



**ash automobilia**

**ash - through the *esses***

## Michael DeFontes Is A Big Jerry Thompson Fan

02/09/09 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Jerry Thompson enjoyed a lengthy career in sportscar racing and he is about to be recognized for his achievements with his impending induction into the Corvette Hall of Fame. There he joins a very short list of memorable names, all people for whom the Chevrolet Corvette was more than just a ride, it was a lifetime association.

The now senior Thompson raced in many series including Trans-Am, Firestone Firehawk, IMSA Camel GT and more. Along the way, Thompson and a fellow racer named Michael DeFontes became acquainted through Thompson's son, Chris. They would go on to be co-drivers in a number of races, and in short order DeFontes developed a real affection and respect for what Thompson could do and had done in a race car.

We talked with DeFontes about his own racing experience and about his relationship with Jerry Thompson. It was very obvious to us that DeFontes holds Thompson in reverence for not only what he has done in a race car, but for how he lives as a man and father.

DeFontes begins by telling us about his own background and then brings us to how he came to meet and admire Jerry Thompson.

"I started racing in 1983. My first race was at the Pocono 500 in the IMSA Camel GT series. I went there to crew a car in that race. Bill Scott and George Hulse were supposed to drive the car but Scott was called away in an emergency to go to Saudi Arabia to teach anti-terrorist driving skills to some important people there. Now this was back in the days when they didn't have televisions and phones in the hotel rooms, so the manager of the hotel came to my room to tell me I had to call home right away as there was an emergency. I called and they said Bill Scott was called away and would I co-drive with Hulse in the race!



“Up to this point I had only been through the Bertil Roos driving school one time and I had never driven in a race before! Mark Raffauf (the current Managing Director of Competition for Grand-Am) was the man who got me my racing license for that race. I told Mark that again when I saw him recently, pulling out my original card and showing him that it was from 24 years ago! I said ‘you are the first guy that ever gave me a racing license’. I told him that he must have lost his mind!”

Several other racing personalities were convinced DeFontes had lost his mind to think he could run his first race with so little prior track time.

“I finished seventh overall in that first race. This was in a Porsche RSR running against the Group 44 Jaguars and the Momo Porsche’s. I never should have been in that race to begin with! Before the race my instructor at Bertil Roos said, ‘You will die!’

“As I said, I had only been to the Roos School one week before! I went there on the advice of Rick Mears and Mario Andretti. After my first race I decided I had better go back again and I did. I also did the Bob Bondurant School five times.”

As a young man, DeFontes envisioned his career path would be fashioned after that of four musically inclined mop-tops from England. But one day he witnessed something that would lead to his turning in his quest for a bowler cut for a Bell helmet instead. Not that his mom was crazy about either career path.

“Before I started racing, my mindset was to be one of the Beatles. But my mom made a serious mistake by taking me to see the movie Grand Prix in 1967. After I saw that film I said the hell with the Beatles; I want to be a race car driver! I still remember the seat I sat in and I remember standing up after the movie and telling my mom that I want to be a race car driver when I grow up. Years later when I did get into racing she told me she didn’t understand my obsession with this sport. We were on the phone and when I said it was all her fault because years before she took me to see that movie, she hung up on me!”

Parental discontent aside, DeFontes decided to continue his rapid pursuit of another guy’s fenders and that decision would one day bring him to meet the man he considers his first choice for an alternate father figure. He would not have replaced his father, but had he not had a father he loved, he would have loved to have Jerry Thompson be his father.

“After that first race at Pocono, I went on to run a few more races in the Camel GT series with a number of top ten finishes. Back then the technology was a bit more basic than it is today. Most of the guys who were racing were party guys who liked to have fun. We didn’t care who we raced against. Someone’s race, creed, or color meant nothing. We were just racers.

“When the new Firestone Firehawk Series came along I thought I would just get a car and go clean up in this street touring series. Then I saw the transporters pulling into the paddock with the same race teams I had run against in Camel GT. I knew right then that I was dead.

“My racing career was pretty much a hit and miss deal until I left racing altogether. I got divorced and concentrated on my business which is as the owner of the third largest nursing home in Maryland. But, like a drug habit that you can never forget about, I wanted to get back into racing somehow.

“Racing is a family circus. You get addicted to seeing the same people at every race. If you look back at the people who were racing back in the early 1980’s you will find about 70% of those people are still in the game. It is a very close knit family organization. We were wary of one another and we knew each other and we respected each other. I have no problem being beaten by one of them. Of course, I want to win, but the point is this is a gentlemen’s sport and we share a lot of respect for each other. And when we are on the track I know who I can take chances with and who I can’t. If I don’t know the guy in the other car I just won’t take chances.

“I got back into racing when I was invited to run in a cat and mouse track event in a Winston Cup car. Greg Sachs was the mouse and I followed him around the track like a cat. Well, he pulled away from me at first, and had about a half mile lead, but he never got too far away. I stayed with him and afterwards he told me he thought I still had talent.”

