

Words Gerard Richards Photos courtesy Robbie Francevic & Terry Marshall

# Twin Peaks

## Robbie Francevic

Part 2

We talk to Robbie Francevic, and tell the tale of the fast talking, fast-driving winner of New Zealand and Australian saloon car championships – 20 years apart



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01 Robbie and Rosita Francevic, possibly taken at Manfeild during the '80s 02 Robbie in the Volvo at the inaugural Wellington Street Race 03 On the Australian championship trail in the Volvo 240T 04 Robbie and the 'flying brick' – Australian Touring Car Championship (ATCC), 1985, at Sandown Park, Melbourne



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**B**y the mid 1980s, Robbie and Rosita Francevic had a comfortable lifestyle and a profitable business – a Nissan dealership in Orewa. This had been the focus of their energy through much of the previous 20 years. Those two decades had seen huge changes in the automotive and technical worlds. Robbie had kept his hand in on the racing front, campaigning various machinery for wealthy car owners. These escapades provide a further rich vein in the Robbie Francevic saga we cannot do justice to in these pages. He might well have continued his part-time weekend racer businessman regime if the climate of entrepreneurship and exotic saloon racing hadn't arrived in the mid '80s.

Two things conspired to bring that climate about. The family Rosita and Robbie had hoped for had not eventuated. Mark Petch, who had dabbled briefly in racing himself, reappeared on the scene.

Petch was now a successful businessman running Mark Petch Industrial Seals, and had aspirations to shift into the big league of international saloon car racing that had evolved into the global Group A category. This class was making its first tentative inroads into New Zealand at the time. After initially trying unsuccessfully to acquire an ex Tom Walkinshaw Rover V8, Petch gained a tip that one of the works Volvo 240Ts was available. A deal was put together, and this turbocharged Swedish machine was purchased and imported in time for the first running of the Wellington Street Race in October 1984.

### The Swedish Taxi

A fairytale was about to unfold; one that would reinvent Robbie Francevic's second coming. Petch was initially aiming to co-drive alongside Belgian jeweller and European Touring car racer Michel Delcour. However, when Petch elected not to race, the call went out to old mate Robbie Francevic – an action which rekindled a partnership that had last seen active engagement with the ill-fated Katipo F5000 exercise in 1971.

### THE VICTORY THAT FOLLOWED IS ALREADY SHROUDED IN LEGEND AND CONTROVERSY

The Petch-entered Volvo 240T only scraped into the Wellington Street Race field at the last moment – just in time to qualify. With only a few orientation laps, the unusually diverse driver pairing of Francevic and Delcour started from the rear of the grid. The large burly Belgian was fronting with the fast-talking, slim Aucklander. The victory that followed is already shrouded in legend and controversy. I was there at this magic occasion, which ushered in and heralded another brief exotic era of truly international-flavoured racing in this country.

That Volvo 240T was part of it. The technology was fascinating. So much power from that small four-cylinder engine, wonderful handling and was light on brakes and tyres. The old dinosaur V8 brigade had plenty of reason to quake in their boots.

The fact the Volvo won the street race, despite not having a straight panel, was testament to its pedigree. The bonnet half lifting up and the rear bumper



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## ROBBIE KICK-STARTED HIS RENAISSANCE WITH THIS ONE DRIVE. IT MATTERS NOT WHETHER THE TEAM ACTUALLY WON

trailing along the ground only added to its mana. The crowds wanted something different, the new refined machinery and the location in downtown Wellington gave local racing enthusiasts a taste of a more cultured Monaco-like flavour. This was in serious contrast to racing around muddy paddocks, hubcap deep in sheep poo. It was the much-needed shot in the arm

Kiwi motor racing needed.

As well, during the pre-stock market crash era, there was plenty of money out there, and a viable racing category to spend it on. For established mid-40s business moguls still harbouring petrol-head dreams of youth, here was a chance to front up on equal terms and banish those adolescent Anglia racing memories forever.

### Robbie's renaissance

Robbie kick-started his renaissance with this one drive. It matters not whether the team actually won. There was a malfunction with the lap-scoring equipment, and one school of thought had the forceful Patch brow-beating the race officials into accepting his drivers were in the lead. The not-quit-in-top-shape Delcour wasn't able

to fulfil his driving stint on the tough and exhausting Wellington street circuit. Robbie, listed as the Volvo's co-driver, stepped up to the plate. Describing the torrid conditions late in the race, Robbie commented: "I was unable to see over much of the bonnet to line the car up for the corners. Also not wearing gloves, my gear changing hand was turning to mush, I wore it right down to the bone gristle!"

