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James Hunt – The Name You Will Come To Know Again

08/01/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

He has a famous name, and he possesses all the ambition needed to put that name back on the lips of racing fans. But this isn't the same person that we are talking about. That is, his name is James Hunt but he isn't THE James Hunt.

"I get that all the time", said James Hunt, a 25 year old man with an eye on getting his famous name to appear on the entry lists of top level sportscar racing events. "The famous James Hunt did have a great name in motorsports", Hunt continued, "and he also had quite a reputation as a partier. I've tried to emulate his driving skill but not his playboy habits!"



For those too young to remember the first James Hunt, he was the 1976 Formula One Champion with McLaren. He started in F1- and raced for several seasons - with Lord Hesketh's team, an effort that presented itself with great emphasis placed on having fun. Hunt later went on to become a racing commentator. He passed away in 1993 after a heart attack, leaving behind a legacy of good cheer and playfulness that endeared him to many a racing fan.

The James Hunt we caught up with recently seems determined to make his own mark in the world of sportscar racing. He is currently driving for APR Motorsports in the KONI Challenge Series. His first professional race came at the opening round of the 2008 KONI season at Daytona where he co-drive a Chevy Cobalt to a 22nd place finish despite a faulty clutch.

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Unlike many young future stars of racing today, Hunt did not spend his formative years pedaling a kart. He spent it pedaling a bike...downhill...at breakneck speeds. But it would be in a unique situation that found him driving a shifter kart that Hunt would come to the attention of the people behind the SPEED channel. That recognition put him on the path to a career in racing.

We began our conversation with the next James Hunt by asking about his family and his roots in racing.

"I have two older brothers and a little sister. We span from 39 down to 12, with me somewhere in the middle at age 25. My dad had a 1947 MGTC that he ran in vintage races for fun. I grew up watching him run that, and my brother, Will Fox, used to run a Datsun 510 in SCCA. I was always the little guy running around in the paddock watching it all happen. I used to think it was all so cool.

"At 14, I started racing downhill mountain bikes on the national circuit with the National Off Road Biking Association (NORBA). Riders would take a ski lift to the top of a mountain with our bikes hanging off the back of the chair lift. Then we would go hammering down some of the most treacherous terrain you can imagine. Picture rock gardens with massive boulders and five foot drops while traveling at speeds of 50 – 60 miles per hour. From top to bottom the run could take upwards of 4 minutes. We went down the mountain in intervals, just as they do in rally racing. It was very fast, exciting and at times brutally painful if you crashed.

"I was the '14 and under' National Champion, and the '16 and under' National Champion in NORBA. When I turned 16 I got my driver's license and I soon learned cars were much faster than bikes!

"Of course, I quickly hit the stone wall so many of us who want to go racing will hit. Racing cars is exponentially more expensive than racing bicycles. I started saving every penny because I don't have wealthy parents who can write a check for \$150,000 to \$200,000 so their son can go racing. I'm doing it all on my own as a one man army. I do my own PR, sales, marketing, everything I need to do to forge a career in racing. To help with all this I started my own company, James Hunt Racing, LLC."

The road to success in racing is often replete with detours and obstacles, and you can never take the trip completely alone. Some form of support is always needed. The lucky ones have the money to pave their way. But the best ones tend to be those with someone squarely in their corner helping them learn how to stay on the road, or at least avoid some of the obstacles. In Hunt's case, useful directions were provided by a good friend. And that friend would soon provide the exact sort of support that would help get him noticed and on the way to a future in racing.

"A good family friend of ours by the name of Ian Carpenter is a professional driving coach. He took me under his wing and started coaching me when I was 16. From 16 to 20 I did a lot of open lapping days in my street car, a 1990 Acura Integra. I ran with the Porsche Club, Miata Club, NASA, the SCCA, basically any track organization that was running on the East Coast.

"When I was in college, I started thinking about competitive racing. So, one day during my sophomore year I decided to I was going to start racing my Acura. I put in a roll cage, full race suspension, gutted the inside and went racing with NASA. I did all this in my back yard in what I liked to call "the gravel pit". I wasn't able to afford a tow car and trailer, so my Acura doubled as my street car. I laugh now because I drove back and forth from Colorado to Philadelphia in

between semesters with 600 pound springs in the car. It was like a 29 hour enduro with no co-driver.

