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**ash - through the esses**

## John Vincent's V-Pack Motorsport Isn't Exactly Monkey Business

12/12/07 © Andrew S. Hartwell

Fans of Matt Connolly Motorsports (MCM Racing) know about the cars and the drivers who have raced under that banner. But one member of that team who toiled behind the scenes with MCM has decided the time to start his own team is now. We refer to John Vincent; an engineer with a family history in sportscar racing that was interrupted for nearly a decade, and then resurrected with MCM.



Vincent grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, the son of John Vincent Sr., the owner of a successful Porsche-Audi repair shop. Young Vincent spent many hours both in the shop working on cars, and at the race track, assisting his father with race prep work.

After 1992, Vincent left racing to take up his trade as an engineer. In 2002, his return to racing would be expedited by a chance encounter with a neighbor. And now, six years later, Vincent has decided to make racing his full time vocation.

We talked with John Vincent this week and he told us of his history in and out of the sport, how he came to get back in, and how he plans to go racing full time in the ST Class of the KONI Challenge Series, running his team as a business of his own.

And then he told us about the parallel between him, his son, and the Mercedes monkeys.

But let us start at the beginning, just as is done in every race.

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"I grew up in racing, working at my dad's Porsche-Audi repair shop in St. Louis Missouri. Back then we were involved in SCCA club racing. My dad - his name is John Sr. - prepped a Porsche 356 for John O'steen. My dad was kind of in charge of the team, but unlike today when you have good sized crews, back then you had my dad and John and maybe one or two guys helping out. That was it. I think I really got started in racing when I was around 5 years old. Back in the 1970's I remember being at the SCCA runoffs. I just kind of grew up around racing. I didn't really know any different at that point. I was like most people who do something for years and become more and more involved in it.

"Over the years I was simply learning the business. While most other kids were playing baseball and other sports I was always working on cars. Dad had a good business going and when you think about what the cheapest kind of labor you can have might be, how can you beat having your own kid as a mechanic?

"I was doing tune ups when I was just eight or nine years old. I remember the first time - I was 14 - that my dad took an engine apart and then said to me, 'OK, now you figure out how to put it all back together. Order the parts and do the whole kit and caboodle.' And I did!

"We did club racing for a long time, then we moved to showroom stock, when that was popular in the 80's. Around 1985 we moved into SCCA Showroom Stock Racing. We worked with Bruce Frenzel who bought a Porsche 944 turbo. Since no one had worked with that car in racing yet, and since we worked with Porsche cars all the time, we said we would give it a shot.

"We did that for a few years before moving over to a team called Kelly-Moss Racing. They started running Porsche 944S2s in FireHawk, but they were really in racing just for fun. Eventually the guy who owned the team decided he wanted to do well and he so he contacted Porsche and they referred him to us.

"It was around this time that my role had become doing most of the racing prep work. We were underdogs with that car as the Pontiacs and Chevy's were being supported by the factories but Porsche didn't really care about a minor series like FireHawk. But we kept working on the cars until we got to the end of the season and we later approached IMSA about setting up an IMSA approved racer we called the 944 S2 Club Sport. We got the car approved at Sebring and debuted it at the following race at Road Atlanta, and we won with it. But we did have a special model 944 available for people to race. Our car was built to be a more competitive version of the stock 944 and once we had it approved, anyone could buy the parts and build this version themselves.

"We ran two cars and one other team ran one car as well. Ours ran under the Kelly-Moss Racing banner and Dave White Racing ran Bob and Bobby Akin in their car. We went on to win the GS championship with Jeff Turner driving. David Murry was also with us on that team. The following year we placed second in the championship with Nick Ham driving for us.

"I was doing the engineering for the team back then. I was trying to finish my college education at the University of Missouri in St. Louis at the same time and I ended up quitting school to go racing full time. I ended up going back to school later on, and getting my degree.

"What happened was, after 1991, we got out of racing altogether. At that point I think my dad just kind of got burned out by it all. I was about 22 years old at the time. While he still had the car repair shop, we got into something that was way outside of racing. We started building police cars for a company that was based out of Russia. They then sold all the cars in Siberia. We took Ford Explorers and Vans and modified them, then shipped them over there. Then we

had to go over there to show them how to work on them. You have to remember that this is 1992 and they had never seen anything like them before nor had they ever worked on automatic transmissions and cruise controls.

