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Andrew Davis Grew Up To Be A Racer

11/26/07 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Andrew Davis grew up in Georgia, in a town just a short drive away from Road Atlanta. As a young boy he spent many hours leaning against the fence at the bottom of turn 12 watching professional racers drive exotic prototypes as fast as they could make the cars go. At a very early age he decided he too had to be a racer and this young boy eventually did turn his fascination with racing into a vocation in racing.



With the support of his parents, Davis would come to graduate from high school - after several years of quickly pedaling bicycles in competition - and then graduate from what would for him be his 'finishing school' - the Skip Barber Racing School - to find himself working the wheel of a S2000 Sport Racer in SCCA events. In time, Davis would go on to faster rides and professional racing, but his path was never really a straight one. He took many turns - and many rides - along the way to becoming a proven commodity as someone who too could make race cars go really fast.



For the 2008 season, Davis will be running with Stevenson Motorsports in the team's brand new Pontiac GXP-R, in the GT class of the Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series. He will be joined by veteran racer Robin Liddell in the #57 car. Joining the team has reunited him with Liddell and a good friend in Stevenson Team Manager, Mike Johnson.

After many years of taking occasional rides when and where he could find them, Davis landed the opportunity to run long term with Jim Tafel and Tony Dowe at Tafel Racing. But, when that team pulled out of Grand-Am in favor of running in the American Le Mans Series, Davis found he was back to job hunting once again. But then his phone rang and Mike Johnson asked him to join the Stevenson Team for this season.

We had a conversation with this proud 30 year old professional driver and his confidence and commitment came through loud and clear. Davis is clearly on a fast track to stardom.

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And to think, it all started with spending quality time with his father.

"My father, Bill Davis, raced in SCCA club racing. When he started I was about five years old. He ran in F Production in regional races. We would travel around to the tracks in the southeast and at the same time, I was growing up right near Road Atlanta. We would go to all the pro races there and the runoffs. That's kind of why I am where I am today. I pretty much got the bug at a very early age.

"IMSA GTP was big at that point in time and that series had me completely enamored at the age of six or seven. I watched guys like Hurley Haywood, Doc Bundy, Geoff Brabham, and Chip Robinson. I would stand by the fence at the bottom of turn 12 for almost the entire race. While the other kids would get bored or want to go off to play, I was so taken by these cars that I would just watch them lap after lap. And my brother and I would always go through the paddock trying to talk to the drivers.

"The Porsche 962 had a lot to do with why I am in love with race cars so much. I thought that was just the coolest race car ever. "

Unlike many young racers today, Davis did not spend years learning the art of speed in a go kart. No, his route took him on some dirt roads and all the horsepower had to come from his legs.

"At an age when I should have been in go karts, I was instead racing BMX bikes. I did that for about five or six years. I was pretty successful and I really enjoyed that. It did a lot to bring out my sense of competitiveness and I learned a lot about racing with others."

His father could see that his son had talent, and that he possessed a competitive nature that is such an important ingredient in the makeup of a professional racing driver. Bill Davis helped his son put down his kickstand for the last time and be seated in a race car. And from then on, all his racing was done on pavement.

"My dad eventually moved into a Sports 2000 car after having twice made it to the runoffs at Road Atlanta in an F Production MG Midget. When I graduated high school he got me a Skip Barber Racing School gift certificate as a graduation present. I did that and Dad liked what he saw so he bought another Sports 2000 car for me. I spent a couple of years running in that class.

"My first season was in regional racing and I won the South Atlantic Road Racing Championship in 1997. In 1998 I qualified for national racing and I won the Southeast division championship and went to the runoffs. I was in third place when I got knocked off the track.

"Those cars were basically miniature prototypes with a top speed of 140. In terms of lap times those cars were extremely fast and we could run lap times rivaling what the GT cars run. That car was very lightweight and you can make up a lot of time in braking. You really learn a lot about not making mistakes because those cars did not have a lot of power to pull you out of a mistake. You really had to learn to tighten up your driving.

"My dad eventually stopped his own driving so he could support me in seeing how far I could go in the sport. He said I would really need to move into open wheel racing so I could learn how to drive a car with down force and wings and that is where young drivers will find the most competition. He bought a Formula Continental F2000 car which I ran in the nationals for a year."

Davis would next go on to experience some of the stiffest competition he had ever faced when he entered his first pro series. He also made some contacts that would serve him well later on.

