

# THE RED LOBSTER BMW M1



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Cowart / Miller Red Lobster BMW M1. Image by Dan Heiny, courtesy of Dave Cowart

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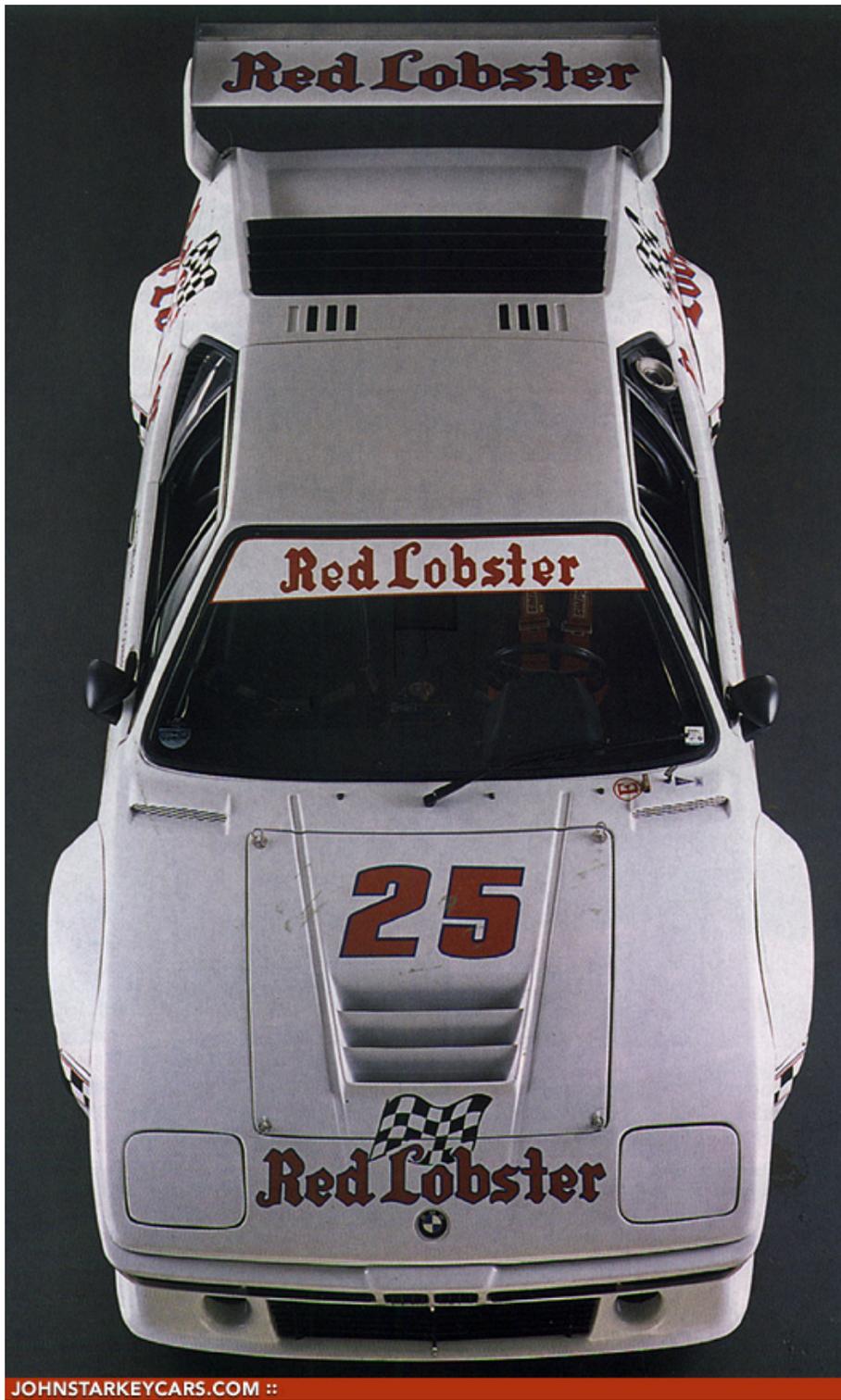
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Cowart / Miller Red Lobster BMW M1. Image by Dan Heiny, courtesy of Dave Cowart.

