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Joey Scarallo - An Australian Long Islander Racing In SPEED

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In 1978, racer Joey Scarallo was born in the city of Adelaide; on the big 'island' that is Australia. When he was just under three years of age his parents pulled up roots and relocated to America, settling in on Long Island, a somewhat narrow strip of land that measures just 20 miles across

at its widest point, and that juts out 118 miles eastward from New York City. Australia is said to be home to 21 million people. Long Island is home to almost 3 million. Australia is certainly the bigger of the two islands, but it is on Long Island that Scarallo came to grow his bigger ambitions.



In time the Scarallo's came to open a new family business on Long Island, selling performance wheels and tires to a good number of those 3 million people. Subsequently, young Joey was brought up in an environment filled with people who had an interest in automobiles. Before long he developed a strong personal interest in cars that led him to racing in karts. This was at a time not far from when two other Long Island citizens – and future racing stars - Guy Cosmo and Andy Lally would also begin to hone their driving talents in karts. A time when a then 11 year old Scarallo would come to meet someone who would inadvertently spark his passion to become a professional racing driver.

Scarallo told us of his beginnings, including an incredible, but thankfully brief, bout with a serious physical condition just as he was taking the first steps of his journey. His faith in a higher power paved the way to a full recovery and Scarallo has been on a fast track ever since.

And one day, he wouldn't mind returning to Australia for at least one fast time.

"I began racing karts when I was 11. We raced out at Westhampton (a track located on the eastern end of the island, not far from the fabled Bridgehampton Race Circuit) and with EKRA (Eastern Kart Racing Association) at Jones Beach. My dad and I used to go together. When I first started it never really clicked in my head that I would make racing my life. I just went karting because I wanted to drive a car but I was too young.

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"I grew up being involved with my dad's business (Autotrend Tire & Wheel Company Inc located in the town of Lindenhurst, on the south shore of Long Island) and I always wanted to drive a car. My dad wouldn't get me a quad because he figured I'd flip it over. He got me the kart just so I would have something to muck around in.

"While I was just 11 years old I had the chance to meet Emerson Fittipaldi. At the time my dad owned several stores and one of the wheel manufacturers used Emerson's name to promote their wheels. My dad's business was the number one distributor for the brand, with the Tire Rack being second. In 1989 they brought their top five distributors down to Moroso Park (in Jupiter, Florida) to meet Emerson. This was just after he had won Indy.

"Emerson was taking people out for hot laps in a Pontiac Trans-Am – the one with the V6 and the turbo. My dad and I went out with him on the track, and then I got to sit next to him when we all had lunch. It was a real cool deal, and I was the only kid there! That experience was the spark that got me thinking about racing for real.

"I had been a fan of racing for several years, following everything from Indy Cars to Winston Cup to drag racing – I would watch it all. Meeting Emerson really got me thinking about being a driver. I decided to go to the Jim Hall School for karting in Ventura, California when I was 12.

"At Jim Hall they would have a race after a few days of learning. Up until then I was using a 4-cycle kart. The karts they ran were pretty fast and I had never driven a kart as fast before. My size and weight with all that speed made driving them a real buzz. I learned a lot at that school, and I started winning in karts the very next season. In fact, we had a real shot at winning the championship that year but I broke my arm at Westhampton.

"When I turned 15 I did the Bertil Roos School to learn how to drive a car. I also ran in the school's championship series – I think it was 16 races – and I won the championship. All the races were at Pocono Raceway. They would run some races clockwise, some counter-clockwise, and do two races on a weekend. We raced Formula Fords.

"While I was running in the Roos series I also dabbled in the Legends Series. I wanted to do some oval racing and that was a great way to get some experience.

"In 1996 I did the Pro-FF2000 Series? The series was a feeder series for the IRL. That started out great but first I had to be emancipated in order to be able to compete at my age, so we had to go through all the legal steps with lawyers and everything. My first race was at the Disney track in Florida and I managed to qualify on the outside pole. I ran against guys like Steve Knapp, Sam Schmitt – who has an IndyCar team today - and Sam Hornish – who had to take the conceit race to make the race. We led the first ten laps and finished seventh. I was only 16 at the time and in that race I got snookered a few times on restarts!

"Financial issues kept me out of racing for a year but I came back in 1998 for another shot at F2000 again. I skipped 1999 again and then in 2000 we decided it would be good to go run in Trans-Am. That was something I had wanted to do for a while.

"We decided to bite the bullet and have a new Corvette built for us in New Zealand. That car ended up being delayed so much that we weren't able to run any Trans-Am races that year. I did a last minute deal with a small budget Formula Atlantic team. The team I ran with always seemed to have problems, from electrics to suspension parts – the car never seemed to last through a race – so we ended up doing just a half-season in open wheel racing that year.

