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Through The Esses – The Spirit of Mark Donohue Envisioned Anew

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In sports car racing history, the period from the early 1960's through the mid 1970's was what many of we vintage race fans often refer to as a 'golden age'. We had the earliest iteration of the McLaren juggernaut that would come to dominate the Canadian-American Challenge Cup; the historic battles of GM versus Ford - and Donohue versus Jones and Follmer - that led so many to come to love the original Trans-Am series, and let us not forget the emergence of the aerodynamic revolution pioneered in great measure by the wonderful Chaparrals that came out of Jim Hall's Midland, Texas race shop.

It was a heady time for road racing in North America.



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Among the many heroes to become prominent in this era, one clean-cut American stood out for both his ability to drive a race car to the limit – and the checkered flag – as much as for his prowess as a development driver and engineer and his steady and calming demeanor in the face of adversity. His name is Mark Donohue and he earned the designation of ‘icon’ long before the word came to be somewhat misapplied to almost everyone laying even the slightest claim to fame or, sadly, notoriety, in society and sports nowadays.

In the current world of sports car racing there is a young man who some would argue invokes the memory of Donohue’s spirit and drive in the way he approaches the sport. Perhaps it is Matt Bell who appears to be on the road to becoming the Mark Donohue for our times.



Nicknamed ‘Captain Nice’ for his casual demeanor, Donohue was no less a competitor on the track than anyone, and while his driving style was often described as fluid and conservative, the reality was that he would do what was needed to have his race car’s tail lights shining in the other guys eyes. Bell too is a quiet man who sets about tackling difficult issues and engineering challenges with a quiet and reserved demeanor. They are much alike in that regard.

Ten years after Mark Donohue died in a racing accident at the Austrian Grand Prix (Formula 1) in 1975, Matt Bell was born. Bell naturally has no memories of that great American racer and engineer but he does now find himself a part of the same world of motorsports in which Donohue excelled as both a racer and a man with an appreciation for and awareness of the workings of race engineering. So far in his career, Bell too has begun to establish himself as a man with the talent to drive a race car and understand the engineering aspects that, when successfully merged, can result in a career filled with opportunity and reward.

Since 2010, Bell has been driving a Stevenson Motorsports Camaro GS.R in the Continental Tire Sports Car Challenge Series (CTSCCS). He is paired again this season, as in 2012, with co-driver John Edwards. We caught up with Bell recently and he told us how he – like Donohue - wants to do more than just drive a race car to win, he wants to emulate Donohue by coming to fully understand all the aspects of gaining speed that come both behind the wheel and during the design and testing phases. In addition, he wants to ‘move up the ladder’ and race a variety of cars and have exposure to the engineering that goes into them.

“I enjoy reviewing and understanding the engineering aspects of what the car is doing out on the track.” Bell told us. “With our GS.R Camaro, now that I have driven it for several seasons, I feel I can give useful feedback to the team engineers and so far, I think they respect my input. I think it is important to understand how the different changes we make to the car in testing and practice impact its performance. I also feel that I need to demonstrate to the team that I want to continue to learn. I think they appreciate that my approach is to be a partner with them and not be someone with whom they cannot effectively communicate. I think I demonstrate to them that I am only looking to learn and improve for everyone’s benefit and not because I have an inflated ego of my worth as a development driver.”

That sounded to us like something a young Mark Donohue would say.

Stevenson Motorsports Team Manager Mike Johnson praised Bell’s contributions both behind the wheel and as a stabilizing force. “Matt has been a large part of the success of our GS program.” Johnson told us. “Since we have had multiple co-drivers and engineers through our three year program, he has brought stability, consistency and speed and uncanny ability to get the most out of the car when it is not running at its maximum potential. I hope he can continue to be a part of our GS program especially with the development of the 2014 Camaro coming next year.”

Bell’s professional racing career only began five years ago when he paid for a ride in a professional series his first season. “I started racing in 2008 when I paid for my rides in the GRAND-AM ST class with Turner Motorsports. I don’t have a history of karting or driving in race school series – or the SCCA regional or national races - as a foundation for what I do now. It was only when I considered my options out of high school that I decided that the money I had planned for college would be better spent on pursuing my ambitions to learn the art of driving and engineering race cars. To that end, I took what little money I had to work with and used it to get real hands-on driving experience.”