"At that time I also ran in my first pro series in the US F2000 championship. Back then, that was such a big series and names like Dan Wheldon and Sam Hornish JR and many others came out of that series. I still race a bunch of the guys who came from that series. I ran a few select pro races in 1999 and I finished fifth at Road Atlanta. In 2000 I ran almost a full season in the F2000 championship. My dad didn't book the oval races because we young drivers had a tendency to smash up the equipment on the ovals. To help with budgeting we decided to stay on the road courses. We ran 10 of 13 races and that knocked me out of the running for the championship. And, again, at that time the series was highly contested. That is where I learned the most about being a driver and pulling the best out of yourself. I was always a strong top 10 guy but by the end of the season I was running in the top five.

"In F2000 I met Mike Johnson. He was running in the series in 1998. I met him at the track and he also had a car built in the same prep shop I was using. He was running a team in 2000 called Archangel Motorsports and they got involved in Grand-Am running in a Lola SRP II class car with Larry Oberto and Ryan Hampton driving. Mike gave me my first opportunity in pro endurance racing and my first race was the 2001 Rolex 24 at Daytona. I was in a Lola prototype - car #22 sponsored by Budweiser - which was a neat car to be driving around in. We had a 20 lap lead at one point and then a half shaft broke. The crew did a fantastic job to replace it and we went back out real early in the morning and we were starting to catch up. We were chasing our sister car that had a guy named Andy Lally in it! I think Andy drove something like 15 hours in that race. I remember his hands were bleeding and he had blisters.

"We were catching them until one of my co-drivers had an accident about 7:00 AM and that knocked us out of the race. Up to that point I thought this kind of racing was kind of easy and 'I got this'. Of course, ever since then I have been searching for a way to get one of those Rolex watches!"

Davis still hopes a watch will find its way to his wrist, but even without a Rolex he knew it was time for him to find a way to make a living in racing.

"Around this time I started working as an instructor at the Panoz School and the Porsche Driving Experience. I find that instructing helps my driving too. You also learn a lot about people. Up to this point in time I was attending school at the University of Georgia pursuing a degree in Marketing. This was a time in my life where I had school, a job as an instructor, and I raced when I had the opportunity. It was a time when I had to hold down a real job, the kind of thing racers try to avoid!"

One lifelong dream Davis did not want to avoid came true that year.

"That year I also ran the Petit Le Mans with Archangel. The car was competitive in both series and Mike gave me an opportunity to have a dream come true because growing up near Road Atlanta I now found myself in the big event. I went from standing at the fence for all those years watching my heroes to being on the track with those guys.

"We had a good team. My co-drivers were Ben Devlin and Jason Workman and we ended up finishing second. That was a dream come true to stand up on that podium and I looked down and saw my dad's face and I just couldn't believe we had come this far.

"My dad and mom have always been so supportive of me. They are my biggest fans.

"And, when I was standing on that podium in Road Atlanta; that is when I really came to know that I could really be a professional race car driver."

Looking to find the means to sustaining his dream, Davis set out to find rides that would help him build a reputation as a pro. But starting the journey and finding your way are two different things, as he soon learned.

"The next year I had a ride with the Acemco team at Daytona but the team owner wasn't happy with the way the car was running so he pulled the entry. I ended up spending most of that year coaching and teaching. Once again I had an opportunity to run the Petit, this time with Fred Goddard, in a prototype 675 class car. That car was a Reynard 2KQ but it had a motor failure in the race. That was about it for my racing in 2002. But I did meet a lot of people and make a few contacts.



"Along the way I met a man named Dr. Michael Cawley and we ran in the 2003 Grand-Am Cup series together in a Porsche, as Foxhill Racing. We ran most of the season and we didn't do too badly with a few top five finishes. In the cup series I got to drive a lot of tracks I had not run before.

"That year I also ran at Daytona with Kevin Buckler's The Racer's Group. I was in the #67 car and Kevin won the race in #66. That was the year the Daytona Prototypes first raced. I also ran with Acemco at the 12 Hours of Sebring in a Ferrari 360GT. I ran with B.J. Zacharias and Shane Lewis. At that time the Porsche's had the edge and we wound up dropping out with mechanical problems.

"Overall, that was a busy year for me as I was also working with one fellow who had a collection of several different types of race cars. He had an Indy car, a Can-Am car and some others, and he would have me drive the cars in vintage events with HSR. (Historic Sportscar Racing). This enabled me to develop a wealth of experience in a variety of cars from Indycars to prototypes, Can-Am cars and more. That was a lot of fun.