"I finally started my Trans-Am career in 2001 and that was a highlight for me. I really enjoyed driving cars in that series. We got our feet wet that first season. We ran against guys like Paul Gentilozzi, Johnny Miller and Butch Leitzinger in the Tommy Bahamas car. Tommy Kendall came back to run for Rocketsports in the Jaguars in my third year in the series. As you know, the last year for the series was 2005.

"We always ran Trans-Am on our own. We were like the Bad News Bears of racing. We never had enough funding to go after the big guys. Most of the other teams had more funds to work with, and we never really had a handle on setting up the car. Then in late 2004 Tony Ave called me and asked if I was interested in running with him in 2005. That turned out to be one of the best years I ever had. Tony surrounded me with a great group of guys who knew what to do with the car. We didn't win a race that year, but there were about four races we should have won.

"We always had issues with that chassis. The uprights retained a lot of heat, and we always had to chase heat in the brakes and in the cockpit. But we were always one of the fastest cars on the track and we were right up there in the point standings all season long. But we overheated a motor at Road America and got taken out of the race in Denver. At Cleveland a rock kicked up into the oil pump belt in the morning warm-up. Because we needed to change the motor before the race we had to start last in the race. We made it through the entire field and had everybody covered until the tunnel covers under the firewall came loose and I was completely baked in the car. We still managed to finish third though. In San Jose we were fastest again but I got pushed into the wall and damaged the suspension. We were fastest at Edmonton too but we had issues with the brakes. We were fast everywhere but we just didn't have the luck. We were top four in points all year, but in the end, Klaus Graf was the champion."

This season, Scarallo and Ave have teamed up to run a Corvette in the SPEED World Challenge GT class. The season opener at Sebring was anything but an impressive debut. You could say; they blew it. Literally.

"At Sebring, I was so glad to be back with the Ave guys. The guys got the car three weeks before the race and they built it up from a bag of bolts. The car was previously run by Brian Kubinski. CRD has always built me really great and reliable engines in Trans-Am; unfortunately, there was no time to get a CRD motor done in time for Sebring. We were going to use someone else's motor for Sebring and then have time to get CRD motors for Long Beach. The Sebring motor broke in the first session of practice! We had just the one motor so when it broke we hunted around for a replacement. We bought another one from Brian and the guys stayed up until 1:00 AM installing it. But when I went out on the first lap of qualifying, it blew up! We were the reason the rest of the field couldn't qualify. There was so much oil on the track they had to cancel qualifying.

"We considered combining bits from the two blown motors to get us in the race but we had a team meeting on that and decided that wouldn't be a good idea.

"The car is back in the shop at Charlotte with one of the engines already out for a rebuild. In Trans-Am, my engine builder was Bobby Cronin. He always built awesome motors for me and they almost never broke. One time we did have a failure but it was because we blew off a hose and that cooked the motor. That was not Bobby's fault. The motors we ran at Sebring were not built by him. I don't even know who built them. But we are switching to Bobby and I don't expect we will have any more motor problems this season.

“We intend to run the whole season in SPEED World Challenge. We hope we will have enough time to get the car on track for testing before we head to Long Beach.”

Scarallo’s career – and his life - in racing almost went permanently off track back when he was just a teenager.

“When I was 13 I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I was in school one day and I just passed out. They checked me for signs of a concussion and they found the tumor in a cat scan. They ran tests on me and told me the tumor was something I was born with. On a scale of 1 to 10 they rated it a zero as far as growth goes. They did an operation but it was quite an ordeal going in.

“The doctors said they could do the operation but it was possible I might not be able to walk again. And if they got the tumor, they would still consider that to be a successful surgery! Obviously an unsuccessful operation would have meant death. I was racing karts then and I was very concerned. In the end though, I was laid up for only a week.

“I decided, right before the operation, that I was going to trust GOD and that is what I did. I still think of the whole ordeal as a miracle. I went into church on Sunday night, they did the operation on Monday, and I didn’t even have so much as a headache afterward. I was raring to go! They told me to forget about racing. But I passed all the motor skills tests and I was back in church the following Sunday night.”

During his hospital stay, young Joey Scarallo made a new friend.

“While I was in the hospital, a family friend contacted NASCAR star Darrell Waltrip about me and Darrell called me in the hospital. I got to talk to him for a little while and that was quite an experience. Someone in the media got wind of that and, years later, when I was running at Sears Point the same weekend as the Cup cars, they organized a meeting of the two of us. And he remembered the call! We have stayed in touch ever since.

“Now I’m just waiting for him to put me in a Winston Cup car!”

Scarallo intends to put his best into the SPEED Challenge effort this season but he has aspirations that would take him into racing worlds apart from what he has done to date. And satisfying one objective would take him back home again.

“I would love to go to Indy and win the 500, and I really enjoyed driving the Trans-Am cars and the closest thing to that today is Winston Cup. I would also really like to go to Australia and run the V8 Super Touring Cars. The Bathurst race is their Indy 500 and I would love to go back as an Australian-American and win that race.

“I grew up watching racing in America, but I would really like to go over and win Bathurst.”