Bell’s performance on the track in just his first five seasons includes several noteworthy achievements. He has collected six wins in the GRAND-AM Continental Tire Sports Car Challenge Series, two while driving the Turner Motorsports BMW in only his second season of professional racing, and four with the Stevenson Motorsports GS Camaro. In just his second season of racing alone he tied the all-time pole-setting record by qualifying on the pole in five of eleven (5 of 11) races and he would go on to win two of those races while with Turner Motorsports. In 2012, Bell finished second in the CTSCCS overall driver’s championship, driving the No. 9 Stevenson Motorsports Camaro GS.R.

Bell also impressed very early by finishing second at the Iowa round of his first professional racing season (and 12th overall in the season points standings). His stellar on track performance to date at this early point in his career resulted in his name showing up on the radar of some influential people in the sport.

“I enjoyed some success after that first season,” Bell noted, “and – with the welcome help of friends I made in racing – I landed a paid position with the Stevenson Motorsports Team as well as a few rides in a Kevin Doran-built Daytona Prototype. The first season with Stevenson was more or less a trial run to establish my capabilities and, as it turned out, the opportunity to become a paid professional followed when I entered my second year of driving with the team.”

Bell continues: “I don’t yet have as many varied experiences as many of the others, like my co-driver John Edwards, who have spent time driving all sorts of vehicles from karts to open wheel racecars. I want to gather up as much experience as I can in a number of different cars but that experience doesn’t come by having only short runs and one-off races. You need to have a season or two to really come to grips with what makes a particular car fast. Right now I would love to have a full season ride in GT but to get that opportunity you need to really shine above the bulk of the rest of the drivers who are all looking to land that same ride.”

Donohue’s career spanned 15 years. While no one – at this early juncture in his career - can defend a complete argument for young Matt Bell to be considered the Mark Donohue of his generation, there are parallels and circumstances that suggest he may be on the path to achieve at least some measure of the success, popularity and respect for which Donohue is remembered. Some circumstances can only be considered, well, circumstantial or perhaps simply coincidental, but others do suggest a Donohue-like spark of talent and drive, as well as a high degree of engineering skill, exists within Bell.

A circumstantial parallel can be seen in the context in which Bell found himself in the 2010 season – his third as a pro – driving in the CTSCCS. For that season, Bell was teamed with Jeff Bucknum, the son of Ronnie Bucknum, a great American racer who was also Mark Donohue’s teammate in the truly iconic dark blue and yellow Sunoco Camaros of late ‘60’s Trans-Am racing fame. The 2010 Stevenson Camaro was painted in the same Sunoco blue and yellow colors which served to suggest it was the reincarnation of the original Donohue/Bucknum car.



Vintage race fans loved it as it brought back so many wonderful memories. Unfortunately, early season issues with the driveline, followed by several mechanical issues throughout the year, served to hamper the duos prospects and in the end, Bell and Bucknum would go on to finish eighth in the season's point standings with four top ten finishes and a second place finish at Virginia International Raceway as their best single result.

It wasn't the kind of season that had helped cement Donohue's place in the heart of now-vintage race fans, but it was a season of promise and homage to the Donohue legacy, and Bell was a part of it all.

Additional ride opportunities may be starting to open up for Bell. He co-drove the APR Motorsport Audi R8 in this year's Rolex 24 at Daytona (they finished 12th in the GT class and 20th overall). In 2012, When Team Owner John Stevenson decided to run two cars in the GT class of the Rolex GRAND-AM series, at select events that were part of the North American Endurance Championship, he chose his GS driver Bell to be one of the GT drivers. This put Bell into two different series giving him exposure to two different levels of competition where the CTSCCS has more pro-am teams vying for wins while the teams in the Rolex GRAND-AM series tend to include more professionals and fewer amateurs.

