on this life and is a sure candidate for the motorsports hall of fame is R.W. "Kas" Kastner, Nissan's National Manager for Motorsports in America.

Kas, as he's known in racing, operates from three offices. One is in a neat, efficient complex a couple of miles from Nissan's headquarters. Here, Kastner is king, the man in motion, a master of a universe that includes a staff of eight, responsibility for millions of Nissan's dollars and the activities of dozens of teams competing in everything from IMSA's 200 mph GTP class to trucks racing in the desert, amateur SCCA races and

Solo I and II parking lot events. On the walls of his motorsports office are pictures and paintings of Nissan racing cars and a single 8 by 10 black and white picture of Kastner, taken in the mid-fifties, driving a much modified MG TD. In this office, where Kastner spends 90 percent of his time when he isn't at a race, he is blunt, sometimes gruff, outspoken, frequently irreverent, often funny and ever alert to the activities of his staff while he makes decisions on everything from commissioning sophisticated racing hardware to finding transportation for a driver of a broken down truck.

Kastner's other office is on the fourth floor of Nissan's eight story glass and aluminum corporate headquarters. Here, in the place Kastner calls the Hall of Heroes, he is the field general at headquarters mingling with managers and workers who spend most of their days in meetings making decisions. His marketing department office is decorated with pictures of various sailboats in which Kastner has won numerous championships in a variety of classes. One year he won four out of six possible trophies at the Marina del Rey Yacht Club. The rule book was rewritten to prevent him from doing it again. And he still won.

Kastner makes regular if not frequent laps of the fourth floor, dressed in conservative suits and subtle ties. He looks and acts like a man running for office. He pops in on members of the department, offers ideas, help, asks questions and is as charming as the most experienced politician. Tucked in his pocket are facts, figures and enough detail about his business activities to put a smile on any auditor's face.

Kastner's third office doesn't look like an office, especially when he rides his bicycle to special places around race tracks and gets out his stop watch to record splits on the Nissan GTP car and the competition. The information is recorded in a ring binder along with track conditions, weather and any other factors that affect lap times and speeds. When he's finished, Kastner knows exactly how fast the Nissan is on every piece of track and where its advantages or disadvantages lie against the competition. When he isn't working the watches, Kastner walks the pits, ever the leader, shaking hands and tossing quips to friends and competitors. Observant Kastner-watchers know these walks are not mere socializ-

ing. What Kastner is really doing is searching for any clue or nuance that will give him an edge in his singular pursuit of winning races. "It's easy to be charming," he says, "when you're winning."

Kastner learned his trade as competition manager for Triumph, the British sports car company that, thanks to Kastner, had a

performance reputation far beyond the reality of its cars. Says a former employee, "I don't know how he did it. We had no money, no help from the factory and somehow Kas figured out things we could do. If we couldn't do big things, we did little things. We were always doing something. Winning a race. Building a car for a magazine cover. Something. It was wonderful, probably the best time of my life."

Says Kastner, "We had so many unsold cars. I was also in charge of service and delivery. Weeds grew through them. We had to go out there with bug spray to kill the black widow spiders before we could move anything. If OSHA had been in existence we'd have been shut down for sure."

A competitor remembers Kastner's Triumph days a bit differently. "Kas was tough. He'd do anything to get an advantage and he often had one. I beat him a couple of times and every time I did I felt great because I knew I'd done my best, maybe even better than my best. I admired Kas then and I still do."

When Kastner came to Nissan in 1986, the corporation's racing program was a boat without a rudder. Some good things were happening, mainly because Nissan's racing activities are so broad and varied it's almost guaranteed that someone is winning something somewhere. What was missing was any feeling of excitement about Nissan products racing. No one outside of the people directly involved seemed to be

enthusiastic even when a car won.

The most visible problem was the complicated and expensive IMSA GTP effort run by Electramotive Engineering in El Segundo and supported by Nissan. The car — at the time a Lola powered by a turbocharged 3.0 liter Nissan V6 — was plagued with dozens of mechanical and equipment

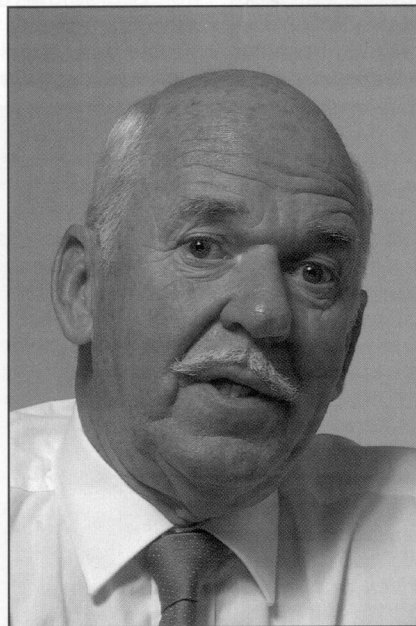
problems. While Electramotive struggled, factory-backed teams from Porsche and Chevrolet developed their cars and, in 1988, were joined by a two-car factory Jaguar team. The Nissan effort lacked many things, not the least of which was enough money to get the job done.

