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Ryan Phinny Wants You To Know His Name

05/13/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Ryan Phinny's name probably isn't as well known as he would like it to be. Not that he seeks notoriety or to become the star of a future episode of the TV show *'America's Most Wanted'*, you understand. He doesn't. But he would like to see his name appearing on the future entry lists of major North American auto racing events. And in order to achieve that goal, he has elected to start with this weekend's Laguna Seca round of the Grand-Am Rolex Series.



Phinny, a young man of 18 with many years of successful kart racing - and a single year of Formula BMW - to his credit, will be co-driving the Matt Connolly Motorsports Pontiac GTO-R with Diego Alessi. This will mark his first race with MCM, his first time behind the wheel of the #21 Pontiac, and the first time his name will appear in the sometimes glaring light of a very competitive Rolex Series entry list..

But there was a time just last year when no one knew if they would ever see Phinny's name on any competitive entry list again. But, they call it a list of competitors because the people on the list just don't quit. In Phinny's case, his competitive nature combined with his youthful state managed to steer him out of a painful point in time towards what he hopes will be a bright future in racing sportscars.

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We talked with Phinny a few days before the Laguna Seca race and learned quite a bit about him, his racing background and aspirations, and about a racing incident that could have bounced him out of the sport for good. It was an accident that happened on purpose.

"I was born in Southern California and my family later moved up to the San Francisco area only to later come back to Carmel, where they opened a restaurant. They own the Baja Cantina restaurant here - and they have a second one located in Marina Del Ray. If you come into the restaurants you will see that my family is definitely into racing. The restaurants have become something of a racer's hangout. My father, Patrick, ran in Indy Lights and Super Vees and worked his way up through the SCCA ranks. He runs in vintage cars now with his buddies.

"My dad was involved in racing for a long time and when I was just five years old I was given an opportunity to drive a quarter-midget. Jimmy Vassar's father owned a track and my dad used to race with Jimmy in Super Vees. Jimmy gave him the idea to put me in a quarter-midget to see if I might enjoy the experience. Everything went well, and I ran in those cars for a short while, but I soon found I wasn't enjoying ovals. My dad then decided we should try karting."

"I wanted to stay in racing because, even at a very early age, I knew that I wanted to be a Formula One driver. Karting is where everyone starts so at six years old I started there too and I did it until I was 16. My parents were very supportive. In fact, they were both involved in local racing. "

Phinny's accomplishments in karting are many and they include being Salinas Valley Karter's Club Champion two years in a row; International Karting Federation National Champion twice; collecting several wins and high season-end placing's, driving for Emmick Enterprises as a factory driver, and being a finalist in the Red Bull Driver Search competition in 2005. That led to a season in Formula BMW.

"I was offered a ride in Formula BMW by Ritchie Hearn. I ran with him in the 2006-2007 season and we ended up 9th in the championship. It was disappointing because we suffered a number of mechanical failures throughout the season. We did pull down two top five and seven top ten finishes that year, and finished second at the Denver GP."

Phinny was on his way to what looked like a path to future opportunities in road racing when one off-road opportunity put him in an inopportune position. And it happened so fast.

"I also ran a few hit and miss races along the way, besides the BMW Series, but then I was offered a great opportunity to ride a dirt bike for Honda, in the Baja 1000. I trained for that race for about four months, but I got injured and never made the race.

"I was practicing four days before the race, traveling at high speeds just as we got into dusk, I hit a log that wasn't in the road before. The fans down there are good fans but they like to see wrecks and I gave them one! I hit the log about 85 miles per hour and after the temporary **flight** I took, I broke my front and back clavicle, my rotator cuff, six ribs, and knocked my shoulder out of whack.

"I sat there for about fifteen minutes and calmed myself down enough to climb back on the bike and ride back to camp.

"I spent several weeks recovering from the surgeries and I have been at the gym everyday since. Thankfully my doctors took care of me and my youth helped me to heal quickly. While my collar bone was broken in half on two sides, it wasn't out of place. What eventually happened is it started shifting and so we had to have surgery performed. I only spent one night in the hospital.

"I was back in a go kart about one month later racing a Stars of Karting Event. I worked with a physical therapist for a few months and was able to heal up pretty quick."

Phinny slowly found his way back into racing by mixing some kart time with some drives in cars owned by privateers. He didn't get too involved in anything too big, just enough to tell him if his skills were still intact.

"I did a few other private runs in race cars since the accident. Nothing really competitive so much as just to try me out after being banged up. Then Joey Hand spoke with Matt Connolly about me driving in the Pontiac. Joey and I have known each other for about 11 years now. When I signed on with Emmick, Joey was already a factory driver with them. He and I were together for about six years in karting, he was with me at every race coaching, wrenching, you name it. He has been a great friend and mentor to me."

Before the Baja bang up, Phinny spent some time in Europe getting the feel of racecars by running Formula Renaults.

"The first time I was in a proper race car it was a Formula Renault. We did a two day test and it was a blast. It confirmed for me that racing is what I wanted to do. And it was so different from karting. In karts there isn't as much going on. There is no telemetry, you don't feel the weight shifting, and there isn't as much horsepower. Mark Pivec gave me that first opportunity to drive a real race car. At that time I was driving karts for Mike Speed, Scott Speed's father. We did that and then I showed up at Sebring (for Red Bull) and they wound up sending me to Europe."

Phinny is now at the point where he is looking to shake off his injuries and start on the fast track to becoming a household name in racing. He simply can't wait to get the process started.

"I can't wait for the Laguna Seca Grand-Am race. You have no idea! My first time in the car will be this Thursday.

"I am hoping to make a name for myself in sportscar racing. I have watched the series the last few years and I can see it is really competitive and I think this will be a really good experience. We will see how this race - and the Lime Rock round - pans out and then decide from there."

Team owner Matt Connolly noted his anticipation of great things to come for young Ryan Phinny when he said, "Joey told me that Ryan is the best driver he's trained to date and coming from Joey that means a great deal to me. I've seen firsthand what Joey could do behind the wheel of one of my cars and, (as) Joey knows, we'll give Ryan a car to run at the front with."

And if we know anything about racing we know that the guys who end up in front get their names listed in two places: on the entry lists and at the top of the results listings too. Will we see the name Ryan Phinny on top before too long? Stay tuned.