Those words of encouragement got DeFontes back on the track – at least for a few races that ended in despair. Before he called it quits again, however, he became acquainted with Thompson and soon a journey of discovery was underway.



“In 1994, I ran with Jerry Thompson, his son Chris, and with Frank DeVecchio in the Camel GT series. We ran at Watkins Glen with a car that was just terrible. We later went to Mosport but the car was clearly out of its league. Chris asked me what I was going to do and I said I think I will just hang it up. He then asked me if I would drive with his dad at the Dallas street race. I asked my son, and the girl I was dating at the time, if they wanted to go to Dallas and when they said, ‘why not?’ I went out and bought a motor home to make the trip!

“I had no idea what I was doing and here I was going to drive with my friend Chris’ dad, Jerry Thompson. I had no idea who he was, really. I only knew him through Frank DeVecchio, who was a wild guy and a good friend.

“We made it to Dallas and the worst possible thing you can experience in a street race is to have it rain. Well, I started the race in our Oldsmobile Calais and it rained like a hurricane! The track had sections of asphalt, concrete and brick which meant the dynamics kept changing. I kept calling in to the pits saying I have to come in. I was scared out of my gut! The guys kept

saying to me, ‘We are not ready yet. You have to come in later, we are doing the dishes!’ They wanted to keep me out. Finally Jerry took over and we finished the race in third place! Not too bad for my first race in five years.

“Now all this time I only know a man named Jerry Thompson. I knew nothing of the man Jerry Thompson or about his storied career in racing. Then one day, at an autograph session, someone asked Jerry if he was the same Jerry Thompson from the Trans-Am days. I knew who a lot of people were but I never really realized who Jerry was until that moment. I have a

program from every race I was in and I looked through them and found his name listed on the entries for the races that ran that same weekend. It turned out he was in almost every race I was in and I had no idea!”

DeFontes feels he has the voice to market his driving skills, but that he does not possess the level of skills of a Jerry Thompson. If he did have those skills, he feels he would be a household name today because he would tell people so.

“If I could drive as good as Jerry, and had as much moxie as I have, I would have been the next Mario Andretti. But Jerry is such a humble guy. He never let me know who he was. With me, I could be in a bar three seconds and I am telling everybody that I am a big shot race car driver. But that is not Jerry. He is such a humble guy and I am so glad we became friends.

“Once I learned just who he was, he told me about the old days when his racing partners were people like Tony Delorenzo and Don Yenke. I was stunned! I had no idea. I heard of Tony and Don but I had never heard of Jerry. He is that low key of a guy that he never talks about himself. I was absolutely shocked to hear about his racing history.”

Today, DeFontes has only praise and admiration for his friend and mentor. Not only for his racing exploits, his inherent talent behind the wheel of a race car, and his low-key personality, but for his fervent compassion for his family and his open-hearted approach to dealing with other people, even those he competes against on the track.

“Jerry runs five miles a day, even at his age. He attends mass every Sunday. He is not a smart-aleck or wise guy. In fact, he will help you to improve your game. He doesn't hold back or keep secrets to himself. He tells you openly how to get through a corner quicker. And if you beat him, he asks you how you did it so he can improve his own driving ability. Most drivers will not share their secrets because they are afraid you will go out and beat them. But Jerry is just the most up front guy and he will tell you how to go faster.

“This September, Jerry is being inducted into the Corvette Hall Of Fame. There is a new Corvette book and one third of it is about Jerry and the Owens Corning Corvettes he raced with Tony and Don. There are only about 30 guys in the hall now. Some of the others are Dick Thompson, Don Yenke, John Greenwood, Reeves Callaway and Larry Shinoda. (Website: <http://www.corvettemuseum.com/library-archives/hof/index.shtml> )

“Jerry has driven everything under the sun and driven it well. He is a very family oriented guy. I became friends with his son Chris first and that is how I met him. Chris had young children like me and I loved that family atmosphere in the pits.

“I'd say Jerry is around 67 years old now and I am sure he could hold his own against any pro in racing today. He recently built his own race car but it got wrecked by someone else. If I won the lotto today, I would put him on my team. He is a great driver and a great engineer.

“Jerry is one of those guys who is such a true racer that if your car breaks down on the Brooklyn Bridge in the middle of a snow storm, he will get out there, ignoring tractor trailers flying by, and work on your car. He will sleep in the trailer. He will do anything that needs to get done to race. He was such a mentor to me. He is the most understated and underrated driver. I guarantee he could run in the top ten of any series right now.

“He is a born and bred racer like no other person. I think he is the most deserving person ever to be inducted into any hall of fame. I hope I am allowed to speak at his induction because he won't say a thing about himself and I on the other hand probably won't stop talking about him.”