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## **Dominic Cicero Is Back In GT As A Member Of The Falken Family**

**05/19/09 - © Andrew S. Hartwell**

It has been several years since we last talked with Dominic Cicero. We decided this would be a good time to catch up with him and find out what this enthusiastic and talented young racer has been doing with his time. Why now? Because, after a one year absence from the entry lists of Grand-Am racing, Cicero has returned to GT racing with the new Team Falken Tire entree in the American Le Mans Series. For 2009, Falken is running a Porsche in the GT2 class for just three races in preparation for a full season run in 2010.

Readers of this column may recall our first interview with Cicero back in early 2007 when we told you about his personal trials involving his extended recovery from a serious karting accident. He had entered into a coma and his injuries were so severe a priest had been called to deliver last rites. Cicero recovered eventually only to find his father would soon succumb to cancer. He had lost his mother to cancer just five years earlier.



Dominic Cicero has been alone, without a family, for many years now and while it would have been easy to languish in despair, he chose instead to ramp up his commitment to living and to chasing his dream to be a professional racer. His resume includes stints in Formula campus, Formula Renault and the Renault V6 World Series in Europe and 4 on and off years in the Rolex series he intends to add many more pages to his personal racing history, despite a temporary loss of employment in 08.

Cicero's last full time GT ride was in 2007 when he ran in the Stevenson Corvette in the Grand-Am Rolex Series. Since the end of that season, he has filled out his time, and sustained his dreams of landing a factory ride, by coaching others in the art of driving. Cicero also continued his involvement with the Driver's Edge non-profit program. The program teaches teens about defensive driving in an atmosphere that young people can relate to. ([www.driversedge.com](http://www.driversedge.com))

Today, thanks to a successful test session, he has landed the coveted role of factory driver – along with Bryan Sellers - with the Falken effort. We will let Cicero tell us how his in-between year passed and how he came to land what will be a full time ride in 2010.

“I was hoping the Stevenson ride would continue but instead I found I was going in other directions after the season. I’ve spent a good deal of time coaching others and honing my marketing skills, in part through the creation of my new website. ([www.domincicero.com](http://www.domincicero.com))

“Over the last year and a half or so I spent time working with Scott Tucker in the Ferrari Challenge series. He is a great guy and he surrounded himself with a great organization. I also worked for Ferrari North America coaching all the drivers at the Montreal round of the series. I am going to try doing some more of that this year as it was a really cool experience.

“I also did some coaching for guys that made it to the SCCA runoffs. I just went into the year looking to make the best of what was available.

“2009 kind of looked like it would be a repeat of 2008 until Falken called me to come and do a test with them. I had talked to Rod Everett of Landmark Motorsports while at one of the racetracks and he mentioned that I should call him when the season ended. He said they were going to do a test. Well, I called him right after Christmas and bugged him a little bit and got an invitation to the test. I learned that Rod had taken a look at a number of potential drivers and I was really pleased they decided to go with me.”

Falken tire had made an initial foray into the ALMS in 2008. The team campaigned in a new car, a Ford GT, and in simplest terms the pairing simply wasn’t what Falken felt they needed. For 2009, Falken elected to go outside the normal route by creating a team of their own, much like a Peugeot or Audi factory team. They chose a Porsche GT2 as their test bed, lined up Cicero and Sellers as drivers, and began the learning process.

Cicero: “Falken wanted to overcome some of the frustrations they experienced the year before. Falken is really a marketing company that makes tires. They do a lot of cool things with their in-house marketing department. They wanted to leverage the equipment they paid for last year but things just didn’t work out. The package wasn’t there for what they wanted to accomplish.

“Falken is really into the sport of drifting. They have five cars and they try to tie in their marketing efforts with that. Bryan and I were invited out to Atlanta to hang out and see how they work. We made some cool videos of our testing. A video we made at Button Willow has already had 60,000 hits! Another one shot at Long Beach was launched last week. The videos are exciting and they serve to kind of move some of the different demographics of the drifting crowd over to the ALMS crowd and bring excitement and show the fans what the sports is.

“Another cool marketing idea is that we give away Fender guitars painted up in the Falken colors. People are getting excited about what we are doing and we are trying to get everyone ready for a full season in 2010.