Bell: "In the sport of road racing, so many of the teams at the lower levels – club racing and spec Miata and so on – are filled with mostly non-professional drivers, people who want to race but don't see racing as their vocation. This is true even at the GS and GT levels but the ratio of amateurs to professionals really skews higher towards the pros when you move upwards, with the ratio of professionals growing highest at the top tier levels like the DPs and the Le Mans Prototypes. It's an uphill battle from the bottom as it is hard to be seen in the massive club fields and hard to figure out ways to win in the trimmed-down upper classes. I would like to continue to grow and learn at each level with a full season or two at each step up to the top."

Growth comes with experience and maturity. Donohue is often remembered as being a thoughtful and considerate thinker, one who weighs his options and considers all the variables that may exist in a given situation. Bell seems set to follow in Donohue's footsteps in this regard through an earnest and steady effort to gain experience and balance the emotions and aggressive nature a professional racer must possess against the realities of surviving in the sport.

We once read that Mark Donohue's sister noted that Mark was someone who always stayed calm in the face of adversity and considered all possible outcomes of an action. If memory serves, and our memory can be as faulty as a Lucas electric system, she once cited a story about a sudden fire in a family building that Mark somewhat casually put out by calmly following a path he determined to be the most efficient to rectify the 'problem'. Young Matt Bell has a similar approach to considering actions and consequences and he told us how he applies that sort of logical reasoning to the 'problem' of winning a race.

"I often spend the night before a race thinking about various turns and actions that can occur." Bell noted. "I try to envision where problems can occur and how I would react if the car breaks free in a particular turn. What would others do if we went into a corner side by side? Where can I change my approach so as to get through that corner a little faster? I try to play the race over in my head before it has even been run. I've done that since day one. I consider it my secret to moving through the classes so quickly out of club racing, and really one of the reasons why I strive to understand each car I drive in such detail. The more

information I have about how the car works, the more accurate my mental model will be. This way, my simulated situations will be adequately close to the real thing.”

Another facet of Bell’s approach to getting to the front would at first, seem just the opposite of what earned Donohue the nickname “Captain Nice”. Bell has a similarly calm demeanor when not behind the wheel as did Donohue, but he becomes a serious and determined competitor once the green flag waves. This too is a Donohue-like trait that Bell possesses.

While Donohue’s peers such as George Follmer and Parnelli Jones – his fiercest rivals in the Trans-Am series – would probably tell you Mark wasn’t all that ‘nice’ on the race track, Donohue’s career record suggests he was in fact simply a man who could go faster without resorting to driving in an unsafe manner. Just don’t play hard with the Captain without expecting some payback. In Bell’s case, he is sometimes referred to as ‘an animal’ on the track. Like a pressured Mark Donohue, Bell isn’t above making his presence known at speed but, like Donohue, he brings his mental acuity to bear rather than simply bully his way to the front.

Bell – again, like Donohue - strives to outthink the competition and he will use a bit of sheet metal contact to facilitate the lesson. Nothing too aggressive mind you, (unless called for) but just enough to plant concern in the minds of the other driver.

Bell: “I enjoy the prospect of close racing and letting the other guy know I am running with them. I am not above giving a little bump or push to just get the other guy to break his concentration long enough for me to perhaps pick up a quarter second advantage. As you can imagine, my actions sometimes come rewarded with a rude gesture but that is OK. What I wanted to do was give the other guy cause to wonder and perhaps, by doing so, interfere with his ability to concentrate enough to find those tenths of a second that can let me go by.