“In the long and noble history of road racing, only a few short periods deserve the term ‘Golden Age’. Now, barely ten years after its decline, the IMSA Camel GT Championship series is becoming recognized as the most recent Golden Age of American road racing.” So wrote John Bishop in the book “Racing with a Difference-The History of IMSA”

John was referring, in particular, to those hedonistic days of the late seventies and early eighties when his Camel GT Championship was divided into three groups, or classes. The fastest was GTX, consisting mainly of what appeared to be hordes of Porsche 935's, with the BMW 320i of David Hobbs putting up some worthy performances in 1978 and 1979.

The next class in line was GTO, featuring such as Bob Tullius in his Triumph TR8, any number of Porsche RSR Carreras and the occasional Chevrolet Camaro. Also taking part in the class was Kenper Miller's lone BMW CSL, an ex-Peter Gregg/Brumos car, with which Gregg, ably partnered by Britons John Fitzpatrick and Brian Redman, had won the 1976 Daytona 24-Hours. The GTU, (GT under 2.5 liters), class was basically for small-bore cars such as Mazda RX-7's and Datsun Z-cars and they filled up the remainder of the IMSA grids.



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Cowart / Miller Red Lobster BMW M1. Image by Dan Heiny, courtesy of Dave Cowart

By the end of 1979, Kenper Miller had decided that his beloved but aging CSL plain was getting somewhat long in the tooth and, as a lover of all things BMW, cast around for a new car to campaign for 1980.

In long-distance races, such as at Daytona and Sebring, Kenper Miller's driving partner was David Cowart, like Kenper a stockbroker, but hailing from Tampa, Florida, whereas Kenper was a New York native. David Cowart had won the 1978 GTO Championship in his Porsche Carrera.

"I clinched the GTO Championship in 1978 with my old Porsche RSR Carrera and the only guy who gave me real trouble that year was Kenper. As long as that CSL kept running, he gave me fits!"

"I decided that it would be a good idea to eliminate the competition and so Kenper and I got together and decided that we would run the 1979 season using both of our existing cars, whilst looking around for a new car with which to win the GTO class in 1980-81."

