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Robertson Racing Plans To Fly In Their Ford GT-R

11/13/07 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

In the American Le Mans Series GT2 class this past season, the veteran Ferrari and Porsche teams went at it pretty hard in pursuit of a championship. The class saw as many as five different marques on track (Ferrari, Porsche, Spyker, Panoz and Dodge) campaigned by up to eight different teams. With the well-established Risi Competizione and Flying Lizard Motorsports teams taking it down to the wire for the overall team championship, the rest of the grid had to settle for the remaining six positions.

At the bottom of the year-end standings lay the newest team to join the series in 2007; Robertson Racing.

Running a Panoz GT-LM in just three events, David and Andrea Robertson hoped to educate themselves on what it would take to mount a full time campaign in a competitive way. And learn they have. Now they intend to take that education and - with the help of some veteran racing people like Dick Barbour, Kevin Doran and David Murry – apply themselves to the task of moving forward.

David and Andrea have a long history in the airline industry (both are pilots!). They met there and soon realized they shared a passion for racing. She had been a drag racer as a teen, and he had once dabbled in sportscar racing in his younger days. For both of them, the realities of working and being part of a family kept them from pursuing their passion to go fast – on the ground. Eventually they were established well enough to allow themselves the pleasure of running in amateur racing and as might be expected, they were smitten with the prospect of taking their success in that world and stepping up into the professional ranks.

That led to their beginner's foray into the GT2 class in the ALMS this season. And now that they have tasted a small bite of it, they have decided it is time to go for the whole meal. For the 2008 season, Robertson Racing will field a brand new Ford GT-R, presently under construction in



Kevin Doran's shop. It will mark the debut of the Detroit iron in the ALMS and Ford fans everywhere are sure to welcome back its familiar silhouette.

David Robertson talked with us recently and let us in on how it all started for the Robertson's and their racing team. He reviewed what that partial first season against professional competition was like, and he defined his expectations for the team going forward.

"Andrea was a drag racer in high school. She married young, had a daughter and had to give up any type of racing as 'family is first always' with her and, by this time, was a young woman raising her daughter alone. While working with Spirit Airlines (starting in 1992), I met Andrea. At the time, I was their Chief Pilot/Director of Operations and she was the manager of the dispatch department. Now, I am a 30 year veteran airline pilot and she has long since left the airline and started and sold a successful floral shop. Even though I am still an active pilot, I have retired from the management side to free up the time to go racing. Andrea has a full time job at home with all her animals and two wonderful grandchildren!"

The Robertson's had to wait a long time to go racing again. As it is for most of us, work just got in the way of all the fun.

"I got interested in racing in the early 70's. I joined the SCCA and bought a roll bar for the Lotus I was driving in college and while still using it to go back and forth to work. I ran out of money before the first race and didn't get back into it until 1999. Andrea and I decided to get into sportscar racing by joining a club in Waterford Hills, Michigan that operates under SCCA rules. We ran in a Spec Racer Ford and just traded off. I ran a race and then she ran a race. We had a good time so we went to two cars the next year; I ran a Formula Ford and she raced the Spec. We did that for a while even though a big 6'5" guy like me doesn't really belong in a Formula Ford. And that car beat me to a pulp, turning me into the world's largest walking bruise!

"We decided we needed to make a car change so we bought a GT car and thought we would race it in SCCA regional races as well as at the nationals. I bought a Panoz GTS, which I thought was going to be a little more competitive than it actually is in SCCA GT2. I ran that and she ran the Spec Racer Ford, and once in a while she would run in the Panoz.

"We did that for a few years and finally got to the point where we were winning a few of those races and we also ran the Panoz race series in the GTS and in their rental GT race cars. After we started leading in those series we decided it was time to go up another level."

It was at Sebring that the Robertson's found the map that would take them to the world of professional sportscar racing.

"We ran the Panoz support race at Sebring a couple of years ago and stayed to watch the 12 Hours. That led us to decide that we were going to step up and race in the ALMS in 2007. Because we were so closely tied to Panoz at that time, and we saw how well the Panoz GTLM's did in that race – with Sebastian Bourdais, Bruno Junquiera, Scott Maxwell, David Brabham, etc. driving them – we decided we would buy one and run in three ALMS races in 2007. We figured that would let us get our feet wet in professional racing and give us the opportunity to learn how to do it right."

