

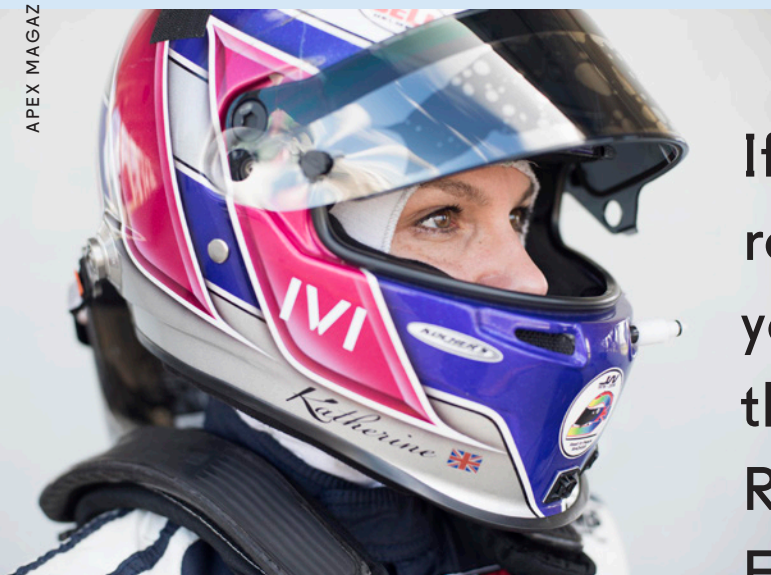
“You Know  
Something

After more than a decade of work, the newest Acura race car, the NSX GT3, is now on the track. For the drivers and teams behind the next gen speed demon, there's a lot on the line.

Is About  
To Happen”

WORDS BY  
ANDREW RAVEN

IMAGES BY  
SAROYAN HUMPHREY



If you want to break a race car—and sometimes you do—you bring it to the Sebring International Raceway in central Florida. The track began life as Hendricks Field, a Second World War airbase that once housed a fleet of B17 bombers. Since then, decades of punishment have left Sebring's concrete surface with cracks, divots and, on its infamous 17th turn, a bump that will send cars airborne. Lots of drivers hate the course; one once said it will "beat you to death." And that was just after it had been repaved.

"You want to have a fast car and you want to have a reliable car. At the moment, I think we have both. We are looking good."

Peter Kox  
DRIVER, REALTIME RACING



**THE PUNISHING RIDE**, however, makes Sebring the perfect place to push the envelope of new race cars. That's why Peter Cunningham is here on this October day. The 54-year-old Milwaukee native, the owner of Wisconsin-based RealTime Racing, is one of North America's most-decorated drivers. He's won 91 races in a nearly four-decade career—but Cunningham hasn't come to the swampy heart of Florida to drive. He's here to supervise the torture-testing of the Acura NSX GT3, perhaps the most important competition vehicle Acura has made in a decade.

The mid-engine V6 is hot off the factory floor and, at the moment, the only one of its kind. Over the next three days, Cunningham and a platoon of engineers plan to run it hard over Sebring's unforgiving concrete.

In racing speak, they're going to try to "break" it. Or as Cunningham puts it, "It's better to find problems now than during a race."

For Cunningham, there's more going on here than exploring the nuances of a high-performance car. RealTime is one of two teams that will each field a pair of NSX GT3s in competition this year. (The other is Michael Shank Racing.) RealTime will make its debut in just a few months in the Pirelli World Challenge, one of the top sports car racing series in North America. The cars, competition versions of the street-going Acura NSX, are the culmination of nearly 10 years of research and development. And as an Acura racing partner, RealTime wants to deliver wins out of the gate.

The expectations are so high that Cunningham, after 30 years of racing, is stepping out from behind the wheel and putting RealTime's cars in the hands of younger drivers. (He refuses

to describe himself as retired, though.) “I’ve had my fun,” says Cunningham, who began racing Hondas on the icy lakes of the Upper Midwest in 1987. “But at this level and with this car, there are probably people who can do it better than I can.”

Cunningham isn’t the only one looking for results. The NSX GT3 is the centerpiece of a years-long push by Acura to supercharge its racing program and show the world the guts and tradition of the brand. “There’s a lot that was building up to this point,” says Lee Niffenegger, a friend of Cunningham’s and a senior engineer at Honda Performance Development, which oversees Acura racing. “Obviously, the expectations are high. Your pinnacle-level road car should be able to compete on the track.”