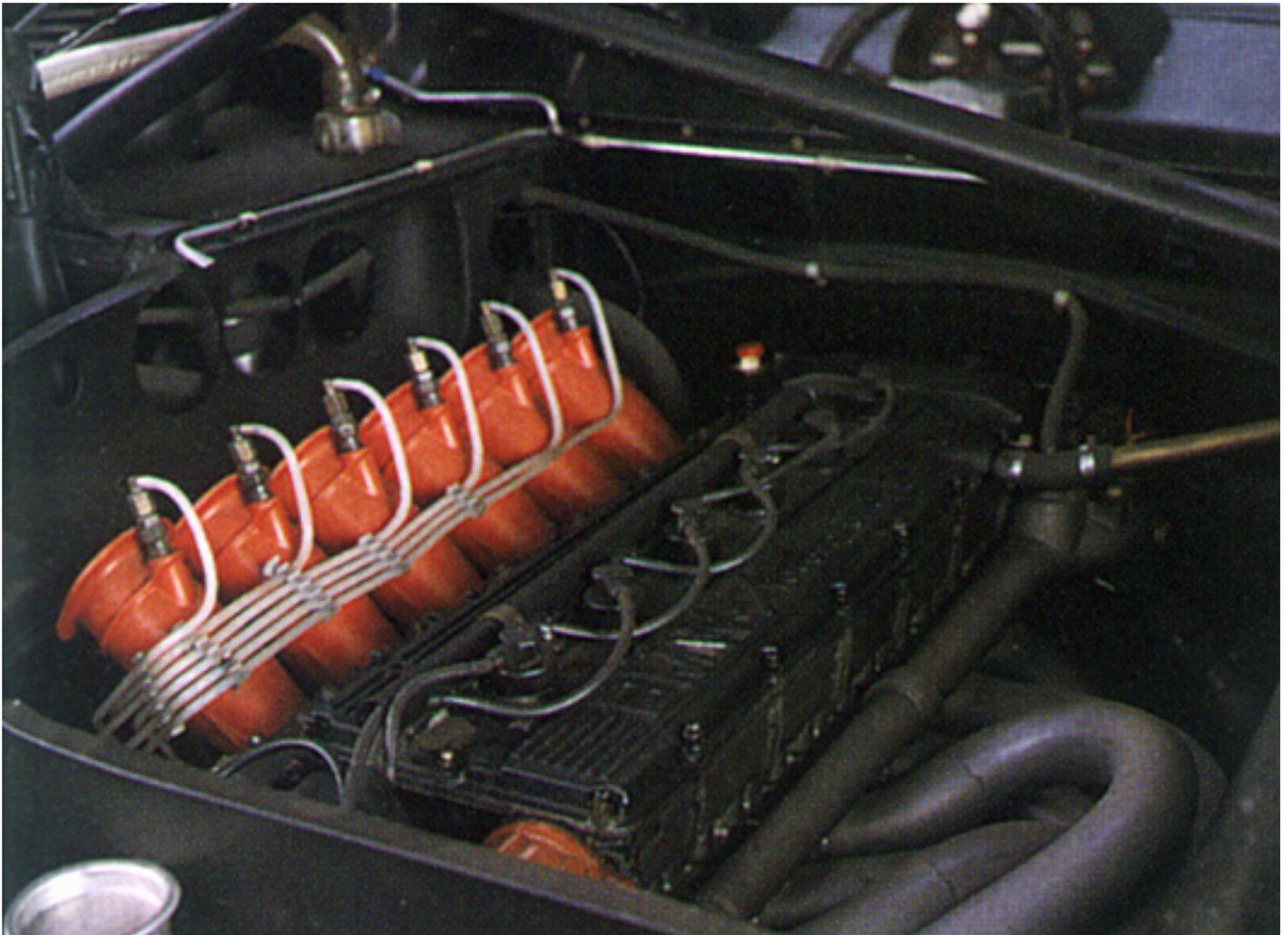
Kenper Miller: "I considered David to be my strongest competitor. Although we were friends off the track, it was pretty nip and tuck out there! My BMW was faster on the long straights, but David's Carrera was quicker on the twisty tracks."

David and Kenper, realizing that the new GTO rules were due to come into force in 1980/1, saw that the M1, particularly in race-prepared ProCar form, would be a good contender for the GTO title again. It was probably no coincidence that Jim Busby had posted some good performances in his M1 recently in the same race series.

It was at this time that David Cowart, seeing how much racing was costing, cast around for sponsorship and... "Getting the Red Lobster sponsorship was really a stroke of luck. Previously, I'd had backing from another source but it wasn't enough and so I sent out a brochure of myself and the Carrera's Championship success to around fifty companies I figured might be interested in sponsoring me. One of these brochures landed on the desk of Dick Munroe, the marketing guy who represented Red Lobster restaurants and he just happened to have raced a Sprite in SCCA events. He called me to say that there was a spark of interest there and that the Company's headquarters were in Orlando, just fifty miles away from me in Tampa."

"I spruced myself up, jumped in my car and drove on over there to put on a show. We got the sponsorship we needed in 1979 and, although it wasn't too good a year for us, Red Lobster could see the way it was going and kept the sponsorship deal on. They helped us through our time with the M1. Then, when we bought our March in 1982, they saw how well the Lobster paint scheme fitted the 'Lobster Claw' nose of that car."

Kenper Miller, having had an established relation with BMW North America for three years with the CSL, made inquiries about buying an M1. "As soon as David and I had reached our agreement about driving together, I told BMW that we would like to purchase a used M1 Procar to use in the 1980 season. They cast around and, while they did, for 1979, David and I ran the CSL on the tracks with long straights and the RSR on the tighter circuits.



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The M1 race motor put out 476 hp @ 8,800 rpm and 307 lb-ft @ 7,200; the stock motor made just 266 hp @ 6,500, 229 lb-ft at 5,000 rpm!