"We went to places in Siberia where they had never seen anyone from the outside world!

"We did this for about four or five years and we probably built about 40 or so vehicles for them. I was spending half my time in Russia! I can tell you that doing that really gives you a great appreciation for living in the United States! We are the luckiest people on the planet! When anybody complains about living here, send them there for a week. They will come back kissing the ground!"

After building Russian cruisers and tuning up Audis for so many years, Vincent made several changes in his life, one of which would lead him back to the sport in a most unlikely way.

"After the Russian police car deal, I went back to school, got married to Jean, and moved to Sante Fe, New Mexico. While we lived there she worked at Los Alamos, the place known as the father of the atomic bomb, and I worked for a machine shop in Albuquerque. We later moved to Pennsylvania, because of my wife's job.

"I'm a mechanical engineer, but over the years that I was away from racing I was doing everything from refrigeration cases, like you see in the grocery stores, to ultra-high vacuum engineering for particle accelerators and the semiconductor industry, to consumer packaging.

"I got back into racing by chance, when I met Matt Connolly in 2002. Somebody had a post on the internet and when I saw he was from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania I went, □That's where I live! It turned out he lived down the street from me. I got his email address and he invited me to come over to his house. At that time he was running a BMW Z3 in the ST class of the Grand-Am Cup. And when you go back over the record books you can see that the KONI Challenge was the Grand-Am Cup, which was the Motorola Challenge, which was the Firehawk Series. It really is the same racing today that it was back then, the races are just shorter.

"Matt was looking for some help and he was quite surprised to learn I had the kind of background that could do many things to help the team, like rebuild motors, set up suspensions and so on. But at the end of the season the team went belly up. The guy who was bankrolling the effort simply had enough of spending a ton of money to go racing. Matt wanted to continue to race and when he said he was trying to put a new deal together I said I would help him out.

"From 2003 on we ran in Grand-Am Cup. It was always Matt's car and we would build new ones along the way. At the beginning of 2005 we met with Tom Milner and his son drove one of Matt's BMWs in the Grand-Am cup Series. Matt later decided to buy two of the former PTG cars and move over into the Rolex Series GT Class. I became the team engineer for the team. Essentially, it was just me and him doing all the prep and everything. Looking back on it, I think we just made the jump from the Cup series to the Rolex series a bit too quick. Of course, that's an observation made with 20/20 hindsight!

"When we started again in 2006, my gut feeling was that some of the decisions made were not what I would have preferred. Most crew guys will tell you that they have had similar sentiments. But that is just something that happens a lot in racing and when you are not the one paying the bills you accept what's thrown at you and you work with it. And we were working with a shoestring budget. We had our peaks along the way that season but the hardest race of my whole life was at Mid-Ohio, when Joey Hand had that tremendous accident. That was a tough

race. We finally had a great driver in the car instead of lesser talents with more money. As an engineer, it is hard to say if what you are doing to set up the car is working for the best if you don't have the best talent behind the wheel. We knew from the first practice that, with Joey driving a car I felt I had set up well, we had the car to beat. That made me happy because I had spent several months reworking suspension geometry without ever seeing positive results from anyone else. All of a sudden Joey gets in the car and he is going a second faster than PTG ever made that car go. And the only thing we had changed at that point was the driver!

"After Mid-Ohio, things just kind of went down hill for us. We had another chance at Infineon Raceway but we had car trouble and we never really went anywhere after that. My wife and I started talking about going out on our own, and I had a chance to buy a car to race in the KONI Challenge ST Class.

"At the beginning of 2007 I bought a BMW 330 from a friend of mine. It is actually the oldest ST car currently running in the series. The price was right, so I bought it. Then I struck a deal with Matt to run the combined Rolex and KONI races. We used his trailer to bring my car (#24) with his to the track and I helped him with the engineering on his car. My car was listed as V-Pack Motorsports, apart from Matt's team, which is MCM.

