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Through The Esses - George Robinson Is Hunting For The Rolex 24 Podium

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George Robinson is a wild game hunter who enjoys the aspects of stealth and cunning required to pursue and land his prey, be it bird, deer, alligator or the steps of a sportscar racing podium. The owner of the 74 Ranch Resort in Texas - a haven for like minded individuals who visit there to hunt, fish or shoot clay targets - Robinson knows quite a lot about bidding his time in a blind, or on a woodland trail, or before a big race, just waiting for the right opportunity to pounce.

Today we learned that Robinson owns a Lexus powered Riley Daytona Prototype, and he has had it in his possession since August of this year. Now if that isn't laying low out of the sightline of journalists and competitors, we don't know what is. But this cunning hunter has a plan because he knows where the sportscar 'deer' will forage come next February and he plans to be right smack in the midst of the herd ready to spring a surprise.



After a two year absence as a team owner, Robinson will be back at the Rolex 24 in February in his own 74 Ranch Racing entered Daytona Prototype. With minimal prodding from us, he let the bear out of the trap, the fish out of the net, the car out of the garage, the cat out of...oh, you get the idea. He told us all about his new machine and his return to sportscar racing as a team owner.

"We will be at the Rolex 24 in our new Lexus-Riley. My co-drivers will be Wally Dallenbach, Paul Dallenbach and Johnny Unser. We have all raced together before at the Rolex, and at Sebring and other races. We have a long history of friendship and driving together. And that is one of the great things about Daytona and the 24, it gets you together with your good friends, who can drive well, and you get to race around the clock. Each and every one of these guys has had a great racing career and they can all get in and hustle the car around the track.

“I have always enjoyed going to Daytona for the Rolex 24. It is a place that you go to once a year and hope to have a good shot at winning. There is an awful lot of competition this year for this great race too. All in all it is a really fun race to be a part of.

“We (Jack Baldwin, Shane Lewis and Robinson) ran the Rolex 24 last year with Steve Southard in the #7 Pap-Parts BMW-Fabcar. That was really just a trial run for us to see how well that car ran. And I do love that race because it is one in which you can have as good a shot as anyone with the right preparation and a bit of luck on your side.”

“Jimmy Fraser will of course be our crew chief again, that goes without saying. And the bulk of the 74 Ranch Racing crew will be back with us. Some guys are committed elsewhere but for the most part, everybody that has been with us at some point in my career will be with us at Daytona. And I really appreciate these guys because they give it their best shot. They all get along very well and we all work well together.”

A 24 hour endurance race requires a degree of certainty about the ability of the car you will be driving. And certainty is only gained through repeated testing and the process of developing a close familiarity with your racecar. Given that it is already November and the start of the new season is coming up fast, we suggested Robinson might not have enough ammunition for the big Florida hunt to come. But this hunter has been quietly busy getting ready for his quest to bag a Rolex watch.

“We have had the car since August and have already tested it on three occasions. Shane Lewis came down and worked with us at our tests at Homestead and we made some great strides. We feel we have a pretty good handle on the car and how it works. We plan to be at Homestead for the upcoming test days and again at the Daytona test days. We are very pleased with the performance of the car and it seems to be reacting positively to the changes we have been making. I am very encouraged.”

While the growth of the Grand AM Rolex DP class has been nothing short of phenomenal – over 30 Daytona Prototypes are expected at Daytona – the chassis choices available to potential racers has essentially boiled down to far fewer than the seven original options. Over time, the Picchio, Multimatic and Chase marques have all sort of fallen away from the pack with the Riley, Doran and Crawford models seeming to be the only ones attracting new buyers. Teams running Dave Klym’s Fabcar chassis have shown that their potential to compete with the ‘big 3’ is improving but recent press releases from new entrants all seem to have only the words Riley, Crawford or Doran in them .

Given this state of the constructor’s nation, we wondered how Robinson came to select the Riley over the Doran or the Crawford models. Or why he didn’t break the mold altogether and go with one of the others.

“I went with the Riley because I have always had a good relationship with Bob and Bill Riley (Robinson campaigned several Riley chassis in IMSA and Grand Am events, enjoying success at several venues) and their whole team. I looked at the Crawford too but come the end of the day I had to decide and I went with the Riley. And I think the Lexus-Riley set up has certainly proven itself this season.”

Clear enough. Robinson has owned several Riley & Scott cars, and one Reynard, and has enjoyed some stirring drives in them along with his longtime driving partner Jack Baldwin. (Baldwin is now teamed with Jim Tafel in the GT class, but there are hints that a DP chassis

may be in their future too.) We wondered what Robinson had done with those “old” open top prototypes.

“I sold the original R&S MKIII car to a vintage racer who put a Judd engine in it and he seems to be enjoying the car. I donated the Reynard to the Collier Foundation to add to their collection of race cars. The R&S MKIIIC is still sitting in our garage and I am hoping to sell it. There is nothing wrong with the car and it is available.”

Unfortunately, while Robinson’s new racer will be “available” at the Rolex; it appears fans will not see much of the 74 Ranch Lexus-Riley after the opening round of the 2005 Grand Am season.

“At the moment, the only sponsor on the car will be the 74 Ranch. There are ongoing talks taking place now but I am fairly conservative about talking about those kinds of things because I like to wait until they are certain. Right now I have nothing firmed up for after the Rolex. We don’t have any substantial sponsors lined up just yet. If we did I would be happy to run the full season but without them it wouldn’t really work. I wouldn’t have much choice other than to park the car without sponsorship. I’m not a guy to go out and land – or even look for – a paying ride with someone else.

“But, that said, I’m comfortable with running the Rolex because it is such a great race by itself.”

Robinson respects what Grand Am has done to establish a new ‘product’ and bring some consistency to a sport long governed by whim and the wind.

“The Grand Am seems to be a stable organization with a lot of interest being shown in the Rolex series by great drivers and teams. It looks like the formula is stable and, I think, it is what you need in the sport. I don’t think there are sweeping changes coming that could lead to an economic disaster. There is a lot of good, clean competitive racing and I think the formula is the right one for sportscar racing.”

While Robinson is looking forward to success at Daytona, his thoughts are also with his son and his success in another form of Motorsports competition.

“My son Gar is doing great in quarter midgets. He managed to win a championship his first year out and we are very proud of him for that. He moved up a class and has done very well and won a lot of races. Jimmy Fraser has been a real help to us with Gar’s career and he has been wonderful for our whole family. I am probably as excited about Gar’s success as I am about any new race car!”

And not to be outdone by her older brother, Blair, at eight years old has already been categorized by her father as “A great shot! She has killed deer, alligators and lots of rabbits!” It seems the talent for bagging the trophy is in the Robinson genes!

George Robinson, the hunter, racer and father, is bringing his competitive mindset to the next Grand Am race. Why? Because he enjoys the excitement of the hunt.

“You know, everybody that is involved in racing has to be competitive minded. There certainly isn’t much opportunity for making money at racing as a business so most people go into this for the competition and to be involved in something that is fun to do. I used to make the kinds of statements race drivers typically do but it all boils down to me just having a blast doing something I enjoy. To me it just has to be fun and sportscar racing usually fits that bill.”

And if he can find someone to help pay the racing bills, perhaps the many fans of the 74 Ranch race team will see him having fun a full 14 times in 2005.