Sadly, we soon realized that both cars were pretty tired! I sold my CSL in November, 1979, but later on brought it back, restored it and still have it.”

At the end of 1979, BMW called to say that Kenper and David could buy a Procar M1, that had been used by BMW Italia. Kenper: “I don’t think that it had been used much. Certainly, it was in good shape when we got it, no body damage that we could see at all.”

Jack Darren, Cowart and Miller’s crew chief remembered: “It had been Elio De Angelis’s Osella-run BMW Italia car. Considering that it had been driven by an F1 driver, it was in pretty good shape.”

The ex-Procar M1’s baptism of fire came in the 1980 Daytona 24-Hours held at the beginning of February. There, Kenper and David were partnered by Christine Beckers but

the M1 failed at around one third of the distance. The disappointed owners had to wait just over a month for the next race with the car, the Sebring Twelve Hours. There, joined by famed Le Mans winner Derek Bell, the M1 finished a creditable 30th overall, completing 172 laps, as against the winning Porsche's 253.

The next endurance race for the M1 was the Riverside Six-Hours and Kenper and David made the trek across America from East to West, but it was all for naught. David Cowart started the M1 in the race, but was out after just twenty-two laps.

The M1 wasn't raced again until August, the duo using the RSR for the twistier tracks, but Kenper and David had a fine race in the "Lumbermans 500" at Mid-Ohio with the BMW to take sixth place overall and third in class. This was an odd race, combining IMSA's GT cars with center-seat Can Am cars and one of these, a Lola T333CS took the overall win. Sixth it was again at the next race, Road America's "Pabst 500", then David Cowart drove the M1 solo to take ninth at Road Atlanta in September.

Just one more race took place in 1980, the Daytona Finale, held at the end of November. Yet again, it was a sixth place for the duo from the East Coast, but three laps behind the winning Porsche Turbo of Gianpiero Moretti and Reinhold Joest. The M1 was very reliable but did not have the speed of the turbocharged Porsches.

"In 1980, we had to run against the 935's with their 600 plus horsepower turbocharged engines." Recalled David. "But we knew that the M1 would be homologated into the GTO class for 1981. BMW kept on telling us it would be in 1980. First they said June, then it slipped to August and finally, we realized that 1980 was really a trial run for 1981."

"We had about 480 horsepower" Kenper recalled. "But Jack Darren, who looked after the car, made some critical changes to make the car both faster and easier to service in the pits. He enlarged the grill to admit and exit more hot air from the radiator and lightened the bodywork to achieve better weight distribution."

Over the winter of 1980-81, IMSA re-classified its entries, as the new GTP class was starting up. The Porsche 935 remained in the GTX category, but the M1 was given a new lease of life by being put into the GTO, (GT-Over 2.5 liters) category.

Jack Darren went to serious work on the car: "I cut a lot out of it, including the trunk floor, lightened it, took out about two hundred pounds. The doors were just shells and so was the bodywork. All the panels were held on with Dzus fasteners and the bodywork could be popped off in minutes. I made it an IMSA-spec. car, a tube frame with outer skins to hold paint. The cowl and roof were original, though."



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The Red Lobster M1 in IMSA action, 1981. Note the modifications to the bodywork by technician Jack Deren - 1977 IMSA Mechanic of the Year - to bring the car up to IMSA spec, more radical than a Procar configuration.

Ricardo Londono joined the team for the Daytona 24-Hours but, like the year before, they failed to reach the finish line, despite completing 346 laps. Still, they were classified as finishing eighth in class and BMW had the consolation of winning the GTO class, The redoubtable Hans Stuck, partnered by Alf Gebhardt and Slot-machine millionaire Walter Brun took the class win and finished sixth overall.

Jack Darren: “When we showed up in 1981 at Daytona, we had the M1 in IMSA specs and the other owners were upset and protested to FIA over John Bishop’s head. John was upset. After all, Daytona was basically an IMSA event, with FIA assistance. We had to change some of the bodywork to make it legal for that race.”

