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## Through The Esses - Rodger Hawley Orbits Into The DP World

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Anyone awake and watching the state of sportscar racing in North America is aware of the explosive growth of the Daytona Prototype class in the Grand American Road Racing Association Rolex sportscar series. It seems that every month that passes brings news of new teams buying cars to join the grids, beginning with the 2005 season. We caught up with one of the latest new members of the 'Daytona racing' fraternity – Orbit Racing Team Owner Rodger Hawley – and learned quite a bit about what lies ahead for this experienced, and yet new, Pontiac-Riley team.



Hawley explains why the DP class was the avenue of choice for him and car owner Jim Matthews.

“I talk to a lot of people and there is nobody I am talking to these days who doesn't have a renewed interest in sportscar racing as a function of the Daytona Prototype class. It is unreal. From drivers to casual observers to team owners, everyone is asking me questions. I really see no end to the growth at this moment. If someone told me this coming year at Daytona there would be 35 DP cars on the grid, I would agree with them. If they told me there would be 50 the year after that, I would probably agree with them on that too.”

Hawley and Matthews have some history together and apart, with both men having been in the racing game for many years.

“Jim and I go back to 1997, when he was racing a Porsche 3.8 RSR. I was his lead mechanic back then. We had some really great success with that car right out of the box at Daytona with Hurley Haywood, David Murry and Doc Bundy. We scored a second in class. That was the “Turkey Car”, back when Jim owned the Carolina Turkey company.”

(Several years ago, Matthews also ran a Riley & Scott prototype with Carolina Turkey sponsorship.)

Hawley has a long history of working on cars. This 39 year old engineer and mechanical craftsman has been putting wrenches to bolts and torches to metal since his teenage years.

“I have basically been working on Porsches since I was 15 years old. That makes it about 25 years now. My first love has been Porsches since I was 5 or 6 years old. I was just drawn to Porsches. I have no family background in racing. I was just always enthralled by Porsche – and I still am! I spent many years in the restoration and street car service business and never really considered racing as a reality. One day I looked up at some racing posters in a Porsche shop and I saw 962s and 935s and I just got interested and gravitated towards racing.

“When I was about 15 or 16 years old I worked as a crew member with cars running at circle tracks. I’ve raced bicycles since I was age 14 or 15 so it seems I have always been around racing of some kind. But what really got me hungry was a guy named Dennis Aase. Dennis has been racing for a long time. He is a racer’s racer. He would win on Sunday and be back in his shop working hard again on his racecars first thing Monday morning. The guy never stops.

“When you are getting into racing, and you want to race sportscars, it is a big mystery and you wonder how you get into it. I had seen the Aase name before and I knew he was in California and I knew he was doing different projects so I just called him out of the blue one day. I told him I really wanted to get into racing. About four months later he called me up and said he was putting together a team. One of the most esteemed Porsche crew chiefs ever, Walter Gerber, was called in to be crew chief for this startup. Dennis bought a brand new Carrera 3.8 RSR and was planning to run it all year in the IMSA series. It was with Aase that I really started to formulate my racing philosophies and schoolings. At that point I had gone to racing full time and was dealing with people like Gerber and Porsche Motorsports Director Alwin Springer.

“I worked in shops in both southern California and Arizona until I made the transition to all racing. My company today is called Orbit Tuning. We work on very top end street cars and we address special projects for Porsche owners. We work almost exclusively on Porsche cars. Our shop is in Jupiter, Florida.”

Hawley has had the Riley for a short time now and is just getting used to working with a non-Porsche race car. But expectations are high and his vast mechanical and organizational skills will be aptly applied to the challenges ahead.

“It made sense to us to go with a Riley because both Jim and I have had working relationships with Bill Riley in the past. And the Riley chassis – like the Crawford – has proven itself on the track. Although the American V8 power plant is foreign to me, we have a great engine program headed by Bob Cronin at CRD. I think Pontiac power is the best engine package and that is why I chose it.”