The gearing of the 240T, which also had a high differential ratio, didn't help, and Robbie had to select low gear three times a lap using a special push-up lever, which made life difficult.

The victory thrust the Kiwis into the spotlight. It had been a truly international field, and an event that had captured public, media and corporate interest. Patch saw the future, and the immediate road to harness both his business and racing aspirations, logically, was the high-profile Australian Touring Car Championship. The Aussies had just converted to Group A after years of monolith V8 mentality. Unfortunately, the Australians' embrace of innovation was to last only eight short years before they relapsed to their archaic origins.

And the best man to tackle that hard school of knocks was obviously a tough, give-no-quarter natural driver – Robbie Francevic. He was to embrace the



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Aussie culture. Always quick with the one-liner, Robbie fitted in perfectly with the locals – who were quick to admire his track prowess and his oratory skills. Robbie's character was diametrically opposed to that rival racer and countryman, Gentleman Jim Richards.

### First Australian season

The story of 1985 was one of lost opportunities. In the debut year of Group A in Australia, the stage was ripe for a player with a quick and well-sorted car to hammer the locals. Unfortunately, this didn't happen. The opposition didn't really pose too many terrors. The JPS BMW 635s were solid endurance racers, not spectacularly quick, but quick enough as it turned out. The Brock Commodores and Dick Johnson Mustangs were spasmodic performers, and the Alfa Romeos weren't really competitive. The Volvo should have blitzed this motley assortment in this transition year. The problem, Robbie recalled, "Was our lack of knowledge and experience with the car."

Things didn't get off to a ripper of a start at Sandown. In Robbie's words, he mouthed off to the media, and anyone who'd listen, just how he was going to hand out a lesson to the locals. He eventually finished in sixth with an ill-handling car, and had to eat humble pie. It later turned out the stiffer springs fitted to the Volvo were too short and the suspension was bottoming out, turning it into a two-wheeler on the

corners. "On the plane home I said to Randall Edgell [the team's spanner-man] and Rosita, that will never happen again."

"We went back to Symonds Plains [Tasmania] for the second round, and just destroyed them." Things were looking up, but it was at this junction that a mystery problem reared its head – and it would plague the Volvo for the rest of the season. Edgell and Robbie pulled apart the Volvo's turbocharger after the Symonds Plain race to check for wear. "What we didn't know was the importance of a little baffle that let the air and mixture in," Robbie said. A small drilled hole with a tapped thread governed how much this opened, and was critical to the tune of the engine.

The team's unhappy season was directly related to the incorrect setting of this tiny component. The engine either ran lean at the top end and rich at the bottom, or vice versa. The ugly result was a saga of blown turbos, head gaskets, overheating and pre-detonation. Although Robbie was to win a later round of the series, the horse had truly bolted on the window of opportunity for that opening Group A season. Fellow expatriate Kiwi Jim Richards was the victor in his black, howling six-cylinder BMW 635.

### Sorting the Swede

It was around this time that Robbie had an offer from Tom Walkinshaw Racing (TWR) to race the Group A

05 Robbie being interviewed on the starting grid at Adelaide International Raceway, 1986 06 Robbie two-wheels the Volvo – Australia, 1985 (Photo by Bill Forsyth) 07 The Volvo Dealer Team, 1986 – Robbie on the left, John Bowe on right 09 Robbie flies by in the Volvo

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Words Gerard Richards Photos courtesy Robbie Francevic &amp; Terry Marshall

Jaguar XJ-S in Europe for 1986. It must have been a tempting offer, given the saga of problems that had blighted his season with the Volvo. However, he remained loyal to Petch and the team. Instead, Robbie contacted Denny Hulme, who leaped at the chance of a drive with TWR and enjoyed an Indian summer as he made a return to international racing. Hulme's highpoint would be winning the 1987 Tourist Trophy, several decades later than his previous Lola T70 sports car wins of the mid '60s.

Instead, Robbie turned back to the Volvo – this time with much more luck. As chance would have it, Swed-

### Fear and loathing in Australia

A grim tale of fear and loathing, not to mention distorted truths – mainly on the part of his Australian counterparts. The story of the underhand stunts and tactics – some of which came from Robbie's so-called Australian team, the Volvo Dealer Team – encountered during the 1986 season could fill a book.