**A LITTLE AFTER 7:30 A.M.**, I pull into Sebring International Raceway, the rising sun casting a glow over the track. Nestled between modest bungalows and farmers’ fields, the course is massive—its 18 turns spill out across a little more than three-and-a-half miles of rural Florida. Some of racing’s biggest names have plied this track, including Mario Andretti, Stirling Moss and Bobby Rahal, along with celebrity gearheads like Paul Newman and Steve McQueen.

I’m in a Ford Fiesta rental, which feels woefully out of place as I snake through Sebring’s access roads and up to the pit lane. The area is already full of technicians hovering over the NSX GT3, its carbon-fiber body panels glinting in the sun. The next



**“It’s very smooth, very easy to drive fast. When you’re reaching the limits of the car, it talks to you.”**

**Peter Cunningham**  
OWNER, REALTIME RACING



**THE NITTY GRITTY**  
Opposite page: Peter Cunningham, the owner of Wisconsin-based RealTime Racing, is shepherding a pair of NSX GT3’s into competition this year; the GT3 pre-race at Sebring. This page: Engineers download technical data from the NSX GT3’s onboard computer.



two hours are like watching paint dry, as techs fiddle with the car’s suspension, brakes and tires. Then, suddenly, someone yells “starting,” and the NSX GT3’s engine thunders to life. It’s a deafening sound, like putting your ear up to a lawnmower, only the pitch is deeper—much, much deeper.

I’m talking with Cunningham as the NSX GT3 bellows, but he isn’t fazed by the noise. Nearly 40 years of racing have taught him to tune it out, or made him an expert lip reader.

Cunningham has piloted lots of great vehicles during his career, but the NSX GT3 stands apart, he says. “It’s very smooth, very easy to drive fast,” he tells me after we retreat to his trailer. “When you’re reaching the limits of the car, it talks to you—you know something is about to happen.”

To go fast, Cunningham continues, you have to balance on a knife’s edge, whether you’re accelerating, cornering or braking. If you’re not finding that edge, you’re leaving time on the table. In some cars, you can’t feel that limit. Before you know it, you’ve spun out or crashed into a wall. But not the NSX. “It’s literally a seat-of-the-pants feeling,” Cunningham says. He slips into a passable German accent, in tribute to Formula One racing great Hans Stuck, and tells me you feel it in your bones.

When many people think of racing, they picture IndyCar, with its open-wheeled rockets, or NASCAR and its rolling crumple zones. But beyond those are sports car racing series that attract legions of fans across North America and are stocked with vehicles that have their origins on assembly lines.

In the upper echelons of these championships—including the Pirelli World Challenge and the IMSA WeatherTech Championship—manufacturers pour millions into making high-powered, ultra-light versions of their production cars. The competition at those levels is fierce, and teams need a small army of engineers, mechanics and managers to keep their cars running. The stakes are high. The series are proxy battles between carmakers hoping that success on track will burnish their racing credentials and lure customers into showrooms.

It’s in this world that Cunningham—best known by his nickname, P.D.—has built his career. A dyed-in-the-wool Honda man, Cunningham has won races in everything from a sub-compact Civic to the first-generation NSX. In fact, he helped test Acura’s original supercar, back when RealTime was “five guys and a trailer.” Today, the team is almost 20-strong



**“You’d be disrespecting the competition and the series to think that you’re ever going to roll off the trailer and just be super fast.”**

40 and travels in a gleaming semi that looks like a cross between a Jiffy Lube and a first-class airport lounge.

For the past several years, Cunningham has been the lone Acura outpost in the racing world, running a pair of heavily modified TLX sports sedans in the Pirelli World Challenge. Last year, RealTime finished fourth in the team standings, a remarkable showing given that Cunningham and his crew were wading into battle against Ferraris, Lamborghinis and McLarens with a family-friendly four-door.

So, when RealTime reached an agreement with Acura last year to run the NSX GT3, again in the Pirelli World Challenge, Cunningham was stoked. “Our intention is nothing short of winning a championship.”