“During my summers, I ran in the NASA East Coast Honda Challenge series. I did about four or five races with them and then I did a few more with SCCA. I love that car as I built it myself and still have it. I also started running a friend’s Spec Miata in some endurance races. We won the 13 hours of VIR back in 2005.

“Spec Miata is very popular within SCCA. They commonly get 30 – 40 car fields. The cars are almost identical as well which makes for great racing. I loved racing in that series!

“In September of 2007 I was laying in bed watching TV when I saw a show on SPEED called ‘Setup’. It was a racing reality show. They took 12 guys and put them in identical Pontiac Solstice GXP’s. They raced several times and in the last race the winner got a check for \$100,000 and a test with the Pontiac factory team. I thought that looked awesome so I applied and got invited to a kart shoot out. I did fairly well. From 2,000 applicants they whittled it down to 100, then 75. The top 24 from the kart shootout went on the show.

“I had never raced a shifter kart before in my life. Out of 75 people, I placed 9th and I was really happy with that because almost every other person I raced against had come from racing karts.

“In the Pontiacs we ran identical cars but we all had to do our own set ups. We could adjust camber, caster, toe, along with the rebound and compression. The show was based on teams of two, the driver and the mechanic/crew chief. I took Ian with me as my crew chief/ mechanic. He is one of those guys who can take a plastic spoon and a roll of duct tape and build you anything you want. I’ve met a lot of knowledgeable people in racing but Ian just has a brain for set up and understanding what the car is doing that is remarkable.

“In the end, I finished second overall. I was leading the final race up until one and a half laps left. We didn’t have rear view mirrors and I took a quick glance to see if someone was going to try and out brake me and I missed my braking point by about two and a half feet. I got a little bit of lock up and my friend was able to get underneath me for the pass. They handed him a check for \$100,000 and a test with the Pontiac Banner race team. I got a ‘high five’ and pat on the back.

“It didn’t matter in the end though because I am now racing professionally based on my driving ability rather than a checkbook, unlike many other drivers in our sport. Had I won it would have been like ‘great, we have a seat for you, fork over the \$100,000’.”

The positive results – and exposure – from the SPEED program, supported in great measure by the technical expertise provided by Carpenter, put Hunt in contact with a number of people who live and work in the game of racing. Contacts are what open doors and Hunt was certainly looking to open the doors of competitive rides.

“Through that show I met some great people like Tommy Kendall who knows not only a lot about racing but also how to go about making racing a business. You can’t just be a young guy who can race a car. You have to be the full package. You have to know how to best represent yourself, your team, your sponsors and business partners both on and off the track. And even if you have all that, you are still not guaranteed to make it.

“But that show got the ball rolling. In 2008 I am driving a partial Grand Am KONI Challenge season for APR Motorsports in the #191 Volkswagen GTI. I could not have asked for a more

professional and knowledgeable team to be a part of. Thanks to APR's tuning and development experience, as they are the premier VW, Audi and Porsche tuner in the U.S., I know with 100% certainty that our race cars are well prepared and competitive. They also are a total blast to drive!

"At Daytona, I met some of the SPEED TV.com people. They said they were looking to do a feature on a driver and they wanted to use me. They said they wanted to capture a year in the life of a rookie and chose me. I write a blog each week that covers everything that goes on at, and between, races. That experience has been very helpful because I have been able to really tell the story that so many of us have to go through to make it in racing. It isn't a cakewalk; it's a battle with a lot of highs and lows. You will have days where everything is going great to days where it all falls apart. Sponsors come back and tell you they can't support the team, or other issues arise that prevent you from continuing with that particular project or team."

Hunt's blog has drawn some welcome attention to his pursuit of his dreams.

"With the posting of every blog I get anywhere from one to five emails from people I have never met in my life. They write about their racing dreams, or how I am trying to climb Mount Everest but just hang in there, to people who tell me they are fans and to keep going. It's been great!"

