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Ken Grammer States His Case For The American Touring Car Championship

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In the 1990's there was a short lived touring car series known as the North American Touring Car Championship. After a short run it went away quietly and in the years since, no one has tried to resurrect a professional touring car series of a similar format in the United States. Lord knows there are enough series out there for people



who campaign touring cars to run in today – everything from SCCA amateur to Speed World Challenge, to KONI Challenge – so why is it that someone is now trying to introduce a professional TC championship again? And why would they start now, with the current economic climate running so afoul of prosperity?

We decided to find the answers to these questions by going directly to the source of this seemingly oddly-timed idea. We caught up with Ken Grammer, the President of USERA – the United States Endurance Racing Association – the sanctioning body that is taking steps to bring the new American Touring Car Championship to life. He gave us some background on his career in motorsports and he explained some rather logical reasons for driving this idea forward.

Grammer has been involved in racing for some time now and it is his experience and instincts that tell him that this is an idea whose time has come.

“My wife Stacey and I got started in racing in the late 1990s by volunteering to work at SCCA events. She worked as a Course Marshall and I was a driver. We jumped in with both feet. In my first year I was offered the position of series administrator for the Atlanta Pro-IT series. I had started out driving an IT truck that I picked up from a team that had run in the old SCCA Coors Truck Series. I raced that for a few years in the SCCA.

“We got into the event management and race management side of racing pretty quickly. I was the regional executive for the Alabama region for three years. My real career was in the information technology field, working for independent companies. The SCCA moved their offices from Denver, Colorado to Topeka, Kansas at a time when I was looking for a new position. I sent my resume to

SCCA and was hired as the Director of Operations for the World Challenge Series. This was in 2002.

“After a few years with the SCCA, I joined Synergy Racing here, in Danville, Virginia. Synergy ran the Picchio DP before I joined them, and we ran a Dinan BMW and several Porsche GT cars. We won the 2005 Grand-Am GT Championship with Craig Stanton and David Murry driving. It was a great experience and I learned a lot about running a first class, professional race program.

“At the end of 2005, as often happens with the ebb and flow of racing, funding became an issue so I decided to create USERA. Having raced in a number of series over the years – Motorola Cup and more – I knew that the cost of racing was increasing. It reached a point where it would cost over \$20,000 to field a car for one weekend of racing. In SCCA club racing the costs were much lower. But I realized there was no middle step for racers to move up to a professional series.

“We developed a formula for USERA with a budget of \$5,000 to \$6,000 per race for a team to race on a weekend. This allowed people to go endurance racing for a championship at a significantly lower cost to run a full season.

“We chose the spec Miata as the car for our first series. We ran this for two seasons and, while it did OK, it never really took hold. As we were getting ready to start the 2008 season I received a call from Lee Brahin and Harvey Siegel asking me to help them get New Jersey Motorsports Park up and running. I then took the position of Managing Director and Stacey became the Track Manager. She handled a lot of the training of track staff and the 150 or so volunteer flaggers and so on. We were handling the transition from the construction stage to the operating stage. It was an exciting project and one we really enjoyed.”

At this juncture in our conversation we brought up the issue of all that loose dirt flying around during the inaugural Grand-Am Rolex Series race at NJMP. Who better to ask about the lack of grass than the former Managing Director?

“We planted a lot of grass seed but we were constantly challenged by the rain. It either came through too hard or we didn’t get enough. We were always putting down more seed!”

We expect NJMP will have grass one day, and viewing berms, and many other amenities that they simply didn’t have time to set up before that first professional race weekend. Grammer too feels this is the case-

“I have to say that Harvey and Lee are great people and they really have the interests of racers and fans at heart. Fans just have to remember that it will take a few years for the track to take on an ambiance like a VIR. When you are building a new facility you can picture the end result, but you have to keep in mind that tracks like VIR and Lime Rock took years to develop into the beautiful tracks they are today.

“In today’s world we just all expect everything to be perfect from day one.”

OK, the case of the missing grass has been resolved so now let’s return to the topic at hand – the new American Touring Car Championship (ATCC).

“The idea has been building for a number of years. It meshes perfectly with the USERA philosophy to contain the costs to go racing. Typically, as a series becomes more popular it becomes increasingly expensive. If you look at some of the series that are out there now you can see it is very expensive to run a team for a full season. Through my involvement with several teams and

drivers over the years it became apparent that racing was missing a layer between the amateur races and the high priced professional series. You just can't run a car in pursuit of a championship, in the current pro series, without spending well over \$150,000.