"Those guys

at Electramotive are terrific," says Kastner. "If you want to go to the moon today, they'll figure out a way to get you there. The problem is it takes more than brilliant engineering to win races. I knew we had to make something happen and I decided we *will* move to the front row.

"When I came around, the team thought they had a reliable car. It wasn't reliable, but no one knew it because it never ran long enough to find out. I think my main strength is setting goals, finding out what we need to accomplish them, and getting it done. I decided that GTP car had to be a winner. I also knew if we did win, other areas of our motorsports operation would start to come around. There were a lot of problems with our car and to make things more difficult Al Holbert was winning races. Our target was moving away from us. We needed to measure up and we weren't doing it.

"I set some new goals. The first was, we will go fast, even if it's only for six laps. I wanted to see that car in front. I also got rid of the black paint job. Now it's red, white and blue. And I made it clear there is no voting in this job, and it is a job. People who think this is a sport should get a bowling ball. This is business. It's what we do



for a living. When we began to reach our first short-term goal, which was to stand on the gas, other problems showed up. We needed full-time professional drivers and better tires and without doubt a permanent solution to our gearbox problems.

"Getting a Hewland VGC to work in that car — at that time rumors of the 1000 horsepower engine were true — was a big step. When that was accomplished we began to do some serious testing. The first

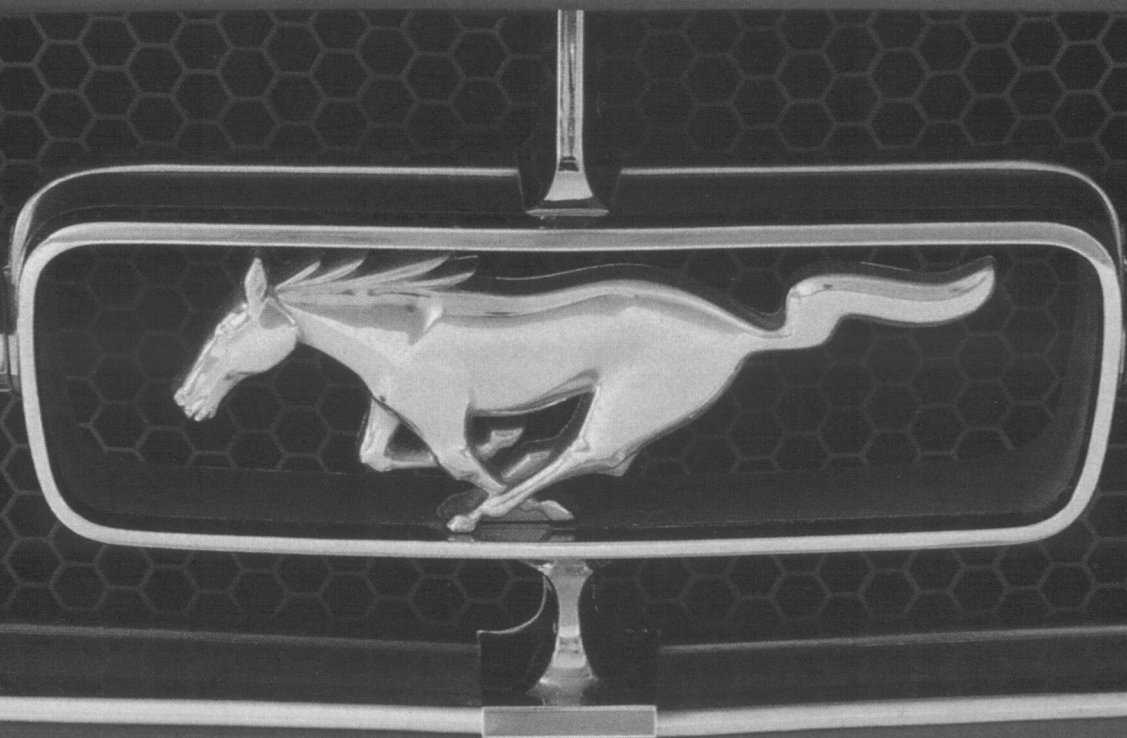
better mileage than anyone. The problem was the fuel bags were about three gallons too small. That was the kind of stuff that was holding us back, but at least we were racing instead of trying to develop the car. Portland was a big turning point because we knew we could run with the world's best and win. We were no longer a junk team.

"By 1987 we'd done a lot of development and we had Elliott Forbes-Robinson full time. We were on Bridgestone tires and the

all the time. Of course, every time they did that it changed our suspension settings. All during this time we were at work and the car was improving and we were close to being a first class team. We had new bodywork that made a lot more downforce, which of course put more strain on the tires. We built a new tub to replace the one from Lola. When we did that we gained 250 percent in torsional rigidity. Now all that's left of the Lola is the cab and the doors. The

doing. That was really important.