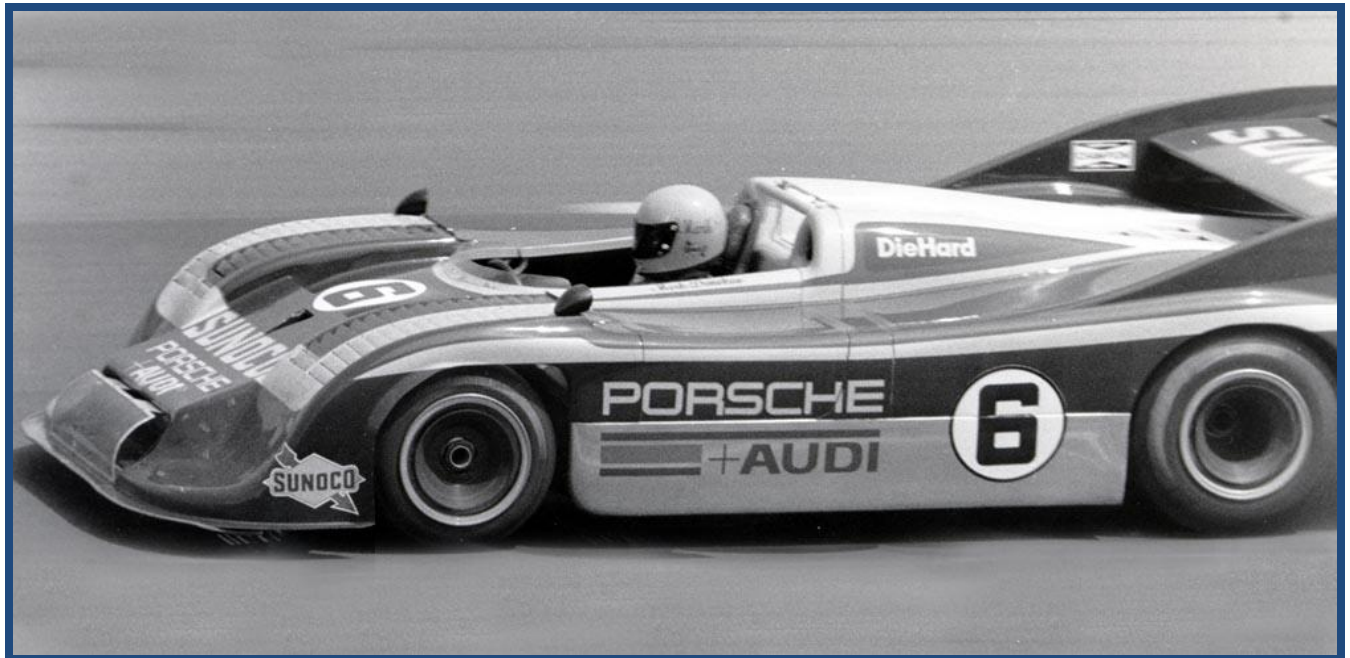
“For example,” Bell continued, “at Road America in 2011, we were in our worst qualifying position of the season, something like 12th or 13th on the grid. Before the race I walked the entire paddock telling everyone that I was really upset with that and that I would be driving like a madman to get to the front as quickly as possible. The tactic seemed to work as several cars in front of me on the grid seemed to give way rather quickly so as to avoid the ‘nut job’ in the Camaro! I think I made it from 12th to 3rd in just a couple of laps, eventually finding ourselves on the top step of the podium for the first time with a Camaro GS.R.

“I remember a few passes in that race,” Bell continued, “one where we had just put our headlights on and while following another Camaro I tried something that I imagined might work. I approached the other car just peeking to the right. A few moments before the braking zone, I snapped the car left and turned off the lights. I know the other driver saw my headlights coming but now I was not visible and he had to be wondering where I was. That moment of wondering and worrying about where I might be– that break in his concentration - is exactly the kind of advantage I like to seek out on a race track. I enjoy the mental aspects of this form of competition and how you can outwit to out maneuver the other guy and possibly put yourself in a better position to win.”

In Donohue’s time, he was a key block in the foundation of the Roger Penske racing empire. Now entering his fourth season with John and Susan Stevenson’s team, Bell too finds himself in an environment that nurtures and encourages his development. He has a supportive team owner and a great crew that provide

him with a similar measure of support to that which was such a vital part of Donohue's success. He too is a block in the foundation of the team's success.

It was often said the Roger Penske and Mark Donohue enjoyed an 'unfair advantage'. While there were some moments along the way where a bit of rules stretching and ingenious operating procedures would positively impact the Penske/Donohue results tally, Donohue's inherent advantage was to always work hard to put himself in a better position to win. They were different times, a different era and a very different sport back then, but today is no less a time for talent and determination to reach a place of prominence. Perhaps, when Matt Bell's racing days end, current race fans will have come to revere Bell in a way as do we 'vintage fans' who fondly remember Mark Donohue. If not, we can, perhaps, at least say we thought we saw Mark's spirit alive and at speed again.



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