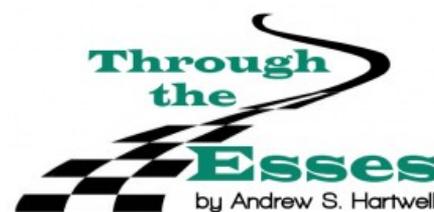


By: Through The Esses by Andrew S. Hartwell

Such is the sad state of sportscar racing today – fueled by a weak economy – that incredibly talented drivers, like Butch Leitzinger, have to patrol pit lane in civilian clothes rather than in driving suits. The world is certainly out of kilter when a man who has excelled so often now finds himself in search of a team instead of being the subject of a search.

For over 10 years Leitzinger enjoyed a special place in the sport as a member of the Dyson Racing ‘family’. His teammates included such talented and successful people as Elliott Forbes-Robinson (now retired), James Weaver (also retired) Dorsey Schroeder (retired and now a SPEED TV commentator) John Paul Jr. and Andy Wallace, and the head of the family, Rob Dyson (retired yet still active in supporting his son Chris who now runs the racing operations). And throughout his years as a family member, Leitzinger more than held his own with his peers and ‘siblings’. His talents were an integral part of the success that team enjoyed for so many years in the sportscar racing world.

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Leitzinger where he belongs – helmet on, strapped into a race car.

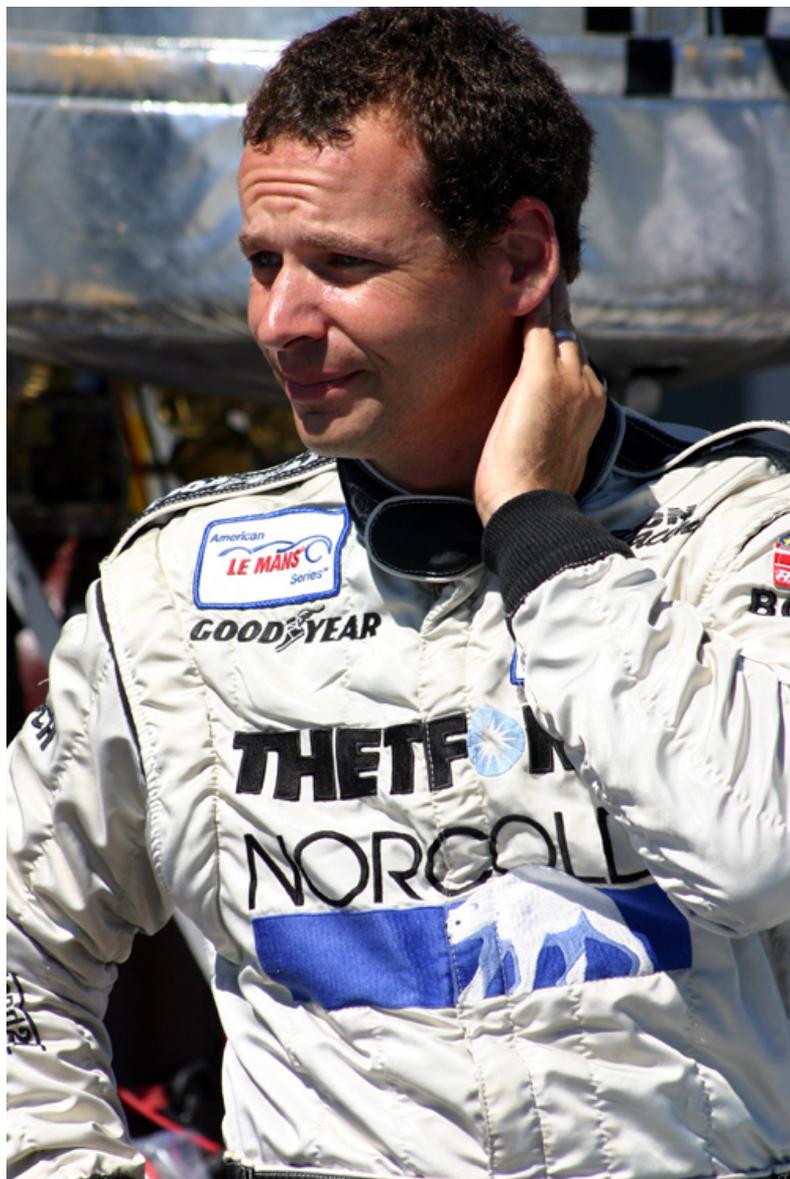
But time, like teammates and teams, moves on and now Leitzinger finds he is without a steady ride and looking to make the best of a season that started with great promise but soon fell victim to technical disagreements. The short version is that his team owners withdrew from the American Le Mans Series despite being the championship leaders. This left Leitzinger with all the tools of his trade but no office in which to ply them.

He explains what took him from the seat of a Porsche, what put him behind the wheel of an Audi, and then found him back in his civvies looking for a new opportunity.

“I started the year with a season-long ALMS ride in the Mission Foods GTC Class Porsche GT3 Cup car. We got off to a great start to the season with a win at Sebring (with Leh Keen and Juan Gonzalez) and a win at Long Beach (with Gonzalez). We were leading the championship by the fourth race but at Salt Lake City our car was disqualified for our ride height being too low. After much discussion ignited by that decision the team decided to pull out of the series and that is how I came to be looking for a new ride.”

Leitzinger’s season had actually started several weeks earlier and in another series.

