By the mid 1980s, Robbie and Rosita Francevic had a comfortable lifestyle and a profitable business—a Nissan dealer-ship 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 Delcourt. 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 Volvo Dealer Team, 1986 – Robbie on the left, John Bowe on right

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 Kari 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 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 Alf Romeo weren’t really competitive. The Volvo should have blitzed this morose 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 trailing along the ground only added to its mania. 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, more cultured Monaco-like flavour. was bottoming out, turning it into a two-wheeler on the ground only added to its mania. 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, more cultured Monaco-like flavour. was bottoming out, turning it into a two-wheeler on the ground only added to its mania. 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, more cultured Monaco-like flavour. was bottoming out, turning it into a two-wheeler on the ground only added to its mania. 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, more cultured Monaco-like flavour. was bottoming out, turning it into a two-wheeler on the
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Sorting the Swede

It was around this time that Robbie had an offer from Tom Walkinshaw Racing (TWR) to race the Group A
Jaguar XJ-6 (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 TRW 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.

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 unheard-of starts 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 cars sorted and were in the groove right from the outset. In Robbie’s words, “We got to Amamoor and just thrashed ‘em.” It was a beautiful way to start a season.

The Volvo Dealer Team Round Three revealed 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 underwriting the car. 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.
be 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 moving 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 closing Fury. a stand-off with Bowe at Winton, when he tried to take Robbie’s qualifying tyres, didn’t improve 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 Francesvic 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 shamrock Volvo team with or without Robbie.

Shortly after Bathurst, which nettled a best finish of 11th place with two Kwes – 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 bureaucratic and a shortfall in finances. This was yet indication of parochial Australian officialism.

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 Days 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 ready and willing to join the list 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.
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.

Robbie says he has managed to collect many of the Custaxie’s original parts. Apparently he’s got the chas-sis 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 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.

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.

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