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**Through The Esses - Chris Dyson – One Season Down,
One Championship To Come**

10/25/07 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Fans of sportscar racing in North America are very familiar with the name Dyson Racing. Rob Dyson started it all over thirty years ago and his son Chris has since taken over the reigns of what is arguably the most successful family-run sportscar team in history. They have remained a significant force in road racing all these years, and their history is ripe with successes they achieved once they had traveled along the learning curve that comes with running a new car.



Over the last 12 years, the team has started a new season four times where the chassis of choice was new to the team in that season. And in each case, once they had enough time to develop those cars and get them up to speed, they went on to win.

The legacy of excellence started in 1994 when Rob Dyson wanted an American built car that could go up against the then-new Ferrari 333SP and win. He went to master car builders Riley & Scott and asked them to build a car that could do the job with an American powerplant. That car became the R&S MKIII, designed by Bob Riley, and Dyson Racing took it to an unprecedented level of success (36 race wins in Can-Am/USRRC and the ALMS) that lasted for many years.

For the 2002 season, with the MKIII warhorse already having thrived far beyond the life span of any previous prototype, Dyson Racing campaigned a brand new Lola – MG EX257 prototype in the ALMS 675 class. In just the team's second year with the car, Chris Dyson won the class championship. In 2004 they made the changes needed to move the car up a notch into the LMP1 class and that led to team drivers James Weaver and Butch Leitzinger finishing second in

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the LMP1 championship. The following year, it was Chris Dyson who finished second in the driver's championship.

It is important to note that, in those years, the era of the dominate Audi RS8 factory prototype was already in full swing. The accomplishments of the Dyson Racing organization against such a formidable competitor simply set the bar for every other private team out there. And with the exception of the stellar performance of the Roger Penske Racing organization this season, who else has even come close?

For the 2006 American Le Mans Series season, the team made another change, this time switching to Lola's latest chassis, the BO6/10, running with engines supplied by AER. The first half of that season found them staring frustration in the face time and time again as an assortment of ailments seemed to have taken up residence within that chassis. As the season went on, appropriate exorcisms - performed by team members using determination, experience and perseverance - drove out many of the demons. The team would then go on to have its drivers finish second and third in the season championship.

In 2007, Dyson racing decided to go in a fantastically different direction with yet another new car to sort out and become familiar with. This time, however, the car was a Porsche. A pair of brand new Porsche RS Spyders was delivered to the team almost within moments of the season-opening ALMS round at Sebring. With no real time to test, the team jumped into it with both feet running and they have been playing catch up with the Penske team all season ever since.

You see, Penske had their cars a full year before Rob Dyson's team. But now, Dyson Racing too has had their car for a year, and that can only mean one thing –the 2008 ALMS season will be nothing short of terrific with two of the most successful racing teams in the history of the sport going head to head in identical race cars.

Good things come to those who wait.

We spent some time with Chris Dyson recently to review the team's learning curve with the Spyders, and to hear what plans lay ahead to further solidify Dyson Racing's standing as one of the greatest race teams of all time. Happily we can tell you that fans can once again expect to see the beautiful blue and white Thetford-Norcold colors flashing quickly by at every ALMS race in 2008.

"I think this was one of the more interesting years for our team. It was our first year in more than a decade working with Porsche and the first half of the season was a huge learning curve for us. We received our new Porsche RS Spyders just before Sebring and really didn't have a chance to test the car until after the first four races of the year. We were really learning on the fly. Trying to learn during race weekends is far from the optimal way to become familiar with new equipment. Once we were able to get some testing in, starting just before the Salt Lake City race and during the Le Mans break, we turned a corner and got to the point where we could get a reasonable balance on the car.

"The Spyders are an engineering marvel. But there are a lot of different elements to the car that you really can't figure out at first glance. That is not a negative. I view it as a positive for I feel the car has tremendous range of adjustment and excels in areas where other prototypes might struggle. From our standpoint now we know a bunch of those areas that we want to concentrate on, and that is a big step beyond where we were nine months ago.

“I think the second half of the year was more of a test of our abilities as a team. When you look at the championship tables and you look at the depth of the grid this year you can see that the ALMS is really the strongest it has ever been. And the LMP2 category has stepped up to a whole new level.

“I think, for a team to finish second in the team championship, and for the drivers to finish in third and fourth in the driver’s championship is pretty respectable. I think it is a sign of good things to come for 2008.”

Now that the members of the Dyson Racing crew have had a full season to work on the Spyderys, one might think the need for a substantial amount of test dates is not as great as it was before that first race at Sebring. But that opportunity was simply not available prior to Sebring. Dyson feels that, at this juncture, a more structured approach to testing is what the team needs to be ready for next season.