But matters began on a very high note. The small team of Robbie, Petch, Edgell and Rosita were a formidable crew; they had the car sorted and were in the groove right from the outset. In Robbie's words, "We got to Amaroo and just thrashed 'em." It was a beauti-

## IN THAT INSTANT, ROBBIE'S SEASON SWITCHED FROM HIM TAKING THE INITIATIVE AND SETTING THE PACE TO MAKING THE BEST OF A DETERIORATING COMPETITIVE PACKAGE

ish driver Thomas Lindstrom was hired as Robbie's co-driver for the two-round New Zealand international endurance races at Pukekohe and along the Wellington waterfront. Lindstrom, with his greater experience with Volvos, quickly nailed the team's ongoing problem. Legend has it that, while testing at Manfeild, the tall Swedish works driver pulled in after one lap and raised the bonnet. He wound the offending screw about five turns, locked it up and the car immediately went ballistic. Lindstrom turned laps four seconds faster than Robbie had done with same car on the Manawatu circuit.

With driver Lindstrom's expertise now at their disposal, the team was quickly established as a front-runner. Now the Volvo was blindingly fast – but alas, a fractured oil line on lap 59 ended its Wellington encounter. Then, while leading at Pukekohe, the car's distributor failed on lap 108. However, the omens were good for the 1986 Australian Touring Car Championship.

fully-controlled race by the talented Aucklander, always holding the ascendancy on the tight twisting track.

However, it quickly brought to the fore an ugly aspect of Australia's racing and administrative body, CAMS. Because they were New Zealanders, and their car was so much quicker than the previous year, what ensued was a relentless campaign with CAMS subjecting the Volvo to impromptu engine strip-downs. "The inference was that this was Group A, we were so much quicker, we must be cheating," remarked Robbie. "They repeatedly demanded we pull the engine and turbo down for inspection following the next few races."

The second round at Symonds Plains brought another convincing victory. For the first 18 laps, Robbie had a close tussle with the rapidly improving turbo-charged Nissan Skyline of George Fury. Then a minor altercation between the two saw Robbie emerge with an unchallenged lead. The two had differing views of the cause of the contact, but once he was in the lead



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it was apparent Fury had been holding Francevic up. Another commanding display also resulted in another engine dismantling – of course, there was nothing illegal about the Volvo.

### Volvo Dealer Team

Round Three heralded the black clouds of serious trouble ahead. On the surface the Volvo Dealer Team should have offered factory resources and development for the car to ensure even greater chances of success. Until this point Petch was under-writing the whole campaign, but now the Kiwi-based team became an Australian one. With Robbie shaping well in the series, Volvo saw a championship win as a serious marketing opportunity in Australia. It was a prospective commercial bonanza too good to be missed.

The fundamental flaw in the package was the choice of old-school team manager John Sheppard – a dour, by-the-book character. Sheppard didn't take to the fast talking, charismatic New Zealander from the start. The feelings were mutual, and Robbie found 'Sheppo' (this was his kinder nickname) totally frustrating, and clashed with him fiercely and often. Robbie's frustration emerged from Sheppard's unwillingness to explore ways to improve the car under the umbrella of the rules. And they needed to keep developing the Volvo as the Nissan challenge intensi-

10 The spoils of victory. From l to r: Robbie, Jim Richards and a fresh-faced Tony Longhurst 11 The start-line at Adelaide, 1986 – on the front row (l to r): Peter Brock's Commodore, George Fury's Skyline and Robbie's 240T 12 Robbie and team-mate, John Bowe, share the winner's bubbly 13 Robbie's main opposition in 1986 ATCC came from the Peter Jackson Nissan Skyline team of George Fury and Glenn Seton

fied. But it never happened.

Robbie; "That mongrel Sheppo, he wasn't a developer, he was in the wrong era, did all his racing when it was standard production. If you wanted to change anything in the car, it had to be homologated, you had to make 500 of the same parts. He wasn't a genius guy."

As an example, "They changed the rules with the air box. I was real excited, came down to the workshop to design a new air box and get all that cold air in. He wouldn't have a bar of it."

On another occasion, "We were detonating our cylinder heads, and he got 12 cylinder heads all ported the same. I said what are you doing, making every single cylinder head the same? We should be experimenting? He wouldn't do anything."

In that instant, Robbie's season switched from him taking the initiative and setting the pace to making the best of a deteriorating competitive package. For the next couple of races under the new regime, still with Edgell and Petch on board, Robbie scored two more good results to consolidate his championship challenge. A second at Sandown (Melbourne) was followed by a good win at Adelaide from a 10th place off the grid start due to a tired engine.