“I was able to start 2010 – before Sebring – as a member of the Brumos Team at the GRAND-AM Series Rolex 24 at Daytona. That was a great experience as I grew up always watching the red, white and blue Brumos cars. I knew some of the guys there so when I was with them for the race I had a great time. Unfortunately, the engine blew! The car was very competitive and I really enjoyed the whole experience except, of course, for the engine failure.”



“Hmmm...what will I be driving next? And for whom?”

A few weeks after Daytona, and before the start of the ALMS season, Leitzinger moved from a car with an exploding engine to a car that simply exploded with speed on the race track.

“Right before the ALMS race at Sebring, I was asked to drive a former Champion Audi R8 prototype in the Historic Sportscar Racing (HSR) vintage event. THAT was fantastic! I’ve driven in HSR before but never in an Audi. I tell you, after driving that car I understand how those cars won so many races. It is a gorgeous car and so easy to drive. You just jump in and go fast! It is truly an impressive racecar.

“I remember that the first time I drove the Audi into turn one I braced my body – as I always did in every other race car going into that turn – for my spine to be beaten up going over all the bumps. In the Audi the car rode so well and maintained such good grip it was like no other car going through there. Normally you hit the bump and wait for the car to stop sliding but the Audi stayed flat all the way through the turn.

"I was glad to get the ride, replacing Andy Wallace who could not make the event. The car is owned by Jim Rogers and Andy had been driving with Bill Adam. Andy suggested to Jim that I take his place and I had a great time. They were a great group of guys. Bobby Green prepared the car and he used to work on the cars for Champion when they were running in the ALMS. Driving with Bill Adam was a lot of fun too because I knew him for a long time but I had never driven with him before.

"HSR weekends are a lot of fun because you get to drive great cars and yet everything is so laid back. It is almost as important to know where you are going to go for dinner as it is to want to win on the track! It is a really fun weekend."

While with Dyson Racing, Leitzinger piloted a number of Riley & Scott MKIII chassis and, for a very short time, an R&S MKIIIC before the team switched to the MG Lola and later to the Porsche Spyders and now the Lola Coupes. He remembered the earlier cars had decided preferences for one track over another and he marveled at how the Audi seemed well suited for any challenge.



Happy days with the Dyson team.

"When I raced with Dyson we had some great cars but they all seemed to be better suited for some tracks than for others. One of the fascinating things about the Audi was how well it performed throughout the season at all different tracks. We had races where our cars struggled and those where we knew we would have a good weekend. Mosport and Sears Point were two tracks that our Goodyear tires were well suited for. Audi seemed to have created a car that might not have been at peak performance in every category but the average was so much higher than anyone else."

We wondered if the capability of the Audis perhaps made their drivers seem, well, more capable and talented because they enjoyed a distinct advantage (fueled by lots of testing hours and Audi dollars). Leitzinger heartily disagreed.

"They were great drivers, period. All of them have won races in other cars and they were probably a big reason the Audi cars were so well developed."

Leitzinger's extensive racing resume begins years before he started driving for Rob Dyson in 1995. But it was the time he spent as a member of the Dyson family that he remembers most fondly.

"It was a brilliant time that I know I will never be able to experience again. The atmosphere was so conducive to winning. There was so much talent there including the drivers and Rob and our Crew Chief, Pat Smith, and the mechanics. Everybody was very loose and no one needed to be told what to do. There was a lot of trust between everyone with no 'hairy eyeballs' or wringing of hands because so and so was driving the car. Rob wouldn't tolerate anything other than working together. He and Pat would make sure everyone understood no one person was responsible for the success of the team; it was the team that shared the pain or the glory.

"You actually felt that if things were going smoothly you got a lot of support but if something happened while you were driving, you never were made to feel you had to pack your bags. They were all racers and they understood why things happened. When things were going badly you still had a sense of security. No one ever had – or was allowed to get - a big head."

When the funding at Dyson ran out for a second car at the end of last season, Leitzinger found himself in the unfamiliar position of having to find a new ride. The search has been an all-consuming process that has yet to yield significant results.

"I kind of let myself be flat footed by not building better networks while I was with Dyson. I also didn't maintain the contacts I made when I raced for Bentley at Le Mans. After losing the full season ride this year I had to start over again. I didn't miss that part of this sport. Having to sell yourself is not a strength for me. When I graduated from college I spent time working for my dad at one of his dealerships. It wasn't long before I realized I couldn't sell water in the desert! It just isn't easy to talk yourself up to others. My philosophy is that when you are using someone else's equipment and money to prove something about yourself you are being somewhat selfish. People hire you to do something for them, not for yourself."

While he is no longer an active member of the Dyson family, Leitzinger is the full time head of a family of his own. He and his wife Kirsten have two small children. Their son, Henry, is a year old and their daughter Annamae is five. The very day we talked with him he had just come from teaching his daughter how to ride her bike.

"We spent a few hours today helping her learn to ride her bike without training wheels. When she was about a year and a half old her grandfather bought her a little electric car. She is pretty good at driving it but she is kind of like her dad in that she seems to find anything that is possible to hit! She doesn't spend a lot of time on the brake pedal! I'm definitely not trying to steer her toward a career in racing!"

Annamae's time as a professional racer may never come and that would be OK with her parents. What would not be OK with fans of this sport, however, is a field of race cars with not one displaying the name Butch Leitzinger on the side. While he has several coals in the fire for the 2011 season, surely there is a team or two out there who could use a significant input of experience and talent to move them closer to a podium placing this season.