To understand the importance of the NSX to Acura, you need to know a little something about the brand’s history. Conceived of as a performance division of Honda, Acura burst onto the scene in 1986, a time when Asian cars were known for three things: being reliable, getting good mileage and being boring to drive.

Acura broke the mold by creating cars that were luxurious and fun. A year after the brand’s debut, its flagship Legend sedan was named *Motor Trend* magazine’s Car of the Year. Its compact Integra was the runner up. By the mid-2000s, however, sales had begun to slow amid stiff competition. The great recession of 2007-08 took another bite out of Acura’s business and forced the brand to dramatically scale back on what had been a very successful racing program. Among other things, the company axed its high-tech endurance cars, which had competed in iconic races, such as the 12 Hours of Sebring.

“We were on a little bit of a wandering road for a while,” Jon Ikeda, vice-president and general manager of Acura, says of the company during the mid-2000s. Ikeda likens the company in that era to a confident 20-something fresh out of college. “You get your first job and you see what other people

**Andy Lally**

MICHAEL SHANK RACING  
DRIVER & FIVE-TIME  
DAYTONA WINNER



are doing. You start questioning the things that you do and want to try things that are different.”

What has emerged since then, Ikeda says, is a carmaker more in tune with what made it great—a laser-like focus on drivers. “I think we’re more focused now and understand better where we come from, what we are. We just need to be us.”

The NSX was crafted to epitomize this shift. Sexy, fast and technologically advanced, it was designed to make the brand, in Ikeda’s words, “exciting” again. What’s more, technology from the hybrid-powered NSX would also underpin Acura’s core models, making them faster, more fuel efficient and better able to compete against the likes of BMW, Audi and Lexus.

The NSX GT3 racing program is a key part of the makeover. The car’s performance on the track will go a long way towards establishing in the public eye the values embedded in its road-going cousin—and the Acura brand.

IT’S JUST PAST 11 A.M., and Michael Shank is standing in Sebring’s pit lane, watching more than a dozen mechanics and engineers probe the NSX GT3. The car is fresh off a lap around the track, and the men—and they’re all men—have hooked up LAN cables to its onboard computer. They’re downloading reams of data, known as telemetry, about engine revolutions, g-forces and suspension movements. If the car bounced a single millimeter higher than it should have going over a bump, they’ll know about it.

As Shank watches, he feels the weight of responsibility. The team he owns, Michael Shank Racing, or MSR, is fielding a pair of NSX GT3s in this year’s IMSA WeatherTech Sports Car Championship, one of North America’s premier endurance racing series. “I know how important [the NSX] is to the whole company,” Shank says.

After Shank inked an agreement with Acura to race the GT3, he and his team of technicians, engineers and drivers visited the NSX assembly plant in Marysville, Ohio. The factory, with its gleaming white interior and army of robots, looks like something out of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But what struck Shank was how much of the car is put together manually.

“We got to [see] these elite assemblers and builders make this car by hand,” he says. “Everyone is really excited about this street car. It is so cool to see people in this day and age who really care. We know we have a big responsibility on the race car side to represent them well.”

If that weren’t enough of a challenge, Shank had to meet it on a compressed timeline. MSR’s season kicked off in January with the 24 Hours of Daytona, the Super Bowl of endurance racing. Unlike most of his competitors, who have been running the same car for years, Shank had 90 days to get the NSX GT3 in game shape. Using a combination of mechanical fixes and software patches, the team would spend three days at Sebring making one minor adjustment after another, using trial and error to figure out what makes the car faster and what doesn’t. The work isn’t glamorous, but it’s vital. (The effort would pay off. Together,