Despite the odds starting to really stack against him, the racer in Robbie burned through, and his aggressive race-craft pulled off that fine win at Adelaide. The race also saw the debut of John Bowe in the newly built-up second Volvo Dealer Team car. And it coincided with a further slump in team relations, as Sheppard quickly showed favouritism to the Tasmanian – clearly wanting an Australian to win the championship.

### The going gets harder

Another tough race at Surfers Paradise netted Robbie a hard-won second place, this time in the newer car. Peter Brock won this round in the rejuvenated Commodore, and the Skylines of Fury and Glenn Seton also had the edge in performance.

Calder brought Robbie's first and only retirement of the season, and the bleak reality of arch rival George Fury's win saw the Skyline inching ever closer in the battle for the championship. The only bright spot here, from Robbie's perspective, was Bowe's retirement from the lead. This erased any chance of title aspirations for the Australian.

"I was rapt," Robbie said gleefully. "It meant they had to support me, from the manufacturer's interests, and also Bowe had been really disloyal, siding with Sheppard against me. I'd busted my butt getting him up to speed at Bathurst in '85 when he was way off the pace."

By the eighth race at Lakeside, team politics had plunged to a new all-time low. Sheppard, harbouring paranoid delusions that Petch was siphoning off secrets and phoning home, feared he was setting up a rival team with Volvo so his services were dispensed with. The new, Edgell-built motor had failed, and he had been shown the door as well. It was now just Rob-



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## THEY FOUGHT AN INTENSE GRUDGE BATTLE BEFORE ROBBIE JUST EDGED OUT THE TASMANIAN AT THE FLAG-FALL

bie with a team that patently didn't want him. The only thing going for him was the points on the board.

The ensuing debacle at Lakeside (Brisbane) began for Robbie when he found that the Volvo's new engine was way off song. This was further compounded when Sheppard decided not to qualify the Bowe car, as it would be fixed overnight. The car wasn't touched, so Robbie commandeered the Tasmanian's machine, which he had to start from the rear of the grid as it hadn't been qualified. Bowe was a spectator in the commentary box on this occasion, and even he had to acknowledge a good drive when he saw one.

Robbie dug deep into his reservoir of commitment and pulled out a stunning drive, going into full assault mode and mowing his way through the field. His final fourth place was a testament to his skill and passion as a racer. Up front, a fierce battle between the two Nissans of Fury and Gary Scott and Brock's Commodore was finally resolved when they all came to lap Gary Wilmington's Jaguar XJ-S. Brock got boxed in and slid into the marbles, leaving the Skylines to score a one-two. Those fourth place points were absolutely critical for Francevic's quest for the crown.

### Championship decider

Outright wins were now out of the question, as development of the car had been static for months. Robbie wanted to win the title by wining races. It certainly went against the grain for him – flogging a machine that had lost its competitive edge into points finishes in a desperate effort to retrieve the title. Reliability and Robbie's racing tenacity led to good finishing positions over the last two rounds at Winton (Victoria) and Oran Park (Sydney). These races would decide the title winner – which would be either Robbie or the fast closing Fury. A stand-off with Bowe at Winton, when he tried to take Robbie's qualifying tyres, didn't improve the general mood of a camp that was continuously at

loggerheads. Once again in the race, at the friendly Victorian country track, the Nissans were in a different league.

Jimmy Richards in the now less competitive 635 BMW found the nature of the circuit suited his car, and he was on the pace with the Skylines. Brock lost a front row position with a jammed gearbox. Bowe, who had been ahead on the grid, was caught by Robbie and they fought an intense grudge battle before Robbie just edged out the Tasmanian at the flag-fall. Another fourth place, and 20 more points.

Facing the final round at Oran Park, the odds were in Robbie's favour. He had a points advantage and drove a sensible race into sixth place. With his fist clenched in a championship-winning salute, Robbie acknowledged the plaudits of the crowd. It had been a nerve-racking few weeks and one of the closest-fought racing series ever, with Robbie's winning tally of 214 points a bare five clear of George Fury's final count of 209. The Swedish Valiant, as Dick Johnson unkindly called the Volvo, had prevailed – but only just. Robbie's victory was a testament to winning in the face of huge adversity, initially from CAMS and later from the obstructions put in his path by his own team.

