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Through The Esses - Rob Bunker Wants A Fast Education

10/13/07 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Rob Bunker is 19 years old and looking to build a racing resume that mirrors that of some of the best in the sport. He admires the career that Tony Stewart has made for himself, running cars in a variety of series, and he is keeping an open mind about how to best capture the flavor – and more importantly, the experience – of participating in just about any race series he can. It is his ambition to go into each new adventure with his mind open to what he can learn there, and then take those lessons and apply them towards making his next drive better than his last.



Rob Bunker equates seat time with education and he wants to get all the seat time - in any seat, in any car - that he can, so that his education advances quickly. Racers like to go fast, even in a classroom on wheels.

Like many of today's young drivers, Bunker started out in karting at the age of nine. Actually, he first did a few laps and decided racing wasn't what he wanted to do. But with some encouragement from his father, Chip Bunker – a former kart racer – he gave it a second try a few days later and this time the squeal-appeal of racing took hold for good.

After several successful seasons in karting, including three national World Karting Association wins and two regional class championships, he moved into a four-race stint in the Formula TR Pro Racing Series. This was to be the start of a very educational apprenticeship working closely with the very versatile and professional driver and coach Ross Bentley. Through this personal association, and the application of the techniques espoused in Bentley's Speed Secrets program (and books of the same name), Bunker was able to begin taking great strides in his journey to learn what it takes to be fast on a race track.

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“I’m very open to running in almost anything with an engine. I would love to get into sportscars and higher horsepower rides. I’d love to run in a Daytona Prototype but I don’t want to get focused on just one series or type of car. We are even going to be testing in a midget soon. I am absolutely open to everything. I want to be as broad a racing driver as I can be. I want to try and get in everything because, what I have learned is that I can mix what I learn in each series and apply it towards a really good run in whatever car I am running in next.

“For example, we ran in the Star Mazda race during the Petit Le Mans Weekend at Road Atlanta. We were third fastest unfortunately we had some car trouble and fell back. This race was a one off, just to see if what we learned in ARCA could be used in another type of car. We definitely found that we could apply the lessons learned. There was a time when the Star Mazda car was the most powerful car I had ever driven. I would feather the gas pedal through a corner and watch the power to keep control. But after driving an ARCA car, with almost three times as much horsepower, the Star Mazda suddenly didn’t seem all that fast. The things that would surprise me last year in Star Mazda I had come to expect this time. I felt I knew what to expect and how to react accordingly.

“I am trying to stay on the top of my game. I am interested in doing just about any kind of racing. I’d love to try doing a couple of truck races and I’m very interested in sportscars too.”

The burning desire to be a great driver is certainly contained within him. But in the beginning, that fire needed to be lit more than once before it broke out into the blazing spirit it has become.

“My first time in a competitive kart, after about ten minutes, I decided I didn’t want to race. But in my second try I found I actually really liked it. My dad and I got a kart and we started racing in a karting series. Within the first year we started winning races and the following year we won a local championship. My dad has been into kart racing for a long time. My mom has always been very supportive too. We also had a lot of help at our local track, Oakland Valley, which is near Port Jervis in New York. I’m from Bridgewater, New Jersey and my dad and I would make the trip from our home to the track almost every single weekend.

“We started winning national events and then decided the next step would be to get into a formula car series. We were talking with some people from the Formula BMW series and we almost ran there but we instead hooked up with Ross Bentley and the guys at Speed Secrets. They said they had their own open wheel series going called Formula TR. Ross helped me, and we had a Speed Secrets sponsored team in that series. We ran four races that first year and the next year we moved up to Formula BMW and ran a full season.

“It was obvious that we had a lot to learn but we felt pretty sure that I had the talent to build on. We had a test with the World Speed Star Mazda team because of our contacts with Ross and others. With those cars, with the bias-ply tires, it was harder to understand how to put those cars on the limit. But within a day of testing our times were right there with others who had driven the car before.

“We figured at that point we probably learned all we could in Formula BMW and should probably move up to the Star Mazda series. We started talking to different teams and the most logical choice for us was to go with AIM Autosport, as we had been running with them in Formula BMW.”