"I did this for the Daytona, Lime Rock, Mid-Ohio, Barber and Miller races. I ran basically when I could rent the cars out. A wonderful thing happened when we went to Lime Rock and I had Andrew Aquilante go out and qualify the car second, in front of the Subaru that his father prepares! He had never been in the car before! In the race, he was leading for 36 laps, ahead of the Turner car that had won the championship the year before. His co-driver then took a car that was leading and drove it 'fast' enough to have it come in 11th! We just knew that Andrew would be great in the car but, in the end, what can you do?

"By this time I felt fully confident that I was a capable engineer. We had a wreck at Mid-Ohio when our young driver got a little impatient. We had T.C. Kline put the deal together and when you get guys like that talking to you it pretty much says you must know what you are doing."

Feeling somewhat vindicated about his ability to put a competitive car under a competitive driver, Vincent decided it was time to test his mettle to the fullest by organizing and running a team on his own. His first taste of being the owner and engineer came at the last race of the 2007 season.

"I used Matt's equipment to go down to VIR on my own, because that was a KONI Challenge-only race. With Matt, I was essentially a customer. He had extra space in his trailer and I paid him to haul my cars with part of the deal that I would spend some of my time working with him on his car. When it came time for VIR, I rented all his equipment and got my own drivers and we went down there and finished fourth in the race. We would have finished second but we blew a tire late in the race and it took way too much time to get it back to the pits and changed.

"One driver with us at VIR, Sam Schultz, decided that he wanted to race with me for a full season. We struck up a deal and now I have my own trailer and equipment and for 2008 we are going racing as V-Pack Motorsport. We will have Jason Workman and Sam as the drivers for the full season. Both men bring sponsorship money and talent to the effort. Trackmasters, Automobilsport.com and Arai helmets are our sponsors."

"Race weekends the team will consist of me and my dad, who I am bringing out of retirement. He was voted IMSA Technician of the year back in the 1990's and it will be fun to have him back with me in racing. We have a race shop we work out of in Bethlehem. Most of our crew is made

up of the guys who were part of the Team Lexus. They ran several Lexus cars back then, and some of them later worked with Matt. While they are weekend warriors for V-Pack Motorsport, they are all very experienced and this season will be something new for them. They won a championship in ST in 2001 and my dad and I won the GS championship in 1990 so you could say I am trying to stack the deck!"

We asked what goals Vincent had set for his first full season of being fully in charge.

"A good year for us would be to win the championship! It's been proven that you don't have to win races to win a championship. Obviously you want to win but you don't have to win overall. We are shooting for consistency across the board. Our goal is to have consistent drivers, a consistent car, and to consistently finish races. Then we want to prepare for what might come next in 2009.

"What we are trying to do is run one car with the same basic crew all season. We want to get results and go for quality instead of quantity. I've seen that some of the people that you have interviewed over the years have announced all sorts of grand plans and now they are gone. I am not a rich guy. I don't have tons of money. I do this because I see the mistakes that people have made and I feel this is the time to set up and run this as a business. That's the reason I don't drive. That plus the fact that when I did race in SCCA back in the early 1990's I saw the way the good guys drove and I knew I could never compete with them! I decided then that I needed to contribute with the talents I do have, on the engineering side.

"When I look at a guy like Tom Milner, Sylvain Tremblay or Alex Job, I see that these guys didn't come from a ton of money and yet they have a business model that works. They have been racing for years and they make a living at it. And now, this is going to be my living too."

For every new team, one primary challenge is to test, test, and test until everything on the car is as durable and race ready as it can be. For Vincent, one approach he opted to testing is one that a major manufacturer, and his father, both employed.

"Jean and I have two young children, Derrick and Brady. My five year old son Derrick has already helped his dad's business get off to a solid start! I redid the whole dash in the car, changing all the switches and stuff. Derrick climbed in the car and he tested everything! He broke three things and I changed them. Now the drivers will never have to worry about breaking them in a race!

"Did you know the Mercedes factory does something similar with monkeys? They take a brand new Mercedes and place it in a cage with monkeys. The monkeys mess with everything in the car because they don't know any different. What they break, Mercedes reengineers to make better. Well, I was in the shop with Derrick and sure enough he started holding up the parts that he broke! I thought it was better he break it in the shop than have the driver break it in the middle of a race!"

That seems to be a good way to go about it. In fact, it seems it was the way his father used to test too.

"Although I don't remember it, it turns out my dad said he used to put me in the car when I was Derrick's age!"