



ash - through the esses

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Through The Esses - Rick Howard Is Racing With Friends

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Rick Howard is one half of the Howard - Boss Motorsports team that runs a pair of Crawford DP03 Daytona Prototype race cars in the Grand Am Rolex sportscar series. This former restaurateur and investor hooked up with Dave Brule (owner of Boss Snowplows, hence the Howard-Boss name) to stay involved in racing while working with some very good friends. We refer to Max and Jan Crawford, and Elliott Forbes-Robinson.

The Crawford's own and operate Crawford Composites and Crawford Race Cars. They build both specific and custom parts for race cars - most notably the spec rear wing and side pods used on all Daytona Prototype cars. The Crawford's also provide support for their customers including the Howard-Boss Motorsports team that campaigns the #2 CITGO and #4 Boss Snowplow cars. (On occasion, a #20 car will appear on track as well.) In the first full season for the team, they managed to pull down two wins for car #2 and one for car #4.



Elliott Forbes-Robinson is the perennial young gun who - at an age where he qualifies for the Wednesday senior citizen discount at Kohl's department stores, and membership in AARP - continues to display extraordinary talent behind the wheel of a race car. It was Elliott and co-driver Butch Leitzinger who pulled down that victory for the #4 car at the Porsche 250 at Barber Motorsports Park. And his lengthy racing resume includes everything from Formula Super Vees to Winston Cup to ALMS Prototypes to off road racing to Daytona Prototypes.

In talking with Rick Howard, it was abundantly clear to us that he holds a great deal of affection and respect for the Crawford's and Forbes-Robinson. They all have some history together and Howard feels the success they enjoyed collectively this season will lead to even greater achievements in the seasons to come.

We started our conversation with Rick Howard asking about his background in the sport of auto racing.

"My father was the promoter at the Charlotte Motor Speedway in the 1960s and 70s and I helped him when I was a kid. Later years I worked as a controller at the speedway and learned about everything that was going on, and I met all the drivers and all that stuff. My dad was at Charlotte before Humpy Wheeler and Bruton Smith came in.

"Charlotte Motor Speedway was in bankruptcy when my father took it over. The facility wasn't in great shape. We would often have to make do - things like taking wires from one end of the track to hook up at

the other end! It was just a lot of hard work back then but it was also a lot of fun because everyone enjoyed what they were doing. Now, it is all business. Grand Am today is more like NASCAR used to be when it first started out.

"We owned race cars, and we did all kinds of things involved in racing including being part owner - with Junior Johnson - of a NASCAR team. I always enjoyed being in racing but we left the sport in 1975 when Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Smith took over the speedway. We went into the restaurant business and found a way to promote our business through sponsoring Richard Childress and Dale Earnhardt in Winston Cup. We were with them for six years and we also sponsored Dale Jr. in his early years of late model racing in the Charlotte area.

"My father and I owned Western Steer Family Steakhouses. After a while we had to expand into places with big salad bars and all-you-can-eat specials in order to make the business survive. We also had another business called Mom and Pop which had a bakery operation and a ham smokehouse business. When we ran in Winston Cup we switched the sponsorship around putting Mom and Pop on some cars and Western Steer on others.

"I was fortunate enough to be in the restaurant business for 30 years. I was the Chairman of the Board of the company, which was called WSMP. I retired from that and today I am a grandparent who invests in real estate and I own a few businesses. WSMP had several restaurants and businesses but I found the right time to sell out."

Howard turned in his apron and spatula - and corporate attire - to return to a form of auto racing that was different from - yet similar to - what he had experienced years before. And he came back to it because he wanted to be involved in supporting his friends.

"The only reason I am involved in this is for the Crawford's. I am not looking for any notoriety or publicity. I have had way more notoriety in my life - as did my dad - then we needed. The Crawford's work extremely hard as does their staff and I am just glad to see them thrive.

"We became friends with the Crawford's through Elliott Forbes-Robinson. They had girls in school and I had girls in school too. Max and Jan Crawford are fine people who work 24/7.