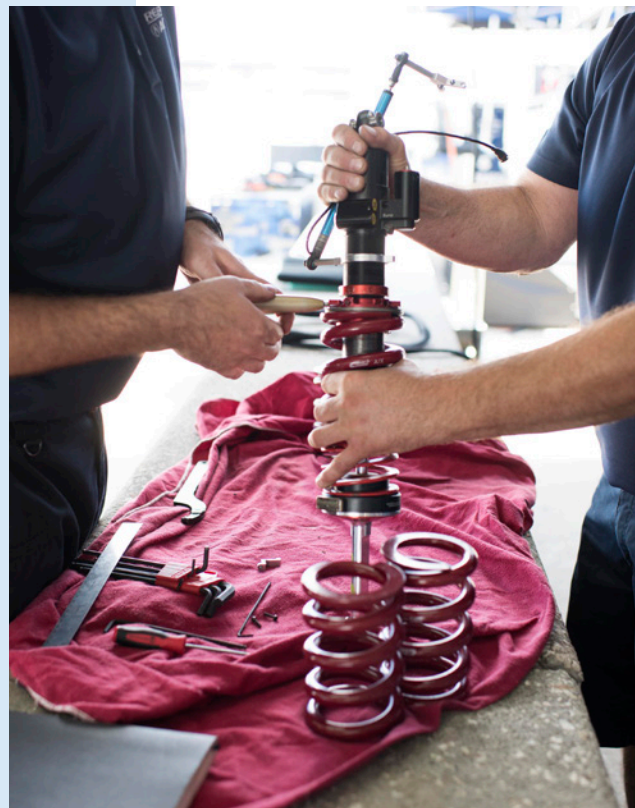
**THE TEAM**  
Opposite page: (top) driver Ozz Negri from Michael Shank Racing (MSR); and, Andy Lally also from MSR. This page: MSR’s Katherine Legge.



“The competition we’re facing is extremely fierce. If we don’t have every aspect of our game at 100 percent, we’re not going to succeed.”

**Andy Lally**

MICHAEL SHANK RACING  
DRIVER & FIVE-TIME  
DAYTONA WINNER



the cars would lead 25 per cent of the race and one finished fifth in its class, managing to stay on the track for all of Daytona’s 24 hours.)

“You’d be disrespecting the competition and the series to think that you’re ever going to roll off the trailer and just be super fast,” says MSR driver Andy Lally, a five-time winner at Daytona. “The competition we’re facing is extremely fierce across a dozen different manufacturers, and if we don’t have every aspect of our game at 100 per cent, we’re not going to succeed.”

For Shank, racing the NSX has been a massive investment. Last year, his team ran a Ligier JS P2, a car tailor-made for long-distance competition in sports car racing’s “prototype” division, which features one-off, custom-built cars. Switching to the NSX forced MSR to completely revamp the way it operates—and spend a small fortune on new equipment.

“We spent 14 years in the prototype division—a long time,” says Shank, a former IndyCar driver. “It’s not easy to bring a new program out like this. But we need to win races. We’re gonna win races.”

The production NSX is an impressive car. Its hybrid engine puts out 573-horsepower and propels the vehicle from zero to 60 mph in about three seconds. But when you get up close to the GT3, you know it’s in a different league. The car’s carbon fiber body panels help keep the weight down. Gone are the passenger seat, the radio and everything else that would add mass. The doors, which pop off with a couple of latch pulls, are so light you can pick them up with three fingers.

Directly behind the driver sits a reinforced carbon-fiber fuel tank; the original was too small for racing. A special electronic clutch saves space. A giant scoop in the hood helps cool the radiator and create downforce, pinning the car to the track.

All of that makes for a special ride, says RealTime’s Cunningham, a ride that, in competition, he’ll be handing off to a pair of younger drivers, Ryan Eversley and Peter Kox.

Over a plate of cold French fries in Sebring’s pit lane, with the sun setting, Kox talks about driving the NSX GT3. The Dutchman knows the car perhaps better than anyone else. He has spent months testing it at tracks around the world, developing an intimate knowledge of its character and qualities. “You want to have a fast car and you want to have a reliable car,” he says. “At the moment, I think we have both. We are looking good.”

Cunningham sits quietly, listening. When we speak later on the phone, he says he was “torn” about stepping away from driving. But in a sport that relies on quick reflexes and intense focus, he had to make a concession to age.

“If you hear about owners who are racing for their own team, usually it’s because of the golden rule.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“The guy with the gold rules. But my best asset wasn’t that I was a team owner—it’s that I could drive. Before things got too out of hand, I thought maybe I’d let some of these younger people do the heavy lifting. I’ll carry the stopwatch.”



**START YOUR ENGINES**

*Opposite page:* The NSX GT3 on the track at the 24 Hours of Daytona; mechanics work on part of the car’s suspension at Sebring. *This page:* Lee Niffenegger, senior engineer at Honda Performance Development, which oversees Acura racing.