Sebring was next on the long-distance agenda in March. David Cowart, along with Charles Mendez was promoting the Sebring Twelve Hour race during this period, but it didn’t bring the team much luck, Kenper and David finishing twenty seventh overall, ninth in class.

David Cowart: “The M1’s engine did not like sustained high rpm’s. There was a problem, BMW later admitted to us, with the long crankshaft that created damaging harmonics. We used to have the crankshaft damper break up, or a camshaft fail. Once we hit the shorter, ‘print’ type races, that problem went away.”



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Cowart's 1981 IMSA GTO winning Red Lobster M1, shown here at a recent Watkins Glen Historic Event. To its right is the 1975 Sebring 12-hour winning BMW CSL.

IMSA's "Sprint" races were next in 1981, the first one, over approximately a hundred miles, was at Road Atlanta in April and there, David Cowart drove solo to win the GTO class and place eleventh overall.

It was triumph again in the Los Angeles Times race at Riverside just three weeks later where another class win was the reward for a steady drive, beating the "other" M1 of Alberto Naon, Tony Garcia and Hiram Cruz.

Alberto Naon remembered: "With BMW's help, we bought a Procar from Europe. It was the week before Riverside and we spent the weekend putting in the fuel cell and repainting it in our sponsor's colors. We did well with that car, especially after we put a Hewland gearbox in it. With the original box, the gears took too long to change. The M1 was a delight to drive. As well as IMSA GTO, we also won our class at Silverstone and did Le Mans but that's another story..."

David Cowart made it three victories in a row at Laguna Seca the following weekend, again beating another M1, this one driven by Indycar expert Al Unser Jr.

And so the season went on, the Red Lobster M1 winning at Lime Rock, Mid-Ohio, Brainerd, Daytona, Portland, Mosport, Road Atlanta and the Daytona Finale. Lest it be thought that the 1980 GTO Championship was a walk-over for David Cowart and Kenper Miller, it should be pointed out that, at Road America in August, they were forced to retire, whilst placing second to Dennis Aase's M1 at Sears Point. There, the heat was intense and, just a quarter of a lap from the finish, the car in front of David went off-course, forcing him to take evasive action. In the resulting dust cloud, Aase got by, but David never saw him make the pass!

Jack Darren recounted: "At the finish, we were all sure David had won. He was just glad the race was over. He said to me: 'You know, I can't even remember the last four or five laps.'" Competition from other M1's, such as the one driven by Tony Garcia and Alberto Naon and the Chuck Kendall/Dennis Aase car was fierce.

Kenper: "David and I had decided that, as David had obtained the 'Red Lobster' sponsorship, he could have first go at winning the GTO Championship. I would call him on the Monday morning after a race and he would say: 'Well, I won!' It was really a shock to find that Dennis Aase had beaten him at Sears Point into second place."

"For a large part of that season, we were unable to get another engine and had to use the same one over and over. A testimony to a great engine."

At the end of the season, David Cowart had accumulated more points than Kenper Miller and was proclaimed IMSA GTO Champion, winning eleven races from fifteen starts and being fastest qualifier six times.

David Cowart: "Once I had won the Championship, I gave the M1 over to Kenper. He came second in the Championship that year. I believe it was the only time that the first and second place guys used the same car to take the top two places."

"That M1 was the easiest car to drive fast. The handling was neutral, the front and rear of the M1 being so well balanced."

Kenper: "I'd like to say that it was driver talent that took us to one-two in the Championship, but everyone who's ever been in a racecar has good and bad luck and we had the luck to be in the M1, the best car for the job."

"That was just a fabulous racecar. I really enjoyed it. The CSL was also a great car and that six cylinder engine made the sweetest sounds, Of course, in the M1, the engine was behind us and it was just a joy to drive."

The M1 was sold to Diego Montoya and was driven by Tony Garcia. Jack Darren: “After three races in 1982, Tony Garcia, one of the drivers, came over to me and said: ‘The way that David came past me, I always thought that your car must be very trick, but it’s really a street car!’”

For 1982, Kenper Miller and David Cowart stayed with BMW M1 power, this time in the back of a new GTP March, but that, as they say, is another story...



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