"There are several things you need to do to contain costs beginning with setting a baseline for the cars, very much like what they have done in the British Touring Car Series. The cars are stock prep with limits on the changes teams can make. They can't change suspension pick up points. They can't change the basic profile of the cars. So you don't allow a team with unlimited resources to build a purpose-built race car that they throw a body on. The idea is that a team can buy a car from a dealer, gut the interior, install a roll cage and other safety equipment and go racing in the ATCC. The series guidelines are very much in line with rules like the SCCA T3 and ITR classes, and similar to NASA production rules.

"The focus of the ATCC is to allow people who currently run those types of cars to come run in our professional series. We classify cars such as the BMW E36 and E46, the Acura Integra, the Dodge SRT-4, the Mazda Protégé and RX-8 and the Nissan Sentra. We will allow wings but not expensive splitters. The concept is to keep the cars as close to stock as possible with all safety features installed to protect the drivers.

"ATCC is somewhat similar to the old Showroom Stock class in a sense. The basic concepts are similar but in touring cars you can gut the interiors and do a few more things to improve safety and handling.

"Another cost containment approach is to have the cost of a car be less expensive up front. Say you want to race a Honda Civic, you can buy a 2007 Civic and spend another \$20,000 getting it race ready and for under \$40,000 you have a race-ready car that can actually vie for the championship. In several of the pro series today, you can easily invest over \$100,000 in the car before you even get to the track.

"Another key cost are the race weekends. You have costs to transport the cars and the team, pay for gas and hotels, and so on. To help with this expense, we have decided on a two race per weekend format. In our first season, we will have six race weekends with 12 races. Both races will be 30 minutes in length. You will qualify and race on the same tires so you don't need to buy extra tires each weekend. The tires will be marked before the race and those are the tires you have to run. You can replace a tire if you wish, but doing so will mean you have to move to the back of the grid.

"Our format is similar to the BTCC and other touring car series like the Canada and Sweden touring car series. The BTCC has 10 weekends with three races per weekend for a total of 30 races. The advantage they have is the travel costs to get around Britain are much less than to get around the vast United States. Given today's difficult economic climate we feel six weekends with 12 races is a good starting point.

"In a perfect world the ATCC would be an American version of the BTCC. They have created a very good program that people around the world have copied. America has not been able to really effectively clone the success of that series.

"Probably the biggest difference between the ATCC and the short lived North American Touring Car Championship is the amount of money invested in the cars. The NATCC cars were purpose built race cars and I understand the teams invested heavily in building them.

“The goal with ATCC is to make it cost \$5,000 or less per race, so you have a \$10,000 per weekend cost. That keeps a season-long run for a championship down to around \$60,000. ”

With a new professional series there naturally follows a question about prize money. Grammer explained his philosophy about how to fund that reward for being fast.

“Prize money is a challenge. Many series fund prize money through the entry fees. In order for them to raise the prize money they have to raise the entry fees. We are just opposed to that way of thinking. We are going to fund prize money out of sponsorship support. When you take the prize money from the entry fees you wind up having the smaller teams footing the bill for the bigger teams that end up winning the races. That creates a division between the teams and we want to eliminate that division.”

Besides paying the winners, another challenge Grammer faces is getting on the calendars of the race tracks. Here the competition to get on the track can be as tight as the competition at speed.

“Scheduling is always a challenge. It is an interesting year as venues are making sure they put together the most interesting package of racing to satisfy their sponsors. And when you run on the same weekend with a major series the costs increase substantially. Tracks naturally need to go with the series that can pay the most. Money speaks volumes!

“I would love to run a weekend at VIR and of course New Jersey Motorsports Park is at the top of our list. Road Atlanta has always been a favorite of mine. We have run successful events at Lime Rock, and we would love to run at any of the road courses like Sebring, Watkins Glen, Road America and Mid-Ohio. We have so many great road courses in America that it's impossible to narrow the list to just six! Again, there is a lot that goes into it and I hope to have a schedule ready to announce shortly.”

One more feature that should prove unique to the ATCC is the idea of a State Championship, in addition to a Drivers and Team Championship. Grammer explains the concept.

“Instead of racing under the flag of the manufacturer of the car they are going to race under the flag of the state of the team or the driver. If there is a two car team or a five car team, they could all race under the same state flag. You could have any number of cars all racing under the same state flag. The results of each of them would factor in to the final State Championship standings. I think the idea of a state rivalry would be something of interest to the fans. This is much like what the A1GP series is doing but in their case it is country versus country rather than state versus state.

“We think it will give the fans an added incentive to root for the cars and drivers from their home states. Right now we are working on the best way to display the flags on the cars. It all comes down to being a function of the sponsorship the series receives.”

As we concluded our conversation there was one area Grammer asked us to omit. But, we feel it only fair to include it here in the interest of journalistic integrity.

“Can you leave out any references to me needing to have a psychological evaluation for coming up with this idea?”

Actually, no, we can't. But Grammer's idea might not be so crazy after all. What could be crazy about going fast without breaking the bank to do it?