While on the way to a career in racing as a driver, Hunt supports himself by working for BMW of North America. Given BMW's racing heritage, we can't think of a more appropriate employer for a young racer to be connected with.

"I work for BMW of North America and I live in Agoura Hills, California. Our Western Region Distribution Center is in Oxnard, California. We are about 30 minutes north of Los Angeles. And I have to say that BMW is fantastic about my racing activity. They are an absolute joy to work for. And for me, getting to work for the best in the automotive industry and also getting to race is a wonderful combination. My managers here are very supportive because BMW has racing in its heritage.

"I used to work in BMW of North America's Motorsports department with Tom Milner's Prototype Technology Group (PTG). This was when I worked out of BMW NA's headquarters in New Jersey. My job was to act a liaison between BMW NA and PTG as well as run events at each race venue. I went to almost every race on the 2006 American Le Mans Series circuit with PTG. I spent time with the Milner family and also got to know Joey Hand very well. He has been extremely helpful to me in offering guidance and advice."

Hunt appreciates the moral and technical support he has received from people he has come in contact with in the sport. Besides Joey Hand, Hunt singles out veteran racer Randy Pobst as one of his heroes.

"One of my teammates is Randy Pobst. I have the utmost respect for him because he was one of my heroes when I was growing up. And now that I have the opportunity to compare my data and video with his, it is just a remarkable opportunity. But there are just so many people you meet on a daily basis that have been in the racing game for so long, that every day is a remarkable experience.

"Randy has been someone I have really looked up to. As I have with Joey Hand. Joey came from a similar background to mine, having to make it on his own. And he has made it."

For this generation's James Hunt, the ultimate goal is to land a ride with a competitive team in a prototype. He is looking for the best route to the top and he hopes that route will include a specific stretch of historic asphalt.

"I want to race sportscars at the highest level. For me that means to compete at the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona, and at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to run down the Mulsanne straight at 200 plus miles per hour. And I don't care if it is in a truck, a two wheeler or whatever. I just want to hit that Mulsanne Straight at 200 plus miles per hour, at night!

"My heart is in sportscar racing. If someone came to me with a deal for an open wheel car I would do it, but my heart is in sportscar racing. "

As is generally the case when someone works hard enough to attain a goal, there are sacrifices to be made. In Hunt's case, the memories of the carousing and party life of the original James Hunt need not fear being overwritten by the activities of the current James Hunt.

"I have to say the last nine months of my life have completely changed from what existed before. I moved from going to business school and growing my career at BMW to becoming a professional racer. I love my career with BMW and will continue to grow it. But, in having two full time jobs my social life is gone. I lost a serious girl friend because I was never home and fell in love with a steering wheel. I have put all my energies and focus into my company – James Hunt Racing, LLC – and into my driving.

"People have asked me what Management Company or PR firm I use. I laugh and I tell them it's me! And when they ask me how I find time to do all this, I tell them that while they are out at the beach having fun, I'm sitting at home until 11:00 or 12:00 PM working on racing, every day. People think drivers are like rock stars with a lot of glitz and glamour. But the reality is there isn't any real security. You can drive for a great team and have a killer season, but if someone comes along and writes a check for \$200,000 to race in your seat, it's 'see ya later'. It doesn't matter if you are a better race car driver or not. They have the money the team needs."

Given the difficulties of becoming a household name (again) in racing, we asked Hunt what other career options he might choose to explore.

"I have started to think about the business side of racing as well. It's this side of racing and my experience in Corporate America that acted as the catalyst for me starting my own company, James Hunt Racing, LLC. Thanks to my years of experience in the corporate world at BMW I am well versed in what it takes to succeed in business, both on and off the race track. From board meetings to entertaining clients, my experiences at BMW have really helped. I've taken the lessons learned from corporate America and applied them to my racing efforts. If for whatever reasons my driving career doesn't work out, I see myself on the management side of motorsports, or working in the area of public relations or marketing."

This James Hunt is one more young man that we will be watching going forward. No, not watching as in paparazzi looking to spy him with a fast and sleek runway model on both arms, but watching as in seeing his arms steering a fast and sleek sportscar running away from the pack.