### Aftermath

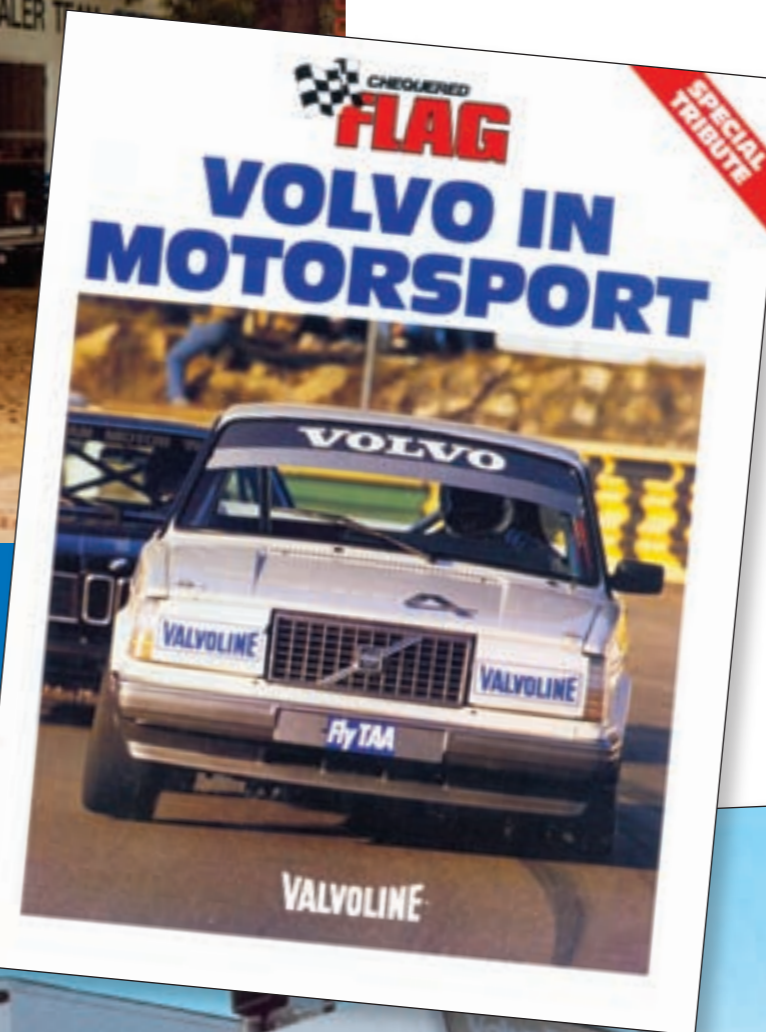
Robbie would be the first to admit that he speaks his mind. Reflecting on the advent of the Valvoline Volvo Dealer Team in Round Three, Robbie's comment was; "Apart from the fourth round win

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14 Original Volvo Dealer Team sticker 15 Volvo Dealer Team race HQ 16 Chequered Flag Volvo in Motorsport tribute issue commemorating Robbie's championship year in the 240T 17 Postcard produced by Volvo Australia Pty to commemorate Robbie's Australian Touring Car Championship win in 1986

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at Adelaide, achieved through consistency and luck, I never won another race under the Volvo Team banner, who do you blame for that?"

Indeed. Mutual animosity between Sheppard and Francevic brought the inevitable parting of the ways at the Sandown Endurance Race. Robbie, disgusted with the state of his car's preparation, had suggested to Volvo management that it should be withdrawn. Sheppard, reading this as an act of defiance, announced to the media that Francevic would no longer be a part of the team. In the meantime all the team's resources had been poured into building a new car for John Bowe. Read into that what you will. As it turned out, its days were numbered for the shambolic Volvo team – with or without Robbie.

Shortly after Bathurst, which netted a best finish of 11th place with two Kiwis – Neville Crichton and Graham McRae – at the helm, the Volvo Dealer Team was disbanded. Competing in that race with Leo Leonard in a Ford Sierra Turbo, Robbie's drive ended early with rocker maladies. The aftermath of Robbie's tumultuous year was followed by a disastrous attempt to put his own team together to defend his title. The ingredients were excellent, but the project fell foul of Australian motor sport bureaucracy and a shortfall in finances. This was yet indication of parochial Australian officialdom.

Robbie returned to local circuits with odd drives here and there. There were appearances in a Mark Petch-modified Sierra Sports sedan, plus various BMWs. In recent years Robbie has been a regular in the Dunlop Targa New Zealand, driving a massive Pontiac GTO. The passion for racing is still alive and well in Robbie, and he backs himself, like Kenny Smith, against the young bucks. When talking to him late last year at his comfortable East Coast Bays seaside retreat, retirement seemed the last thing on his mind. While sharing a sumptuous roast meal courtesy of Rosita's exquisite culinary talents, Robbie announced that he was keen to have a lash at the Toyota single-seater racing class this season.