“Another key element of Falken’s preparation is doing a lot of testing. We just did two days in Salt Lake and three days in Sebring. All of it is a warm up for next year. They are sort of tip toeing into the series because they want to show up with a great product.”

For Cicero, being with Falken has left him mightily impressed with their approach to professional sportscar racing and product development.

"I've never been involved in this big of a process. They just do not leave anything to chance. They are really doing a lot of homework. They want to show up next season with a product that can effectively compete with Michelin, undoubtedly the big fish in the series.

"We feel we have a comparable product right now. At Sebring we tested with them and Dunlop was also there. Michelin started to take notice of us as we could see them getting the stopwatches out. I think Falken opened some eyes."

The chemistry of compatibility is a mysterious amalgam of passion, commitment, kindness and support. Dominic Cicero feels his new employer has established an environment that promotes that kind of positive chemistry.

"So far, being with Falken has been simply awesome for me. They are a great organization. They kind of remind me of the world of racing 10 years ago. They take care of you. They do the little things that make you feel important and part of the team. They take care of your comfort and do the things that keep you focused on improving rather than having you get caught up in things that could cause stress.

"Vaughn Gitten has been with Falken as a drifting driver for some time. The first thing he said to Bryan and I was 'welcome to the family'. He said it was a great organization and it really does feel like that. It is a great group of people."

In addition to his joining the Falken world for the first time this season, Cicero is also making his first journey into the ALMS series.

"I find that running in the ALMS is a lot like running in Europe. I was in the Rolex series for a few years but, like any series, there were some flaws there. The ALMS really is a series with a lot higher level of technology in the cars. I didn't really believe that when I was in the Rolex Series. I used to just think it was just that the budgets were higher and you had to run with a factory. But I have found it is really like when I ran in Formula Renault and with Sauber in Europe. Everything is done right and corners are not cut.

"The ALMS is just different. For example, I have used Bell helmets forever. At the last minute, I had to get a new helmet for Long Beach because my two year old helmet didn't meet the ALMS safety standards. Bell didn't want to come through with a new helmet so we called SPARCO and they gave us one. It was plain white and Rod said 'you can't wear a plain white helmet', so we went to his friend, Peter Santini, to get it painted up. Peter has been in the business of automotive art for a very long time but he normally doesn't paint helmets. But he said he would help us out and he got it done for us in just three days. I picked it up from him the day before practice and I love it!

"A funny thing is, I was a Bell guy for years. We couldn't get a helmet from them so I said I'm a SPARCO man from now on!"

It is a well established fact that, more so than gasoline, it is sponsors that fuel race cars. Cicero has been working the phones and the networking scene across the entire spectrum and he has struck up a working relationship with a company that stands to benefit greatly from additional exposure within the racing community.

"I was able to land a sponsor before Falken called me. They are a shipping company called Schenker. They do international shipping. They aren't so much interested in getting their name on the car but they are definitely interested in making contacts through racing to expand their

business, building that relationship. Several things are already being worked on. Schenker is also the official shipper for the Indy Racing League. They also are the official shipper for the Olympics. We help them connect to potential customers through our racing activities. Long term they plan to become more involved as full sponsors for us.”

Besides getting back behind the wheel of a GT car, Cicero is looking ahead to playing a role in the world of NASCAR. He has his sights set on emulating someone who has successfully transitioned between the two different racing worlds.

“I drove up to Charlotte, North Carolina recently to meet with some NASCAR Nationwide Series teams. Boris Said has always been a role model for me and I would like to be one of those guys the NASCAR teams call on to run a road course. I would like to be the next Boris Said! Breaking into that world is a bit tough though but we are doing a lot of networking with the NASCAR teams that could use Schenker’s services.”

So now that we have learned what Dominic Cicero has been doing to further his racing career, we wondered what he had going on with his personal life. Was there a special someone in his life, we wondered, perhaps someone with whom he would soon be starting a family?

“You know, I have been so busy that the joke on the Falken team is that I am the only single guy there. The manager for all the Falken models told me, ‘We are going to find you a girlfriend.’”

Welcome back to the GT fast lane, Dominic Cicero.



Photo courtesy Falken Tire