“We got the car in November. In fact, we were bringing the car back from our very first test just as a hurricane was bearing down on our shop! We got through it with just some minor water damage. We did a roll out of the car at VIR just to make sure we had no fluid leaks and that everything was functioning properly. This past weekend we participated in the Homestead test days testing the Hoosier tires. I have run some cars in club races that ran on Hoosiers but I have never had a working relationship with them, so the tests were a new experience for us.”

2005 looks to be a whole season of new experiences for the Orbit team as their Pontiac-Riley is scheduled to start every race.

“We plan to run every race in the Rolex series in 2005. Jim Matthews and Marc Goosens are confirmed for the 24 hours. We plan to add another driver or two but we aren’t ready to announce that yet. And we are also looking to be a two car team as there are certain cost benefits. It allows certain infrastructure situations that are more cost effective. We anticipate growing to a two car team in the future.”

Orbit Racing will also field a Porsche GT3 Cup car in the GT class of the Rolex Series. The effort continues a solid working relationship between Joe and Jay Policastro and Rodger Hawley.

“The Policastro’s have been friends of mine for years and we had the opportunity to race together two years ago in the ALMS. It is just something we enjoy doing and plan to continue doing well into the future. The Porsche GT3 Cup car is owned by the Policastro’s.”

Hawley’s experience with Porsche GT cars includes having run Leo Hindery’s YES Network effort in the ALMS.

“Leo Hindery was my primary customer and I would say he brought me from total obscurity. When he wanted to run his own program he called me up and said, ‘I want you’, and that got us going down the road together. He also introduced me to Kyle Petty who has raced with us several times. In 2001 we had a couple of cars in Grand Am. In 2002 and 2003 we ran in the ALMS and ran at Le Mans. This year I had an entry at Le Mans that I shared with Leo and then this year we ran one car in Grand Am. We won our class and got second overall at the Rolex 24. Mike Rockenfeller was chasing Johnny Mowlem down at the end and it was pretty exciting.”

Speaking with Hawley, a very quiet and reserved gentlemen who has little interest in being in the spotlight, there is no doubt but that he finds the Grand Am approach to racing sportscars to be an incredibly intelligent and cost-effective way to go racing. But he didn’t start out thinking that way.

“I think I was similar of mind to a lot of people in the beginning, when the Grand Am formula was announced. I was very entrenched in the ALMS and I am definitely thrilled about having been to Le Mans. At the start, I really didn’t see the Daytona Prototype class suiting what I thought I wanted to do. But I think it has evolved into a very competitive series. The manufacturers are coming out and joining the series. I think that the manufacturer’s support of the DP teams is really getting people excited.

“The way they have stabilized the rules and done everything they can do to make it cost effective is just so appealing. I have no doubt that one of the single most important virtues of this series is the stabilization gained by going with one tire manufacturer. It is just an absolute crime to being going out to race against an identical car that has a tire that gives them an advantage of a second or two a lap. If nothing else, that is something that gives every one of us team owners and engineers a good feeling to know we aren’t trying to beat another manufacturer’s tire.

“There is nothing I have seen in this series that doesn’t make sense from the level of a business owner like me who loves racing and is involved in it from every level from top to bottom. I am making financial decisions and engineering decisions and it all just makes sense. And the people at the other end of the phone, when you talk to Roger Edmondson or Mark Raffauf or anyone in Grand Am, they are actually there listening to you and giving you some feedback.”

Hawley has shared some time with us and given us a better understanding of where he has been and where the Orbit Racing team is headed. But if we hadn't called him, who knows what the world would really know about him.

"I am a very quiet guy. My first priority is to get my customers the most for their money. I'm glad people don't really know that much about me because if they did, it would probably mean I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing!"

We suspect Rodger Hawley will continue to quietly go about his business but his work could mean Jim Matthews and his driving partners may make some noise next season.