“We are going to test very methodically this off season. We know that quality tests are more effective than just testing a lot. We came into this season not really aware of what we needed to concentrate on with the car. As the year went on we started to understand which areas we needed to spend a few days concentrating on. I think we have started to distill that into a test program and working with Michelin and Porsche we will come up with a reasonable schedule of productive testing days.”

This season, Penske once again enjoyed an ‘unfair advantage’ by having worked with Porsche previously to get the RS Spyder ready for its first test in a race. Chris Dyson feels that the hard work of Penske’s team and of his own team, along with Porsche’s commitment to all of its customers, have more or less brought them to the point where both teams will be about equal starting off in 2008.

“The basic chassis and aerodynamic package we have are identical to the Penske cars. As are the engine specifications. But anybody who has been watching racing as an educated observer will tell you that very often time with a car is the best asset you can have. Where the Penske guys have excelled this year is partly down to the fact that they spent 12 months with the car in an intensive testing program before their first season began. Porsche has pledged equality in terms of support of both teams. I think that where the difference has been is that when they rolled their cars off the truck at the start of a race weekend this season, they were much closer to the window and therefore they were able to concentrate on a specific program in the sessions leading up to the actual race.”

The Penske experience with the RS Spyderys was not unlike that which Dyson Racing lived through with the R&S MKIII and the MG-Lola.

“When you compare when we first had the Riley & Scott and later the Lola-AERs to just a year later, you can see we made huge strides forward. The Penske organization obviously has its act together and the results they have shown this year are the dividends from the efforts they put in last year.

“And I think you are going to see that from everybody in 2008. The Acuras and Mazda teams are going to step up. I think it is great to see that natural evolution that occurs in racing. And if you look at Dyson Racing’s history you will see that we have never shirked from a challenge and we always tend to rise to the occasion. If you look at the 2007 results we didn’t win any races and we didn’t set qualifying alight, but there were certainly some real flashes of strength. I think if you look at the point’s tables they show there was definitely enough consistency.

“For next season, our goal is to attain a more frequent high performance level, and have less ‘off’ days. You are only as good as your average and your misses, and in that respect, motor racing is like golf.”

Obviously reliability is a key element for success in endurance racing. Dyson feels his team has an advantage in that the reliability of Porsche race cars has never been an issue and it is no different with the RS Spyder than with any other Porsche.

“Realistically when you look at the Porsche package, the car has essentially been running for three years. With both of the Lolas we raced, until we put them on the track the cars and the engines had never really been developed much. In the case of 2006, neither the car nor the engine had turned a wheel before we took delivery. Like Penske with the Spydres, we were the ones doing the development of the Lola-AER cars. Porsche had done a year of serious testing before they made the first cars available to Penske. While it is obvious that both Lola and AER are extremely capable companies and they actually offer the finest non-manufacturer customer products available to the racing industry, Porsche had the resources to devote a year to testing.

“Honestly, the reliability of the Porsche RS Spydres is due to the efforts of Porsche Motorsport and Roger’s organization in 2005 and 2006.”

With having more than enough to address with the development of the Spyder, you might not think there would be time for additional efforts. But in 2007 Rob and Chris Dyson again had the opportunity to drive together in a Crawford-Porsche Daytona Prototype, prepared and run by Howard Motorsports, part-time in the Grand-Am Rolex Series. Long-time Dyson affiliates Butch Leitzinger, Guy Smith, Andy Lally and Oliver Gavin each joined Rob Dyson at different races throughout the partial Rolex campaign, but the end results were not as expected.

For the new season, the Dyson’s are setting their sights firmly on the ALMS LMP2 Championship.

“For 2008 we intend to concentrate our energies and resources on the ALMS. Yes, this year we did have some frustration with our partial season in Grand-Am. We weren’t running the car consistently enough to get to the point of refining the car, and we did suffer a streak of horrendous luck. It really didn’t turn out to be the type of effort we expected.”

We asked how they came to choose to divide their attention between two series.

“In late 2004, when we were running the two Lolas in the ALMS, my dad expressed an interest in driving again after a few years out of the cockpit. He really wanted to get back to Daytona in 2005, which we did with Michael Gue’s Essex Racing. Later that spring, Max Crawford let us know he had a car about to become available and so we ran about a half dozen races partnering with Harrison Brix and we signed on for another six events the next year. Guy Smith and I did a few races in 2006 and we had two very competitive and entertaining races at Homestead and VIR. But the primary purpose of our being there was to maintain our family’s engagement with the Watkins Glen and Daytona International Speedways. From our standpoint, yes, it was a different experience to have Howard Motorsports taking care of the car rather than our own Dyson Racing crew. We didn’t have the logistical resources to run both series in-house, but thanks to Rick Howard and Max and Jan Crawford we were able to be in the Rolex Series on a small scale.

