



ash automobilia

ash - through the *esses*

**Through The Esses –
ALMS and GRAND-AM Merger Announcement –
The Key Is Listening To The Customer**

09/05/12 © Andrew S. Hartwell
(TTE 142)

North America: Soon to be home to a singular top-level professional sports car series and championship? Yes, according to today's landmark announcement at the Daytona International Speedway. With the GRAND-AM and the American Le Mans Series principals, Jim France of the former and Dr. Don Panoz the latter, coming together to announce the merger/acquisition/alliance of the two series, the future looks bright indeed.

Scott Sharp, a competitor in both series, echoed the sentiments of many who have already posted their own reactions to the announcement on the social networking site Facebook, when he said, “I’m very excited about the potential merger of ALMS and GRAND-AM. I think bringing together the potential that both series have when it comes to TV package, scheduling, competitors and tracks, it could be huge. Hopefully, it will turn out that way.”

Hopefully indeed, for this new venture – and that is what this is, a new venture where a new organization (yet to be named) will be created – opens up a myriad number of opportunities to create a ‘product’ that will appeal to motorsports fans across the continent.

The answer to the question of ‘will that product sell?’ will only come when many hours of conversations and meetings and discussions with all the players involved take place over the next year and a half. We can only hope the sense of ‘inclusive engineering’ we took away from the announcement conference bears out and that many ideas, suggestions and opinions are in fact solicited and considered by the brain trust for the new series / organization / company. We think that GRAND-AM President/CEO Ed Bennett, and ALMS President/CEO Scott Atherton expressed their intention to ask and listen and absorb input from many sources and we find that to be the most encouraging aspect of this effort.

“Today’s announcement will transform sports car racing on this continent, along with having world-wide industry implications,” said Bennett. “Aside from the organizations involved, everybody wins: drivers, teams, manufacturers, sponsors, tracks – and most all, the fans.”

We suggest that the best way to ensure everybody wins is to actively seek out input from all those sources Bennett mentions. The mix is diverse but each element plays an equal role as a valuable data resource upon which to build a foundation. We of course refer to the tire manufacturers, the auto manufacturers, the race tracks, the drivers, the potential sponsors, the TV networks, the car builders, the team owners, the media and – number one – the fans who the series will look to for robust ticket sales.

When you boil it down, auto racing is just another form of entertainment. It is also a business. The two are intertwined and integral elements of one to the other. Success in both arenas requires the collection of data, understanding your customers, and closely examining the possible consequences of every action to a degree that borders on fanatical. Without collecting data applicable to your pursuits, without seeking input from your customers, without an enhanced and open level of communication between the leaders and those who perform in the respective arenas, there can be no success. We applaud the promise made by Atherton and Bennett and France and Dr. Panoz to ‘do this right’.

We will have one racing series beginning in 2014 and we will have only one shot of getting it right the first time. If it isn’t right the first time, customers may not come back for a second look.

Alex Job – a man who has fielded cars in both the GRAND-Am and ALMS series since 1998 - expressed his feelings about the newly formed leadership team ensuring the groundwork for success occurs when he said, “It appears that the group in Daytona are going to give themselves 18-months to forge a sturdy business and technical plan.”

Sturdy can only imply the creation of a plan that works for the majority of the players involved.

Mark Reuss, the President of General Motors North America, applauded the new joint venture and provided his input into how Chevrolet can and wishes to choose to benefit from the right choices being made before the first trailer is unloaded in preparation for the 2014 Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona. “This is an exciting moment in sports car racing.” Reuss commented. “This merger combines the best attributes of GRAND-AM Road Racing and the American Le Mans Series to create a singularly focused series. Congratulations to Jim France and Dr. Don Panoz on having the passion for sports car racing and the vision to take it to the next level. The joining of these two series will provide a foundation for Chevrolet to develop technologies and race cars with tremendous relevancy to the production vehicles we sell today and in the future.”

Relevancy: That same word applies to the fans and the team owners.

Chris Dyson, current P1 racer and Vice President and Sporting Director for Dyson Racing, shared his support and enthusiasm for the merger in his comments made today in a team press release. “The best mergers strengthen. This combination has the potential to be a significant milestone in the history of sports car racing and to foster a period reminiscent of our sport’s glory days. The addition of GRAND-AM’s historic tracks to IMSA’s existing set

of iconic tracks will only reinforce the appeal to fans, competitors and manufacturers. We are optimistic that with a continued emphasis on technical advancement, variety, high levels of on-track performance, close competition and a welcoming paddock atmosphere, unified sports car racing in North America is about to enter a new era – one of long term strength. There are always challenges involved with change, but Dyson Racing will continue to work with all in our sport to ensure the strongest possible future.”

Challenges indeed, and that is exactly why we again harp on the point of employing the single most key element going forward: asking the people who play a role in the sport what they want, boiling down the most prevalent responses to expose key indicators, and then come up with a plan that works for most everyone involved. Next, before that plan is cast in stone, let the customers review it and comment on it. Such additional feedback and input can only serve to strengthen the final outcomes.

Yes, they will need the full 18 months for sure!

And we add our voice to the conversations to provide some input from one source – our favorite source by the way – us! We think a good way to proceed would be to consider having two races at each date on the calendar. We would like to see the Daytona Prototypes and the LMP 2 cars on the track at the same time, each competing for a win and a championship within their class. That is, they race together but not against one another. We suggest a second GT-only race where you have a GT1 and GT2 class with the current ALMS GT cars in GT1 and the current GRAND-AM GT cars in GT2. They too race together with separate championships up for grabs.

Of course, while such an approach is easy for us to suggest, the technical aspects and the philosophical approach to the application of the term ‘premier class’ ensures much discussion and compromise will have to occur.

Difficulties in execution aside, we think this approach accomplishes much to the benefit of the fans, the drivers, the teams and the new organization. The teams get to continue to race the cars they already own. The fans get to see the same cars/team/drivers they love from the respective older series still out there at speed. The drivers and crew members continue to hold positions within the sport so the collateral damage of downsizing – always an integral part of any merger – is minimized.

Now, we also advocate this separation of racing be dropped in favor of all the four classes – DP, LMP, GT1, GT2 – running together, in the fashion in which sports car racing was born, at the big three (or four) events: Daytona 24 hours, Sebring 12 hours, Road Atlanta 10 hours (the former Petit Le Mans) and possibly the Six Hours of the Glen. Each of these historic venues can accommodate (we think) having all four classes on track at once. That could not happen at a track as short as Lime Rock, but we don’t see that venue as a player in what we envision as a championship within a championship, as inspired by the GRAND-AM North American Endurance Championship (NAEC) that debuted this season. All the teams would have the choice to run for either the season championship or the NAEC, or both.

We would love to see a final plan that emulates our first choice as just stated, but while we often consider our opinions to be of impeccable stature and carrying enormous weight, we readily defer to the will of the people at large. So, Mr. France, Dr. Panoz, Mr. Atherton and Mr. Bennett, please continue the journey you began with the manufacturers in the six month period leading up to today. Seek out as many opinions and ideas and suggestions as possible and put more time and effort into building a foundation that will stand the test of time.

Oh, and let's all hope the Mayan calendar is wrong.

Hey! Who wants to miss the 2014 racing season? Not us and not Alex Job. "This has been a long time coming. I am looking forward to going to the Rolex 24 Hour at Daytona in January of 2014 and then to Sebring for the 12 Hour a month-and-a-half later like the old days."

The old days with a twist: one sanctioning body presenting one product line to one audience. We'll buy that!

Visit us by clicking on the image below:

