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## Through The Esses - Russ Oasis Has Been #1 Before

01/09/08 © **Andrew S. Hartwell**

Being one of sportscar racing's biggest challenges, the Rolex 24 at Daytona is a magnet for those who crave success achieved through competition. They come to prove their mettle, in a contest that pits them against like-minded individuals and against a force of nature over which no man can achieve infinite victory; time. Time will always be ahead of even the fastest of racers.



But for one weekend each year, hundreds of men - and women - will try to outlast the minutes and hours that spin around the face of the clock and seek at least a temporary victory against time.

In a race that can see 80 cars going 150 miles per hour (or more) for 24 non-stop hours, the victory here isn't only achieved by the one who finishes first. Just to finish this grueling fight for supremacy over fatigue, mechanical failure, and erroneous judgment delivered through exhaustion, is to have conquered and won. It is an incredible accomplishment to have survived the long day that opens with a heartily waved green flag, then takes you through the dead of night, then all the way through a new dawn into afternoon, and then on to the heartily welcomed unfurling of the black and white pennant, that waves the struggle complete, at last.

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The struggle to stay in action against the perils of time is what attracts so many to this contest.

The Rolex 24 traditionally appeals to a large contingent of competitors who bring to this grueling event a myriad of racing experiences. That is, of the literally hundreds of drivers who take a turn at the wheel in an attempt to vent their competitive urges in pursuit of victory, some will have more experience, while others will have less. When mixed together, there is a potential for disaster.

For the 2008 edition of this vaunted exercise in time-travel, a number of cars will be piloted by well known and seasoned veterans of racing series, from IndyCar to NASCAR. And then there is everyone else. But what the rest may lack in top-flight experience, can often times be off-set by their intense desire to prove themselves capable of both keeping pace and keeping out of trouble.

This year, Kevin Buckler's The Racers Group (TRG) will be fielding a record seven car effort in the GT class. Among those entries will be a Porsche GT3 Cup car, #65, piloted by several racers who don't quite carry the same cache as say a Max Papis or Scott Pruett. These are men who indeed do have real racing experience but found their ultimate success in other fields. One of these men made his fortune in radio. His name is Russ Oasis and he is the subject of this column. On Jan. 26th, he will be joined in the #65 Porsche by Tom Atherton, Jim Stout, Tommy Archer, and Jason Daskalos.

Oasis currently owns four radio stations - three in Fort Wayne, Indiana and another in Indianapolis. - and he comes to the Rolex 24 with one prior Rolex race to his credit. In 2006 he teamed with Leighton Reese, Tommy Archer and others, in the #06 Banner Racing Corvette. Today, Oasis will be looking to apply that experience, along with years of racing in the Viper Racing League, to the task of coming across the finish line at the end of 24 hours.

Oasis has tasted success before in a world where time moves at a more sedentary pace than in racing. But that's not to say he hasn't burned some rubber along the way.

"I grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut and I have always been a car junkie. On my 12th birthday my brother asked me what I wanted as a present. I said '\_I want to drive your MGA'. So he let me! Back then I lived for go-karts and mini-bikes and scooters. My folks would never let me compete, as they thought motorsports were too dangerous.

"My first car was an Alfa Romeo Guiletta Veloce Spyder and that is where I learned how to heel and toe and double-clutch. Most of it was self taught and I hung around guys who were older than me, and they had been on the track at Lime Rock. I listened to them talk about things like apexes and trail-braking and I kind of picked up on it."

Oasis did not pursue a career in racing in his late teens. He instead chose another vocation that would put him on-the-air as a disc jockey for several radio stations. It was in radio that Oasis would build a track record of success that would eventually allow him the opportunity to speed up his driver development.

"I was a disc jockey from 1970 into 1980. I supported myself in college by being on the air, full time. Once I took my first professional job as a disc jockey, I never stopped. I worked full time and went to college full time. By the time I graduated I had worked at four different radio stations.

"In 1973 I finished college and moved to Miami, Florida to take a stellar radio gig. But, radio is a

very unstable profession. You get fired, and then you get a different job. The new station changes formats or owners, and you get fired again, etc, etc, etc. Nevertheless, I worked hard for ten years and even had a little comedy show on local television. It was on that show that I met a writer who became a friend. He suggested we pool our talents and open an advertising agency. I said, 'I don't know anything about advertising' and he said, 'Neither do I. Let's just do it!'

"At the time, I needed to support a Jaguar XK-E, so we opened an agency called 'The Ad Team'. We did very well and within three years we were a top 3 agency in Miami. While my name as a radio celebrity did help in some respects, our real secret was that we knew how to utilize radio and television better than other agencies did. My partner was a brilliant writer and I was a good voice-over talent and producer. He would write the ad copy and I would go into the studio and come back with a great commercial. We were an ideal team."

