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Through The Esses - Corvette Coming To GT2 In 2008 – Part 2 – Lou Gigliotti

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When the new Riley Technologies-built Chevrolet Corvette debuts in the ALMS GT2 class at the Sebring 12 Hours next March, it will be a birthing supervised by two of auto racing's finest: Bill Riley and Lou Gigliotti. Riley's company is building two new cars and Gigliotti's LG Motorsports team will be campaigning them in search of a season championship.



Andrew S. Hartwell / www.ashautomobilia.com



It would seem the racing stork couldn't have dropped off this set of twins to better parents.

Riley Technologies has produced some of the most enduring and successful race cars ever made. We refer, of course, to the R&S MKIII World Sports Car and the MKXI Daytona Prototypes, and the many Trans-Am cars to come out of their shops. For 2008, all that engineering prowess will be working hand in hand with one of the most durable and talented racers and race teams to ever compete in a sportscar series. Gigliotti's LG Motorsports team has scored victory time and again – 22 times in all – in the ultra-competitive SPEED World Challenge Series. And when the team went Trans-Am racing for a few years, they managed to perform quite admirably then too.

In part one of this two part column, we talked with Bill Riley about the reasons he decided to build a GT2 'world car'. We next talked with Lou Gigliotti, the veteran racer who had no problem giving us his reasons for entering the ALMS next season.

"I have wanted to run in the ALMS for some time as I see it as a step up. It is always hard to find teammates that want to do that, and it is very hard to find a company like Riley that is interested in building a car specifically engineered to compete in a series like this.

“As for the question of entering GT1 versus GT2, I think the base Corvette the way it is, and the way the rules are, allows for a much easier entry into GT2. Carbon fiber brakes and all the other expensive modifications that they allow in the GT1 class, make it almost impossible to go that route as an independent. An independent team just could not race in GT1 and compete with the factory team.

“We were thinking we wanted to move out of the SPEED WC series for some time now. Let me first say that I admit I can be a pretty stubborn guy now and then. But one thing that I am always stubborn about is fairness. One of the things we didn’t like about that series was the arbitrary weight penalty imposed on us last year. After just 2 wins out of the first 6 races in 06 we had a 190 pound weight penalty added to our Corvette. That just didn’t make sense. So we are moving on and up.

“I ran 110 races in that series – going back to 1990 with a few years out to run in Trans-Am - with 22 wins and 26 poles. I’m confident I can say they weren’t all by mistake!

But I don’t want to linger in the past, I want to move forward and I couldn’t be more excited about running in the ALMS. I think they have honed their version of an equalization formula over years of running the 24 Hours of Le Mans and that should make it as fair as possible for every team out there.”

When the twin LGM Corvettes begin the 2008 season, Gigliotti will be aboard the number 28 car and his partner, Doug Peterson will be in the number 49 mount. Co-drivers have not yet been finalized for the season. Gigliotti expects to firm up those deals in the near future.

“Doug Peterson won the 2004 SCCA Formula Mazda championship at the SCCA National Championship Runoffs. He has won in SCCA and he raced in the pro Mazda series as well, but that series is designed for the 150 pound kids where Doug is a 200 pound adult. He just kind of outgrew that series and wanted to get into sportscars. He and I have been racing together for two years now. He was on the pole at Sebring this year. I qualified third so I told him I wanted to protest his car!

“Doug owns a company called Three Dimensional Services, out of Detroit. He works with the big three automakers there as well as some German companies. He is not only a talented driver he is a great businessman and a great teammate. “

We wondered how Riley and Gigliotti ever got together to come up with the idea of a new GT2 car. It seems there was some history behind what might become a case of history in the making.

“Back when the Daytona Prototypes first came along, Doug and I took a trip to the Riley shop because we were considering going into that series in a DP. In 2002, we entered our Trans-Am car in the July Grand-Am race and we won our class. Doug Goad was my co-driver and he handed me the car in second place and we went on to take the win. We decided to enter the season ending Daytona race as well, and, through a mutual friend, that is when I met Doug Peterson. We got to talking and that is why we went to the Riley shop.

