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Through The Esses - The Rolex 24. It's Time

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If you have never been - but always wanted to go to - the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona, you probably couldn't pick a better time than February 5, 2005. Now, racing purists will argue that assertion until the cows come home - "cause it ain't traditional sportscar racing" - but regardless of what has come before, it appears that what is yet to come is worth taking the trip to Florida to witness.



As we write this, the Daytona Test Days entry list has just been posted on the Grand American website. Test days are the time for teams new and old to get in some valuable track time at this often-torturous circuit. Teams make an effort to be here for a few days to best assess their chances at finishing this grueling 24 hour break-a-thon. And even the sportscar purists will admit this race is hard on cars, drivers, teams and fans. Add in some unpredictable Florida weather and the task becomes even more daunting. And faithful readers of this column (both of you) will remember that the Daytona Fate Fairy is always lurking about. She favors but a few and wreaks havoc with all the rest.

But this is the first race of the new sportscar season and this is the place that all racers want to finish first at. And there are many reasons why fans like us should be here to see it all unfold. (Or is that unravel?) We have made up a short list of reasons why you should be at the Daytona International Speedway in a few weeks time. If one reason isn't enough, perhaps a read further down the list will be all the justification you need.

1. At the test days, 30 Daytona Prototype entries are listed. That is 30 as in: "Wow! 30!" And that doesn't include a few teams who don't have their cars yet. The growth rate for this class has been beyond incredible and borders on the Twilight Zone. (No, Rod Serling isn't listed on the driver's roster anywhere, but this whole thing has taken on a surreal existence with new teams looking to get on the grid quicker than we can eat chocolate. We are talking fast!)

Let's look at the numbers:

Engines: 1 Infiniti, 2 Porsche, 3 BMW, 6 Ford, 6 Lexus, 12 Pontiac

Chassis: 1 Picchio, 3 Fabcar, 3 Multimatic, 5 Doran, 8 Crawford, 10 Riley

Teams: 24

Engine / Chassis combinations: 1 BMW-Doran, 1 BMW-Picchio, 1 BMW-Riley, 1 Infiniti-Doran, 1

Lexus-Fabcar, 1 Lexus-Doran, 2 Porsche-Fabcar, 2 Pontiac-Doran, 3 FORD-Crawford, 3 FORD-Multimatic, 4 Lexus-Riley, 5 Pontiac-Riley, 5 Pontiac-Crawford,

2. The list of drivers who will compete in the race reads like an international 'who's who' of sportscar racing. Who, you ask? Why people like Shane Lewis, Stefan Johansson, Ross Bentley, Didier Theys, Rob & Chris Dyson, Scott Pruett, Max Papis, Wally Dallenbach, Butch Leitzinger, Elliot Forbes-Robinson, Andy Wallace, Wayne Taylor, Max Angelelli, Boris Said, Hurley Haywood and Terry Borcheller. And those are just some of the drivers in the Daytona Prototypes. Add to this all the talented people (and the other kind too) who will be piloting GT cars and you have some collection of driving suits. Just the variety of colors in the team uniforms will be appealing to see. And, oh yeah, there are some NASCAR guys running in the race too. Greg Biffle, Matt Kenseth and Kurt Busch are members of that group.

Grand-Am President **Roger Edmondson** summed it up best when he said earlier today, "Obviously people are very interested in the progress of the Daytona Prototype, but I think more importantly, the driver lineup is unparalleled in decades here at Daytona."

3. The GT class takes on a new identity this season and will debut at the Rolex 24. The racing comes down to just two classes now, and that means the action should be a bit easier to follow for more fans. Although anyone who can say they really have it all in check at 3:00 AM is probably cheating themselves as much as they are cheating their mattress. But even groggy eyes will be able to tell the DPs apart from the GTs. At least, that is the plan, Stan.

4. Rob Dyson has defected! Well, not really. But he and son Chris will be back at the Rolex 24 looking to repeat past success here. This time the car isn't entered by Dyson Racing but by Essex Racing. The pair will be teamed with Harrison Brix and James Gue in the #5 FORD-Crawford. The Dyson's and The Crawford's have a long history of racing together with Max Crawford having worked alongside Dyson Racing stalwart Pat Smith as second-car crew chief for the endurance races. It is only fitting that Rob Dyson be behind the wheel of a Crawford chassis when he returns to Daytona.

5. Everyone will be running on Hoosier tires. This one change alone will go a long way towards keeping the field close. As Orbit Racing's Rodger Hawley told us recently, "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."

6. The three top teams from 2004; SunTrust, Chip Ganassi Racing and Howard-Boss Motorsports, will all be back to defend, attack, and conquer (in whatever order) the competition. Of course, that doesn't mean the Doran Racing or Brumos teams won't be looking to 'kick tire' too. Bottom line is, the game is on and any team that takes the green flag has a shot at taking a second, black and white checkered flag too. Lord knows they will all be trying to. And watching them battle it out is worth seeing in person.

7. Did we mention they have completely renovated the infield at Daytona? They have, and the pictures of the ongoing construction featured on the DIS website [Daytona Gallery](#) provide a glimpse of what will await the fans. David Talley, the Director of Media Relations for Daytona International Speedway, recently gave us an overview. "(Fans) will be able to walk behind the garages in what we call the 'fan zone', and view what is going on in the garages through a large glass window. You will be able to see the mechanics and the drivers at work in there. The Rolex cars will use the new NEXTEL Cup garages."

8. We think this classic race is about to set a new standard for sportscar racing in North America. Yes, it would be great to see names like Lola, Audi, Courage and Saleen on the grid, but then it wouldn't be the Grand American Road Racing Association's Rolex Series. And that, race fans, is what this race will be. Some will say the sanctity of 'pure' sportscar racing has been purged while others will see the beauty in tightened regulations that intend to keep the racing action close. What you see before the race, however, will pale against what you will see if you are at the race.

Purist or not, this Rolex 24 looks to hold many memories that are just waiting to be released - at the whim and fancy of the Daytona fate fairy, of course. Care to join us as we watch history being driven into the record books?