"Our agency got a reputation for results and we did it by coming up with unique media strategies. Car dealers, who stand to profit handsomely from effective advertising, took note. The automotive field became our niche. It was then that I met the Potamkin brothers, Alan and Robert. They own one of the largest privately held car dealership chains in America. The Ad Team was doing some advertising for them, and I became friendly with Alan Potamkin, who lived in my neighborhood. We spent some time hanging out together and one day he mentioned that there was a radio station transaction that wasn't going to close, for lack of financing. We had an opportunity to buy it. My ad agency partner and I, along with Alan and his brother, bought the station.

"It didn't go well at first and my ad agency partner decided he was too nervous to own a station, so I bought him out. I then changed the station to a Spanish format and it exploded to the #1 position. Then we bought another struggling station, converted it to a Spanish format, and it too became wildly popular. In 1997, we sold those stations for \$111 million. I also sold my half of the ad agency. My ex partner loves the ad business and I love radio, so we both happily continue working in our respective fields and both continue to be good friends.

"I took my first racing lessons at Bondurant when I was 34. When I sold the radio stations, I was 47 years old and I used some of the money to buy a few Dodge Vipers. I had met Justin Bell through Alan Potamkin, and Justin helped me along a bit. The next step was to enter the Viper Racing League. I bought one of the first Viper Competition Coupes. It was then that I met Tommy Archer. Tommy has also been a great coach for me. While I am not the fastest driver in the series, I'm definitely not the slowest, either. I augmented my experience by taking car control classes and enrolling in other schools. In the end, nothing beats seat time."

"In 2006 Leighton Reese and Tommy Archer asked me if I would like to drive the Rolex 24 with them, in the Banner Racing Corvette. We did pretty well. We had a few mechanical issues that kept us off the track for nearly two hours, yet we still finished 17th of 34 cars in the GT class. That was fun!

"In 2007, I simply couldn't get other guys that I wanted as teammates, to commit, so I didn't do the Rolex. By the end of 2007 however, I had persuaded a few friends from the Viper Racing League to compete in it. I had heard a lot about The Racers Group, so I contacted Kevin Buckler at TRG. He got us one of the 12 Porsche 997 GT-3 Cup cars produced each year. I then called Tommy (Archer) and asked him if he wanted to join us. He said 'sure.' It was going to be all close friends in the #65 car. Jason Daskalos is one of those friends - he races in both the Viper Racing League and the Speed World Challenge. Another is Tom Atherton, and the third is Jim Stout. Tom, Jim, and I trade paint every month in Vipers."

Is Oasis up for a second shot at beating time at its own game?

"I feel as if I could use more Daytona seat time. When you get a chance to drive at practice, you have to share the time with your mates and often you have DPs around you, hardly ever allowing a clean lap. Daytona is a major track and during the race, there are a lot of things to deal with. You drive with one eye in the rearview mirror.

"I did OK at the test days. I also had a chance to get some time in a KONI Challenge GS car, earlier in the month. Coming from the Viper, the Porsche is a bit different but they are still both cars."

We wondered if the disparity in speeds between the Prototypes and the GT cars was something Oasis had experienced in the Viper League.

"In the VRL there are four classes. Three of them are running about the same speed and one is much slower. After 2006, I'm not worried about the speed differential between the GT cars and the Prototypes.

When not overseeing his network of radio stations, Oasis likes to put his feet up and relax on a motorcycle.

"I like motorcycles. I currently have a Harley, but I have also had BMW's, Honda's, Suzuki's, and Kawasaki's. In 2004 I took a cross country ride (in a big loop), logging 11,250 miles. I stopped for a couple of Viper races along the way."

This successful businessman enjoys taking his free time being behind the wheel of race cars. But he really isn't what you would call a fan of racing, in the sense that he doesn't really follow the action from afar.

"It certainly was fun meeting Rusty Wallace at the driver's meeting two years ago. He is a legend. But I never really followed racing closely enough to develop a passion for any one driver or personality. Today I watch the SPEED World Challenge a little because a lot of my Viper friends race in it, but I'm not one to closely follow any series, really."

Oasis is single and lives in Miami. He spends the summers at his home in New England. And at the end of this month he expects to spend some time just a wee bit further north of Miami, attempting to win a war of wills, with time and fate. He has an optimistic yet reserved outlook on what he and his co-drivers can accomplish in this year's Rolex 24.

"I predict that we will finish the race and that we will be in the top 15 in our class. I could say we are going to finish on the podium, but I prefer to be realistic. I think finishing in the top third of our class would be a very good showing."

Oasis doesn't need to go all the way to #1 in the Rolex 24. He has already been #1 in Florida twice before.