"This was really the first year that I was in fact making a living from racing between driving and teaching. The fact that I was avoiding having to get a real job out of college hadn't come back to bite me yet!"

Davis would next go on to run the Rolex 24 with Essex Racing, which was run by Michael Gue. That was where he met Tony Dowe, the Essex crew chief, and a man who would remember him when he joined with Jim Tafel at Tafel Racing.

"2004 was kind of a mixed bag for me. I ran several different races with several teams but didn't have a season-long ride. I ran with Foxhill and did a few drives in a Daytona Prototype running in a Pontiac-Crawford with Larry Huang and Silverstone Racing. I ran three races with them and my best run was to qualify third at Barber. I think that really helped people notice me because I was up there with Terry Borcheller and Max Papis.

"It was in 2005 that things really started to come together for me. Tony Dowe called me to run in the Rolex 24 with Tafel. We finished fourth in that race. Next I was called on to run the 12 Hours of Sebring with TRG in a Porsche RSR. But my co-driver suffered a wheel failure and that put us out of the race. After that Tafel asked me to run the rest of the season in Grand-Am GT with them.

"We did a complete season with a few high points along the way including a pole at Daytona. I co-drove with team owner Jim Tafel. We pretty much ran with me qualifying the car and running for an hour or so, and then I would come in and hand off to Jim who would drive for a while and then hand it back to me to finish.

"We renewed our contract for 2006, this time running in a Porsche 997. They brought in Robin Liddell and Wolf Henzler to run a second team car. It was a great team and at that point in time, I knew where I was as a driver. I knew this was my calling. I found I was out there learning as much as I could. We did fairly well and it meant a lot to me to be able to establish myself among the Grand-Am paddock.

"That year, I was at the 12 Hours of Sebring coaching, and an opening arose to drive with Andy Lally and James Gue in the Miracle Motorsports Courage prototype. I felt my testing laps in that car impressed some people. I found that I am very comfortable in a prototype and I would like to race in one, but the hard part is always finding a ride.

"That year I also did a few one-off races in KONI Challenge and in the IMSA Lites class. I did some development work on those cars too. Some people asked me why I was running the Lites when I should be in GT or Prototypes and I just said I am doing both because I will drive whatever is available!

"This year (2007) I was back with Tafel again, but this time they wanted to split their resources between Grand-Am and ALMS. I drove the majority of the season with Nathan Swartzbaugh in Grand-Am GT before their season entries were withdrawn. I then got an offer from Cole Scrogam to run the final three races with Synergy in the #81 Porsche."

Then Davis got the call from an old friend.

"Mike Johnson called me. We always stayed in touch and at Miller Motorsports Park at the end of last season he spoke with me about a possibility of joining the Stevenson team for this season. I of course said I was very interested! I had raced against that team for the last several years and was impressed with James Gue, Dominic Cicero and Marc Bunting as competitors. When Mike told me the steps team owner John Stevenson was taking to put the most competitive car on the track, and put all the pieces together for a championship run, it looked to me like this was the place to be.

"Stevenson has the same goals I do and they are to be competitive and make a run for the championship. I know that Mike has helped teams become winners and the crew has

experience, so I think we have a real shot at it. And Robin (Liddell) and I have raced together before. We became friends and I have the utmost respect for his talent.

"I also love the American theme paint scheme on the Pontiac, and I already have my helmet painted in those colors to match!"

With a season-long deal in his pocket, we asked if he could look forward to relaxing a bit before suiting up in the Stevenson Team colors to chase down the rest of the Grand-Am GT field next year.

"Obviously racing takes up most of my time but my wife Lindy and I are big Georgia Bulldogs football fans so during the off season we try to go to as many home games as possible. We've been married for four years, with no kids, and I enjoy spending as much time with her as I can. And she comes to many of the races with me and is very supportive.

"And she never really tells me how to drive when we are in our family car! Sometimes I'll go a bit too fast or make a move I shouldn't have but I'm really pretty conservative on public roads because I know how dangerous driving really can be."

And Davis knows how difficult making a living as a driver really is too. He has made the long arduous journey from the fence to the track, with the talent and racer's heart he inherited from his father. And this former young racing fan probably wouldn't mind being the source of some current young racing fan's inspiration to pursue a career in motorsports, just as the Haywood's and Brabham's had been for him. But for right now, we think Andrew Davis would be happy enough just to keep wearing that Stevenson-inspired red, white and blue helmet for some time to come.

And if he does have to take that helmet off, he hopes it will be as he exits the #57 Pontiac racecar in victory lane.