If that isn't confidence at 64 years of age, I don't know what is!

### Epilogue

What I really wanted to say in this story, aside from trying to get the atmosphere, facts and flavour of Robbie's journey to his two milestones, is what a bloody great driver he was and still is. Robbie possesses an ingredient only a few drivers have – a natural instinctive gift for car control. Probably the only other two local drivers on par, in my opinion, would be Jimmy Richards and Graham McRae.

## ROBBIE POSSESSES AN INGREDIENT WHICH ONLY A FEW DRIVERS HAVE – A NATURAL INSTINCTIVE GIFT FOR CAR CONTROL



Words Gerard Richards Photos courtesy Robbie Francevic & Terry Marshall

Donn Anderson, the long-time editor of *Motorman*, drove the Custaxie during its heyday and was stunned how anyone could drive it. He was moved to comment that he “Can’t understand how anyone could drive it and keep it pointing the right way, without it constantly wanting to swap ends.”

I rest my case. I was there at Pukekohe in March 1967 and saw Robbie’s magnificent handling of that truly iconic monster, the ‘Colour Me Gone’ Custaxie. The memory is burned into my brain cells and I can still conjure up the sound and fury of what must be truly the greatest Allcomer ever built.

impressive victory. Though diametrically different in concept, the Volvo was very much a perfect race car for Robbie. He loved the car’s innovation and beautifully engineered design. The turbocharged engine put out enormous power, in a light and compact vehicle, and the challenge of refining the car totally absorbed him. It was certainly sad and ironic that in his victorious year in Australia, from mid-season he was unable to fully realise the maximum potential of the Volvo.

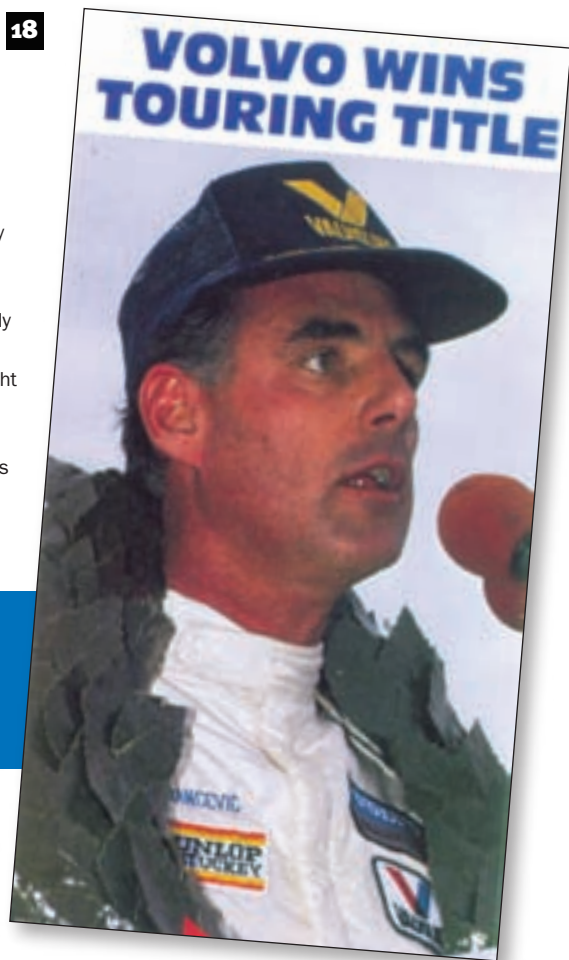
**“CAN’T UNDERSTAND HOW ANYONE COULD DRIVE IT AND KEEP IT POINTING THE RIGHT WAY, WITHOUT IT CONSTANTLY WANTING TO SWAP ENDS.”**

Robbie says he has managed to collect many of the Custaxie’s original parts. Apparently he’s got the chassis and much of the body. He intends to rebuild it as a retirement project, if he ever gets around to retiring.

I was also there in Wellington in October 1984, and witnessed the rebirth of Robbie Francevic on the international stage. Against supreme odds on the track – with only three laps of practice – he brought the latest state-of-the-art saloon racer home to a very

However, that said, the lingering memories from my fading video cassette of that series constantly displays Robbie on the charge. He fought his way from the back with some sublime displays of aggressively controlled driving, coming through the field to finish in strong positions. This was the true measure of the man. ➡

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18 To the winner, the laurels 19 The ill-fated Volvo Dealer Team, with Robbie out front alongside his car

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