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Through The Esses - Letting Go Of Tradition And The Wheel

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With the introduction and rapid growth of the Grand American Road Racing Association's Daytona Prototype class, the world of top level prototype sportscar road racing has been tilted on its axis. The earth still turns in the same direction but the gravity of the situation for gentlemen racers has been changed. And the changes being wrought have opened up some interesting questions.



Barber

Dyson

Lienhard

Buckler

At the start, road racing in America was all about the rich guy with the hot new European street car that didn't look anything like everybody else's American made street car. It was about the gentlemen with money to burn, racing each other on private land in pursuit of bragging rights and a maybe a bottle of champagne or a trophy. The racing went in every direction – up hill, around corners to the left and to the right, under bridges, and even over railroad tracks. It was called 'road racing' for a reason.

Today, anyone wishing to go road racing in an American series - running a car at the top prototype level – has to choose one of two options. They can elect to run a 'pure' prototype LMP1 class chassis in the American Le Mans Series (ALMS) or they can go with the newly-defined prototype as it exists within the Grand American Road Racing Associations (Grand Am) Rolex Series. The former is most closely linked with traditional sportscar prototypes in that the cars tend to represent the latest in technological advances and are priced accordingly. The latter is more closely associated with a kind of hybrid racer that combines a measure of technological prowess with a good dose of financial restraint.

For a gentlemen racer, there are several considerations to review before committing resources to either series. In the ALMS, the cost to set up and run a team is said to be fairly substantial. Conversely, it has been said the return on an investment made in a Grand Am effort will be both initially smaller and will depreciate over a much longer period. We can not debate all of the economic considerations at play here as we are no ones idea of a "bean counter". Hell, all we know about beans are that they often come with franks on a plate.

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But coming back to considerations for a moment, a gentlemen racer has to ask why they want to be involved in either series in the first place. Is it to simply be racing against better drivers so you can say at the end of the race that you may not have won, but you at least finished ahead of so and so (who probably broke down but some bragging tales are best told without all the details)? Is it to simply go fast in a top level class? Is it to simply have a really neat event to bring your friends and business clients to, where they can watch you pretend to be a real racer? Is it just an expensive way to have fun?

Whatever the reasons for getting involved in the first place, there is always the question of motivation to stay involved. In light of some recent developments centered on gentlemen drivers continuing their involvement as driver/owners, we wonder if the day of the gentlemen racer in prototype competition has all but passed.

Perhaps it has for four very prominent gentlemen? Men you would have to call traditional sportscar racers. Here is a brief look at the four that come readily to mind, for each has seen their involvement in racing change significantly over the last year or so.

Fredy Lienhard – As was recently announced, the head of the Lista Company has recognized his time as a competitive driver in a front line professional series has come to an end. While he plans to have a reduced Motorsports presence supporting Didier Theys career and the racing efforts of his long time associate Kevin Doran, his plans do not include driving in the Rolex Series, nor in the American Le Mans Series. This gentleman racer will be driving in a handful of vintage races and that is about it.

Kevin Buckler – The long time head of The Racers Group Porsche GT effort, Buckler too recently announced he was letting go of the wheel in all but the Daytona 24 Hours race in 2005. He concluded that his new pair of Crawford Daytona Prototypes can only challenge for the series championship if he has better drivers weaving them through traffic. He plans to serve as team manager and, like the teams in NASCAR, he will look to run with professionals who preferably can bring sponsorship dollars to the table.

Rob Dyson – With his son Chris progressing so well as a professional racer, and his Lola LMP cars getting faster and faster every race, Dyson knows in his heart that the only way he can expect to ever knock the Audis off the podium is from a supportive position centered in the pits, not in the car. We think it means so much to him to come out on top in this fight that he knew pulling out all the stops meant pulling for his son, and several other outstanding drivers, to get the job done in his stead. And the move to Michelin tires should certainly bring his team closer to realizing Rob's dream for him.

Forest Barber – He came into prototype racing because his friend and instructor Terry Borcheller thought he would enjoy the competition. And Barber did enjoy the series and the taste of early victory when the number of competitors was small. But there are more and more highly skilled drivers and teams coming into the series with each passing week. It seems that Barber too has decided that if his team is to win, and support the funding provided by Kodak, it can only do so by pairing Borcheller with another professional driver.

Now, we have presented just four examples here of gentlemen drivers – professionals in business who enjoyed the competition and excitement of driving a top-line sportscar – but have decided to let go of the steering wheel. There are others too who might be about to hang up their helmets. ALMS Viper pilot Tom Weickardt comes to mind. At least Weickardt has made sounds that indicate the possibility is strong that he will drop out of racing, even though we have

heard those sounds from him before. But since he is running in the GTS class, and not in a top level prototype, we won't include him or others outside of prototypes in this discourse.

And, despite the stacking of the deck against them, there are of course other gentlemen drivers who are still planning to plug themselves smack into the middle of the prototype grid. We assume because, after all, it is still fun to be driving a racecar. Names like Mike Baughman, Larry Huang, Doug Goad (Grand Am) and Jon Field (ALMS) come to mind here. But, with the recent decline in entrants in ALMS competition at the top prototype levels, and the influx of new teams in the Grand Am Rolex 'parity rules' series, is it becoming clear that the gentlemen racers time at the top level of sportscar racing has nearly passed?

In the ALMS, the Audi R8 has proven it possesses all of the sturdy attributes of a steamroller in combination with a rate of speed more akin to an Air Force fighter jet. It is extremely difficult to beat an Audi R8. But even an Audi R8 can't win without a pro at the wheel. Well, maybe that's not true. I could probably win driving an R8. Well, OK, that's ridiculous. I couldn't win if I was in the Air Force jet. But let's not go there (or up there, thank you).

In the Rolex series, the level of competition is rapidly rising. It is almost to the point where, while you don't have one Audi R8 dominator (although the CGR cars certainly seem to be auditioning for the role) you do have a handful of teams that can win at any time. Besides strong organizations, substantial sponsor dollars, effective chassis/engine combinations and experienced staff, the one thing the top teams all have in common is the use of paid professional drivers. Why? Because those sponsors want results and if you want to beat the other guys best, you have to put your best on the starting grid.

We are at a point in the history of top level sportscar racing where the gentleman racer has been virtually relegated to the role of team owner exclusively. Yes, the gentlemen racers are still out there (reference the names we mentioned earlier) suiting up for battle, but the question we ask is; if the need to compete successfully demands paid professionals be behind the wheel exclusively – ala NASCAR - will the role of owner/observer be interesting enough, or exciting enough, or enjoyable enough for them to want to stay involved in the sport at all?

Will we see more and more teams coming along with a clear objective to run their racing operations like any other successful business enterprise? To run their prototype teams like NASCAR teams run their stock cars, as a professional business with professional hired help, looking to turn a profit.

Will sportscar racing really become NASCAR – the sequel? Has it already?

We put that question to our readers and we welcome your feedback. If you have an opinion, why not go to the Race Site forum and start a thread on the subject? We would love to read your comments.

As for us aged race fans, we will simply continue to enjoy the diversity of exotic automobiles found in the American Le Mans Series (although our attention may switch to the LMP2 and GTS classes) and the intense level of close competition found in the Grand Am Rolex Series. After all, we don't have any money invested in this, outside of the price of a ticket. And no one ever mistook us for gentlemen!