Once the Robertson's made the decision to go racing in the ALMS, they knew they would need some help. They sought the advice of several people and soon found they had lined up the necessary resources to get into the game, albeit part-time to start.

“When Andrea and I decided to go racing in the ALMS, I went down to Georgia to talk with all of the people associated with the various Panoz organizations. I also had a long discussion with Scott Atherton on the subject of pairing with another team to fill in the gaps in staff so I wouldn't be out trying to hire part time staff or training people in jobs that I don't even do very well. We met up with Dick Barbour and I decided the right answer for us was to hire him. He and his son-in-law basically manage the team for us, and the mechanics are people he has used in past racing endeavors. He has a full rolodex of contacts; mechanics, suppliers and anything that you could ever need. Andy 'H' Smith functions as our team manager and is responsible for supplying the team with personnel. We rent space from Dick in his facility down at Road Atlanta and, so far, the arrangement has worked out really well for all of us. Dick is a very knowledgeable guy and I enjoy talking to him.

“Before we connected with Dick we hired LisaKay Golde, who we met through the Panoz Race Series. She managed that series for 8 years. This coming season she will work for me half of the time and the other half for Ranger Sports Racing in the Koni Challenge Series (a team owned by former Panoz Race Series clientele). She does a lot of the race planning and logistics for both teams. This year our full time staff included Andy 'H' Smith, and our mechanics Paul Sherwood, Brian Litwiler, and Wayne Hill. The rest of the members of the team are weekend warriors but next year we will look to have a full time engineer too.”

The team had a difficult time keeping themselves on the track in two of the three races they entered last season. 'New car' mechanical difficulties took them out twice but, in the final race, they finally got their first finish of the year.

“Our first season was really just a reconnaissance run for us and not much more. That is what we had planned it to be, although we would have preferred better on track results. We ran Sebring and we blew up three hours into it when the timing chain broke. At least we did make it into the race and we ran respectable times as we were able to get in some practice there. We were running ahead of a couple of people when the quirky thing with the engine happened. At Petit Le Mans (Road Atlanta) we drove four hours when the driveshaft broke as I was headed down to the apex of turn 12. A car that was coming up behind me hit us because, as I had no drive in the car, I had started coasting.

“Then we ran Laguna Seca. Wow, what a TRACK! But that might not have been the best idea; we had not spent enough effort getting an all weather tire for the car. We were trying to run that cooler temperature track with tires meant for Sebring (where it is much warmer!). We just slid all over the place at Laguna Seca. We finished, got a couple of points but, most of all learned a lot by being in that environment. And that is what our first season was for. To get our feet wet and learn. Now we have a pretty good idea of what we need to do the second time around.”

For the 2008 ALMS season, the team will attempt to bring an all-new race car to the grid. The goal is to bring some new-found success to the two fun-loving yet competitive team owners. And this time, they want to come to the game with an advantage over their younger competitors and the more seasoned race teams out there.

“Our decision to go with another type of car was a hard one. One thing we learned with the Panoz is that it takes a much more experienced driver to handle the sister of the 2006 Le Mans class winner as it has a few handling quirks that slowed us down quite a bit. To keep the car within the FIA rules, we found that there are too many things that we can not alter so we opted to do something different car wise.

“We have purchased and will help develop a car that we think will work better for us; the Ford GT-R. Most of the engineering and construction is being done by Kevin Doran, and some of our guys are also involved. We believe we will then have a car that we can make ‘go fast’ with our background and our experience. We’ve also hired David Murry as our third driver; we plan to use his huge engineering and set up knowledge to help us learn even more. Having David with us will help us tremendously.”

Given the success of the Ferrari and Porsche models, one might think a new team would choose a proven commodity as the fastest way to the front. But the Robertson’s think that particular path is a bit too crowded.

“I felt we needed to go with a mid-engined car. We had seriously considered buying a Michelotto Ferrari. I spent time at Petit and Laguna trying one on - thanks to the Peterson White Lightning and Krohn Racing teams and learning how to get my tall body into one of those cars. I spent time with people from Michelotto and I really thought we were going to buy one. But, listening to others, a lot of people were talking about buying a Michelotto Ferrari. Some of them have already backed out but, there will probably be a lot of them in the ALMS next year. But the point is, we are people who started this pretty late in our lives. In some ways we are 30 years behind people who are 20 years younger than we are. That’s a simple fact. We are not going to beat them by driving the same kind of car they have.