"Elliott and I worked together with Grey Egerton, who was a mentor and a sponsor of Elliott's when he ran in NASCAR Winston Cup. I helped put that deal together and we did that for a few years. Elliott introduced me to the Crawford's when they were working on the Bruce Jenner project. I think it was in Trans AM. Basically they came here - in the mid 80s - to run that project. They moved here to North Carolina from sunny California but once that project ended they never left.

"They opened the business Crawford Composites and Max told me he always wanted to build race cars. Around seven years ago or so we started talking about it and I said you know you got to dream big and follow your dreams. He wanted to build them and race them and do research and development on his own cars. Max just loves racing! You can see the light in his eyes when he goes to the circuits. I just tried to help him to reach that goal.

"Today they have the composites business which is doing well and they have the race cars which they run themselves and the ones they make to sell to others. You will see even more Crawford Daytona Prototypes on the circuit next year too. We are all excited about what is going on with Crawford Race Cars and with Howard-Boss Motorsports and we are looking forward to having a great year.

"This team is a real family. The Crawford family and the love they have for the sport and the love they have for the people is incredible. They work so hard to make everybody enjoy a race weekend from scheduling the flights to setting up the meals to everything else. The way things are done shows just how much effort they put in to making sure everyone has fun."

Howard has gotten in on the ground floor of what looks to be NASCAR- the sequel. He knew what he was getting into when he decided to go racing with the Crawford's because he knew who was running the show.

"I am not surprised by the growth of the Grand Am Daytona Prototypes. You are talking to somebody who has been in Winston Cup and followed Grand National and watched it all develop over the years. This series has a strong kinship to the France family and NASCAR. I have the highest regard for Jim France. I have known him and his family since forever, going all the way back to Bill France Sr. They have developed a way to market the sport, and the series, and their tracks that proves they are good at what they do.

"Road racing is looking for somebody that is strong and puts an organization together that can be a leader. Road racing is an entity that wants to be stepping up from out of the background. They have been looking for somebody that they could feel good about being there year after year. They see that with the blueprint with NASCAR and the ISC tracks, and the successful people behind it all making it work. With that said, new people don't mind sticking their foot in the water by buying a car. I really will be surprised if this thing doesn't grow by leaps and bounds over what we have already seen."

And the subject of growth brings us back to that reference to Forbes-Robinson's "elder gentlemen's" status.

"Elliott and I go to the same church, Mt. Pleasant Methodist. We have Methodist Men on Sunday mornings and this past Sunday Elliott was the speaker. We had about 50 men in the audience. He talked about his year in racing and he also talked about the Baja. The key thing about Elliott is that he doesn't have to do it, and he is in as good a shape as any kid, but he does it because he absolutely loves it. I told some of the men that there are people who come along that are freaks of nature or an eighth wonder of the world and Elliott still fits that mold. There is no way that a man 60 years old should still be as fast as he is. For my money, there are younger drivers and faster drivers on a single lap, but for the way the car is going to be when he turns it over to another driver, or the way he attacks the course, is just like a master craftsman. Andy Wallace told me earlier this year that he raced with Elliott and he just followed him around watching him cut through the traffic like a craftsman. He is unbelievable."

Rick Howard feels a real sense of warmth and pride for his friends and he loves seeing them succeed at what they have a passion for doing. And the Crawford's will be the first to tell you how much they appreciate his support, and moreover, his friendship. But unlike Elliott Forbes-Robinson, when you hit grandfather age you are supposed to slow down a wee bit and Howard may just have to throttle back a hair next season.

"If I believe in supporting something I believe in it all the way. I attend all the races and all the tests and I am there when they deliver a new car to a new owner. I can't say for sure I will be there all the time next season however, as I do have daughters and grandkids to spend time with. But I have truly enjoyed being able to help in trying to build the series. And I believe that everybody in the series is trying very hard to make it the very best series it can be."

After having spent some time with Rick Howard, we have to add the series is stronger for his participation. His passion for the sport, his commitment to his friends, and his experience with the people involved can mean nothing less.

"Elliott and I have a long time relationship. I am very happy that he has found a series that he can still be so successful in. And I have to say that it is about as good as it can get when you see two groups of people that you care about accomplishing what they want to accomplish."