After a season in Star Mazda, staying with his wish to put his hands on wheels in almost anything motorized, Bunker and his dad next decided to give oval racing a shot. Of course, while having a variety of racing experiences looks great on your resume, getting that experience takes a mix of commitment, talent, perseverance and luck.

“We were interested in racing in the Craftsman Truck series. My father and I and my coach, Bob Perona, started talking to some truck teams. They told us we didn’t have any experience in stock car racing so we should go run in a late model class. We decided on the ARCA series and landed a ride with the Cunningham team. They offered me a spot running seven races this year in their cup car. The cars are very similar to the Nextel Cup cars except for a larger rear spoiler and no side window. But they have a solid 800 plus horsepower motor. The cars would be able to reach qualifying speeds for a Nextel Cup race.

“We went into ARCA with no oval racing experience at all. When I first took to the track there was no one out there with me and I thought it was no big deal. We were running good lap times. Then I had my trial by fire at the half-mile oval in Salem! There were 40 ARCA cars on the track so there was literally no end. The cars went all the way around the track and nobody could tell who was leading during the race. There was no experience in the world like that!

“We had to get the hang of that kind of racing real quick. We were running in the top 15 when we were taken out by another car. The team saw how well we were doing for our first time out and that kept us going. All things considered, with no experience and running in only six or seven races, we did fairly well.”

Bunker is extremely focused on his goal to be the best and to that end he has sought out any edge that could help make his name move closer to the top of a team’s driver wish list. You might say he can see his way clear to the top.

“We did a program with Doctor Berman, a sports vision therapy specialist who works with professional athletes to help them improve their visual acuity. Ross taught us that vision is a big part of racing and keeping your eyes focused further down the track, instead of on the end of the car, slows everything down. We did a lot of visual exercises that opened up my peripheral vision and allowed me to focus better. We did a number of tests and learned how to focus quickly. The end result was an improvement in my eyesight to 20/15.”

Ross Bentley has provided Bunker with many solid and effective bits of advice in an effort to help him move his early career along and Bunker is quite appreciative of Bentley’s guidance.

“I don’t think you could find a more professional driver and coach who really knows what he is talking about than Ross Bentley. As far as my being a young driver, I was an open book and ready to soak up whatever he could teach me. And I still rely on what he taught me every week when I go to the track. We talk now and then as he is a bit more focused on his new defensive driving course for the street. More recently I have been working with Bob Perona and he and I clicked almost as fast as Ross and I did.

“I admire a few people in racing. I have always liked Tony Stewart. In drag racing I have always been a big fan of John Force. I think he is very comedic. I also get a thrill out of watching people like Michael Schumacher and others who have a great degree of professionalism and may appear to be stone cold but are so fast on the track.

“While I can’t say that I have someone who is an absolute favorite, quite frankly; it is people like Ross Bentley, people who can transcend the world of going fast into the realm of helping others to go fast that I really admire. Ross talks a lot about becoming the perfect driver. He told me that staying in one series for five years isn’t going to improve your game as much as moving around will.”

Bentley is equally complimentary of Bunker. He appreciates a good student as much as his student appreciates his teacher.

“Rob's one of the most versatile drivers I've seen - especially for his age and experience level. The fact that he's raced open-wheel cars as well as stock cars makes him very adaptable - and fast. He's also great out of the car - marketable and great with the car's setup. In fact, his all-round "smarts" is one of the things that sets him apart from many other young drivers.”

That is high praise indeed from a veteran driver and coach who can deftly spot a hot prospect in a crowd of aspiring future racers. And even though our eyes aren't 20/15, and we don't have Bentley's ability to differentiate the wheat from the chaff, we are able to say we will be monitoring Rob Bunker's progress in motorsports. This young man has the confidence to go far and we can't help but notice he has the desire to excel.

“I used to play lacrosse in school when I was younger, but in the coach's eyes I had to choose that or racing and I was not about to give up race car driving. I mean, when it comes to how much fun you can have playing a sport, you can't get much cooler than racing a car! And I just want to learn all I can to be the next best driver out there.”



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