“If we bought a Ferrari, it doesn’t mean we would beat Mika Salo because I didn’t start racing when I was eight, on the ice in Finland. If we were going to stand a chance we knew we had to try to find a way to create something that is better. If I buy the Ferrari I am going to run a little bit behind everybody else who is in a Ferrari. They are going to be ahead of me because they have been at it a lot longer than I have. I will naturally get better, but the only way I can think of to win is to do something different and then do my damndest to make it better.

“We are going to roll the dice and either have a really good car with a chance to do well or we won’t have a really good car because it is a complex thing and there are a lot of intangibles and no one can know everything. There is really nothing to lose!

“And the Ford GT is an important part of history. I love Ferrari as much as anybody. I have one in my garage. But we intend to enjoy the experience of being an American team running in an American car. Ford has the history, and we live here in Michigan, so it will be a lot of fun in many ways.”

Doran would like nothing more than to sell several copies of the new Ford GT-R. But there has to be a first one and it appears that car may be the one the Robertson’s receive.

“We are probably getting one of the first – if not the first – GT-R’s coming out of Kevin’s shop. It’s our understanding is that he is building two cars and looking to sell six in total. We are ready for it. We’ve got the staff to start testing and are very anxious to get the car on the track to start working on it. That will also help us build our confidence in the new car and in our abilities to set it up.

“And Kevin and I have an agreement that he will provide some at-the-track support for our team. He will have some of his people there early on because he is a smart businessman and he knows anything he can do to help us make the GT-R fast will help him sell more cars.

“If our racing budget allowed it, we would love to buy two cars so we could really fill one with two top-notch professional drivers to go after the class championship. But frankly, we want to keep

the funds to ourselves so we can stay in the game as long as possible. After all, the whole point of this is for us to go and have a good time doing it. And we are going to run the whole 2008 schedule, once I have addressed the issue of having time available to me personally.”

The Panoz has been raced for the last time by this team, and Robertson hopes another team will want to park it in their garage. He will need the space in his for the Ford.

“The Panoz is for sale. We had an Italian team interested in it for use in Europe but they decided to go with a Viper instead. I have ads in several places and I think I will also advertise it to the vintage crowd. Perhaps someone will want to buy it, throw a tarp over it, and store it for a few years and then race it in vintage events. The theory being that they can buy the car now for a lot less than it will cost when it is vintage eligible. If I don’t sell it, then who knows? I might give it to a museum for a tax write-off.”

Being a pilot, we assumed the sensation of speed came somewhat naturally to David Robertson. And we wondered if flying at 600 miles per hour was akin to going 150 in a gravity-challenging race car.

“Actually, the sensations and the way you ‘drive’ the two are very different. In a plane you don’t have anything close by as a reference. The only time you are aware of how fast you are going is when you level off right above a cloud bank and watch the clouds go by at 600 miles an hour. It is really beautiful. But the rest of the time you don’t have any sensation of speed because there are no telephone poles, trees, spectators, or anything whizzing by. Plus, in the airliner you try to do everything smoothly and stay away from the limitations of the aircraft. In a race car if you are not on the edge all the time you are too slow.”

And it is life that eventually slows us all down, somewhat like a plane coming in for a landing. We have our time at speed and then we slow down. The trick is to keep getting right back up in the air again. David and Andrea Robertson think their last landing is still a few years off.

“I am 52 and Andrea is 48. We are really just ordinary people who are doing this to have a good time. We really enjoy being with so many interesting people who are involved with professional racing. But, in reality, we will probably only be racing a few more years, as this is not a cheap sport!”

“When we first got into this my dream was just to run in a race that mattered. We just wanted to get that far. Now, we are looking to move up this year. And so much of our lives have been about working hard so we are willing to put the time in to get better. We are willing to WORK to make our second childhood more fun!”

And it looks like the good times will begin for the Robertson’s on March 15, 2008, when the Robertson Ford GT-R makes it’s debut at the 56th Mobil 1 12 Hours of Sebring.

Robertson Racing website www.robertsonrace.com