“I knew of the Riley engineering team and how much success they had in building winning cars. I just told Bill yesterday that this new car will be the first time I am ever entering into a season with a properly engineered race car from a company like his. This is my first ‘store bought’ car! What I mean by that is; this is the first time I will drive a professionally engineered car where I

have no doubt in my mind that the geometry and the mechanicals of the car are going to be right from the very start.”

The GT2 class in the ALMS uses different rules than the SPEED World Challenge Series in terms of what are permissible modifications to the base production car. Gigliotti outlined the primary differences for us.

“Some of the biggest differences between the Corvette we will run in GT2 and the car we have been running in SPEED World Challenge are the pick up points on the suspension, and the number of body panels we can change on one car and not the other. On the GT2 car there are only certain panels you can change. If the panel is bolted onto the car, you can remove it and replace it with a carbon fiber panel. I believe the Ferrari and the Porsche are built so that all the panels are bolted on so you can replace them with lightweight carbon fiber panels. I am not 100% up on the rules just yet but Bill Riley is, so we are in good hands.

“The key for us is to meet the minimum weight limit because we plan to run bigger tires. Our GT2 car will be 200 pounds lighter than our World Challenge car, but the body won’t be as aggressive in terms of aerodynamics. It will still be good and comparable to the Ferrari and the Porsche; at least we hope it will. That is Bob Riley’s job as head of the design team, to come up with a car design that is aerodynamically efficient.” The other major difference is the tires. The World Challenge cars used DOT legal shaved tires while the ALMS car will use a proper racing slick tire.”

As we mentioned earlier, Gigliotti has enjoyed a somewhat ‘efficient’ career, winning in sportscars going back many years. We asked him if he always had his mind set on sportscar racing. It turns out, he thought he might get a break in Indy Cars, but sometimes you don’t end up where you think you are going.

“I don’t want to date myself but, back when I ran Super Vees, one of the wings that we ran on our car was designed by Bob Riley! That was my first contact with the name Bob Riley. How long ago was that? Well, I actually crewed one race for Elliot Forbes-Robinson in 1974 or 75 when he was racing in the Lynn Car in Super Vee! In 1976 I raced Super Vees and when I qualified on the outside pole at Watkins Glen during the Formula One race weekend, I thought, ‘Well, now I am on my way! I had my name really big on the side of the car but I forgot to put my phone number! Of course that meant they had a hard time getting a hold of me so no one called me even after 20 years plus.

“It turned out five other guys in that race went to Indy – guys like Tom Bagley, Howdy Holmes and others. I didn’t get to go to Indy but everything happens for a reason and I was a little bit on the aggressive side, so I might not have made it out alive had I gone. But Indy was where I wanted to go back then. If only I had put my phone number on the car! ☺”

Indy’s loss (?) was sportscar racing’s gain as the names Gigliotti and Corvette have become somewhat synonymous in road racing. And the LG Motorsports team that has worked together all these years plans to continue intact as they enter the next phase of their racing lives.

“Everyone who ran on our team in the SPEED series is coming with us to the ALMS. We are going to hire a few more people to support us. My son, Louis Jr., went to Perdue University and so did Bill Riley. There are a number of engineers from Perdue that are working with us now. One of them may just quit his current job to come run with us full time.”

We asked if an illustration of the new cars was available but Gigliotti is waiting for design illustrations to come, once the body shape has been defined. However, he was able to clue us in on one key graphic element that will appear on the car no matter what the final shape.

“I can’t say exactly what the final car will look like once we set the body style and paint it up. But I can tell you this much: the number 28 car will have flames on its nose! And I think the Porsches are flammable, aren’t they?”

Gigliotti and Riley certainly are approaching this new project with enthusiasm, optimism and years of experience to back those emotions up. We wouldn’t bet against them to make a strong showing early in the 2008 ALMS season. And maybe, just maybe, by the time June rolls around they will have impressed enough to win a spot in that little race in France.

“I tell you what, I feel like the luckiest man in racing. I really do. I swear; having an organization like Riley behind me makes me feel like I wish I was 20 years old again. It feels great to have them in our corner. And we are not going to let Bill and Bob Riley down. We are going to do everything we can to make this a success and work with them every step of the way.

“Bill told you he hopes to take the GT2 car over to Le Mans. Doug Peterson and I share the same dream; to go to Le Mans and win. Having Bill Riley in our corner I think just doubled the odds in our favor!”