“When you look at what Grand-Am has done, and the level of competition in that series, to compete for a championship there you have to be in the series week in and week out. My dad and I were only able to do a half-dozen races together each year, and there were some great memories in there, but I think anyone who has been watching our team over the years know that we don’t go to the races just to show up.

“I think Grand-Am has made some significant strides with their series but they do have some new challenges ahead with several new manufacturers coming in. I think that we will simply be interested observers for a while and see how that all develops. Balancing the new marques coming in will be a challenge for them. But I think that, long term, Grand-Am has to remain on your radar if you are in road racing.

“I think that, if and when we decide to focus on a Grand-Am effort again we will do so on a more engaged level. To be honest, we are a small team with finite resources. I think that next year our top goal has to be to concentrate on an ALMS championship and then we can take it from there. We are certainly committed to the ALMS for 2008.”

Despite the challenge and the frustrations that come from getting the new Spyders up to speed against extremely capable competition, there were some highlights for the team this season, with each in its own way lending energy to their desire to excel next season.

“Finishing on the podium at Long Beach was a high point for us, as it was the first time Porsche had all three overall spots on an ALMS podium. Salt Lake City was a big step in the right direction. When you look at the Detroit race you have to say both our cars were competitive and had it not been for a couple of issues we would have had both cars on the podium. Then you look at the Petit Le Mans a few weeks later and Guy and I finished third overall and second in our class. All of these were highlights for us this year.

“The car also showed some real speed at Lime Rock and at Mid-Ohio and some of the judgments made by the race director kept us from finishing on the podium at both races. Realistically, if you look at it from Salt Lake City on, in race trim the car has been pretty competitive. I think all of us started to get a bit more of a spring in our steps as we started to get our arms around the car. Overall we were good enough to finish second in the team championship so we are encouraged for next year.”

The fan base for the ALMS seems to be growing at a pace that suggests this series has a healthy future. (This is certainly the case in the LMP2 and GT2 classes. LMP1 and GT1 simply need more to offer than silver and yellow.) With Acura joining the series in LMP2 this season - with no less than three teams running under that brand - and Fredy Lienhard and Horag Racing announcing they too will bring a Spyder into the fray (albeit for just Sebring and Petit Le Mans) next year, is it really any wonder the fans are coming out to watch state of the art sportscars at speed?

Porsche fans certainly have reason to be in attendance. Chris Dyson couldn’t be more pleased with the fans’ reaction to his team’s return to its roots with the German manufacturer of legendary race cars.

“We have been so thrilled this year with the reception we have received in the ALMS paddock. The fans couldn’t be happier to see the renewed connection Dyson Racing has made with Porsche. Our connection dates back to the 1980s and it was really an uninterrupted bond until Porsche pulled out of prototype racing in the early 1990s. A lot of Dyson Racing’ accomplishments, and where our name was formed, was with Porsche. For me, having grown

up wearing a Porsche hat and a Porsche shirt and living in the heyday of watching my father winning races for them, coming back to Porsche 20 years later is just hugely satisfying. And the fans were just over the moon about the renewed connection.

“There are no better educated fans out there than the ones that follow the ALMS. Uniformly, whenever you go to any of the tracks, the knowledge base and the enthusiasm you see during the autograph sessions and leading up to the start of the race is unsurpassed. I think the ALMS is doing a lot of the right things and they do emphasize the fan experience. I think that is very important.

“With our Porsche program, and the competition in the series right now, there is a lot of excitement. The most exciting thing however, is to come to a race weekend and know the crowds are going to be there and they keep growing year after year. We have raced full time in the ALMS for five years now and I don’t think the series has ever been better.”

Every ALMS race weekend includes an autograph session where the fans can meet the drivers up close and get autographs. We asked Chris Dyson if, after so many seasons in the ALMS, he had reached the point yet where he simply couldn’t autograph anything else. He replied, “As long as the fans keep coming, we will keep signing!”

The team is about to break ground on a new race shop in the Poughkeepsie, New York area that will give them enough space to address the functional demands of preparing race winning cars. And it seems that as long as there is a race car to develop, and a championship to win, Dyson Racing will be the driving force that gets the job done.