"After the eighty-seven season, Bridgestone decided they no longer wanted to participate and Goodyear was looking for a way to beat the Jaguars on Dunlops. They were happy to have us and we were happy to be with them. By now we had aluminum cylinder blocks and we were down to the minimum weight; before we'd been about 100 pounds too heavy. Geoff Brabham was now our full-time driver with John Morton in the



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time we tested with the new gearbox at Riverside the car was hitting 207 mph in the cut on the back straight. The sound of that thing was amazing. It was like an F-18. Then we got a professional team manager and professional drivers. Pretty soon we moved to the top of the page in qualifying and at Mid-Ohio we finished seventh. We didn't win, but we were in it. I insist on being in it. At Portland we ran out of gas on the last lap while we were leading and everyone thought we had bad fuel mileage. That wasn't true. Donnie Devendorf had a system that gave us

first time they gave us a radial tire — we'd been on bias ply before — we blew the doors off the other guys. The problem was the Bridgestone radials didn't last very long and at Riverside a left rear blew on the straight, the car crashed and did \$200,000 worth of damage. Bridgestone put us back on bias ply tires. EFR couldn't drive after the accident so we were without radial tires and our driver. David Hobbs filled in at Laguna Seca and finished fifth.

"Bridgestone was promising us radials that never seemed to show up and they changed compounds

rest has been designed and built by Electramotive.

"Another big move was getting Trevor Harris as a designer. That allowed us to move faster towards our own solutions to problems. Another really important factor in our success this year was a big management change at Nissan. During the time I'd been on the payroll, I'd reported to three different people. When Tom Mignaneli took over, things changed a lot. He's a car guy and he knows motorsports and asks the right questions. We had two meetings and I knew he knew what we were

second car and we were on the latest tires. IMSA's new restrictor rule took 250 horsepower out of the engine, but we had done our homework and had a 750 horsepower racing car with no shortage of torque."

Kastner's double time development program, matched by a frenzy of activity at Electramotive, has produced four consecutive wins in 1988 and by the time you read this the team may have broken Peter Gregg's consecutive win record in IMSA. Says Kastner, "I'm awfully proud of those guys and I think the reason we're doing

so well now is that we try awfully hard. Now we're the team to beat in IMSA and the others are trying to catch up. Of course, we won't offer a sitting target."

While Nissan's GTP car went from also-ran to contender to winner, Kastner's motorsports department was beginning to pull in the same direction. "We had all this stuff," he says, "and most of it wasn't being used. We had the latest dyno and it was hardly ever used. We had worldwide access

getic and the catalyst is Kastner.

You can see it when he strides down the hall. People stand a little straighter, smile a little broader and the message is clear they like the boss — "the big man," as one staffer called him — and they want to measure up. And the admiration Kastner receives is mutual. "We've got a terrific group here," he says. "I'm really pleased with what's going on. And it's getting better. I'm the first one here most days, but I'm not alone for long.

are rebuilt. He inspects new bell housing castings, asks about the material thickness in critical areas and smiles when he hears how many pounds were saved by the change.

His presence at Electramotive is much like it is in the motorsport office. The staff is aware of him moving around the shop, work continues as before, but now there's a new electricity. Driver John Morton shows up, still a little battered from a high-speed acci-

says Nissan will also race in GTU.

How about the Infiniti, the car that Nissan hopes will give them a place in the lucrative market occupied by Honda's Acura? "There is a definite place in racing for the Infiniti," says Kastner.

Has Nissan thought about Indy car racing? Kastner reaches across to his desk and picks up a CART rule book that was lying in plain sight. "Well," he says, "I've found some interesting things to read here. A lot of what we might

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to parts and technology and we didn't use it. It was awful. People went home at five o'clock and came to work late. I couldn't believe it. Our competition parts files were on index cards."

Today, Kastner's world hums with efficiency. Parts orders are on a computer. Frank Honsowetz and Tom O'Conner, both racers themselves, split diverse duties and report to Kastner. Procurement specialist Tom Johnson spends his days in a worldwide search for more elusive parts that might have American racing applications. The atmosphere is ener-

We're on the move, things are happening and more things will happen. Our truck program is doing well, we've got lots of people winning in SCCA and in showroom stock and we've even got an entry at Pikes Peak."

At Electramotive, where two complicated Nissan GTO cars are in final stages before being trucked to a race at Watkins Glen, Kastner's eyes sweep the shop, noting details on the cars, people and work in progress. He stops, kids with a fabricator, asks a few construction questions and moves on to an area where gearboxes

dent at Lime Rock when his car tried to launch itself. He didn't expect to see Kastner and begins a dissertation to convince the boss that he'll be fit to drive by the next race. Kastner listens, then offers a few friendly comments that reveal none of his thoughts.

As Nissan's racing operations continue to come together and move upward, the obvious question is what's in the future? When asked, Kastner shifts away from the forthright racer to the political marketing department member. "All I can tell you for sure is we will race in GTO next year." Rumor

do depends on what happens with some of FISA's engine classes.

"I'm a goal setter and a planner," he says. "We already have plans into the 1990s. The corporation is helping a lot. Of course, every time we win a GTP race, it gets a little easier, but there's still a lot to do."

Asked what it takes to get the job done, America's most effective corporate racing manager replies, "What's most important is a sense of humor. This job is too tough to do without it." **scf**