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Through The Esses - Michael McDowell Goes Racing Under A Roof

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With several very successful seasons in the Star Mazda Series, and many years of fast times spent racing just inches above the pavement in a kart, young Michael McDowell is about to take a seat in a Daytona Prototype. Mature and experienced beyond his years, McDowell will be running the entire 2005 Grand Am Rolex series in a BMW-Riley for 10 Motorsports. And as if that weren't enough for a young man to do, he will also run the entire Grand Am Cup series in a BMW M3.



Now, we have heard people use the expression "Young people grow up so fast", but in the case of the 20-year-old McDowell we think it could be said as "This fast young man has grown up!"

We talked with McDowell recently about the new 10 Motorsports entry in the Rolex series. We learned about his meeting with team owner Rob Finlay, and how all the pieces and personnel came together to bring this potentially potent team into being.

We began our conversation with a rundown of his early years in karting and in the Star Mazda series. McDowell finished second overall in the Mazda series championship in 2003, and was the overall winner in 2004. Prior to that he raced in FRAN AM and before that he was heavily involved in karting both in the United States and overseas.

"Everything went really well in Star Mazda over the last two years. I had been karting for ten years, starting out at the age of 8. I ran local events and then graduated to regional and then national competitions. In 1997 I won the National Karting championship. In 1998 I started racing internationally for a factory in Italy. I was the first Junior American to ever land on a podium when I was just 13.

"From there I came back to the states to run Shifter karts for four years. It was a great experience but unfortunately we didn't have a real good program there. Our finishes were good but not great.

At about 12 or 13 years old the family funding phase of my racing career came to a close. After having won the national championships I approached the manufacturer of our kart and told him we needed some support to continue racing. Charlie Pistorio with Grand Products was the name of the man who worked with me to support my continued involvement in karting. He provided me with everything I needed to race for few years. Then I hooked up with several other karting companies through the years. Greg Bell at Leading Edge, and Bo Herron at MTC Racing, and Bill Mayer at MMI Karting.

"I ran Formula Renault when I was 16. One of my karting sponsors, Bill Mayer from MMI Karting, bought one of the earliest cars to come to the states and we ran it in the series. It was a tough season because we didn't get to do much testing and so we either won a race or we broke down. We just didn't have any reliability. I did win four of the nine races and finished third in the championship though."

It was during this time that McDowell sought other opportunities to go fast in potent race cars. He was always looking for that next big break.

"Earlier in that same season I decided to try Star Mazda at Sears Point with World Speed Motorsports. They had won the championship the year before so I figured this was a chance for me to go out and race with some great drivers. At the time there were people like Guy Cosmo, Scott Speed and others who went on to bigger things. When Scott Speed lost his ride with the Star Mazda factory team, they called me and asked me if I wanted to run the last race of the season at Laguna Seca. We did real well, running first until the last corner of the last lap when I was taken out by another car. But the team was pleased with the results so they offered me the seat for 2003."

Now any up and coming young driver will tell you that you won't have anything handed to you unless you are the child of wealthy parents or extremely talented. McDowell learned the road to the podium is only traveled when someone else is willing to buy the gas.

"I had the Star Mazda factory team's support for most of the costs in 2003 but I had to start knocking on doors to make up the balance needed to run the full season. I was able to secure the bulk of the additional support from MMI Karting, Bob Megdal, and Dan Schroeder. Customers of mine - people I was coaching in kart racing - from Mega Metals and Western Titanium helped to round out the rest of the sponsorship.

"Throughout the years I have been fortunate to meet some great people who have been able and willing to help me with my career. I have been able to call several people and get a little support from each of them to make up the total needed to be involved in this sport. I wound up putting the whole deal together with a combination of the primary sponsorships and the smaller contributions from about 15 others."

But even the best drivers with the best records still find they often need help from friends to keep moving forward.

After finishing second in the season championship in 2003, I found myself sitting without a ride for 2004. I put my head down and started working the phones! I was fortunate enough to meet Michael James. He provided the primary funding for me and - as he is an engineer - he worked with me during the Star Mazda run. I am really grateful he was able to support me and, with my 15 or so other mini-sponsors, we were able to go all the way and win the championship outright."

McDowell may have found good fortune working the telephone line, but he really found himself on the cusp of greatness when he connected with a student of his at the track. And this admiring pupil didn't give the teacher an apple - he gave him a shot at running in a top level prototype.

"During the middle of the season, I was working at the Bob Bondurant Racing School in Phoenix, Arizona and Rob Finlay came through the school as a student of mine. He did really well there and we hit it off. One day he asked me what it would cost to go racing professionally. We talked about it and went ahead and set up a Grand Am Cup program for the balance of the 2004 season. It was a big step for him to go from student to real racer.

"We ran a BGB Motorsports Porsche 996 in the GS class. I knew it would be difficult as Rob had no racing experience so I used the time to network with people in Grand Am racing and work towards putting together a full season package for us for 2005. Well Rob got real excited about racing and he saw how well I was doing. He understood that if something didn't happen for me in the next year or two it was

going to be real tough for me to move forward, so he said he wanted me to try putting together what it would take for a possible DP program.

"I was working with Rick and Steve Cameron in the Mazda series and their effort with Lynx in Formula Atlantic was coming to an end so I contacted them about working with us on the DP program. I told them I had the budget but no idea where to really start so I asked them, 'What are you guys doing in 2005?'

"Rob was real excited about working with Rick and Steve and we both were confident that collectively we could put an effective program together."

Finlay selected the name of the team, drawing on an idea he had to keep his new DP team running past their maiden year.

"The name 10 Motorsports comes from a marketing concept that Rob came up with. As a small business owner, he was looking for a way to draw other small business owners into the sport. He knew that people would like to be a part of something as exciting as sportscar racing without having to worry about running the team or setting everything up. So instead of trying to find one huge sponsor for the team, he set out to line up 10 smaller sponsors who just want to go out and have a good time and be a part of the whole racing scene at a fraction of the cost to field their own teams. So far we have a few people signed on under this approach. We are also fortunate to have the Air Force Reserve and Make A Wish and Commercial Defeasance signed on as marketing partners.

"We are in the position where Rob's company, Commercial Defeasance, can help fund the team for this season but he can't do it forever so we are going to keep building our sponsor base. We think it is going to be a real good idea because people will spend thousands on vacations to go do the things they enjoy and being connected with a professional race team in a top level series can give them the same kind of thrills and enjoyment."

There are seven chassis manufacturers available to new car buyers. Three have taken a lead position in the series so far. We wondered why 10 Motorsports elected to go with the BMW-Riley combination.

"We went with the Riley because we felt there were really only two choices for us. We really enjoyed meeting the Crawford's. They are great people and they build an awesome car. But Steve had a relationship with Riley and we knew the Riley was winning. We knew the Crawford was still developing but the Riley was already there and we wanted to be in a position to win races right away.

"Grand Am has done an excellent job of regulating the engines in the series. The Pontiac is really strong but we feel that is more a result of being paired with the best chassis and good drivers. We felt it was a given that the SunTrust car would do well.

"Ganassi is running the Lexus and he enjoys a great relationship with TRD so we knew he was getting a great motor. We didn't think we would enjoy a similar standing with them so we felt the BMW would be the better choice for us. Everyone we talked to that was running the BMW felt they had the best motor out there, just not the best package. We met up with Steve Dinan, who is already a builder of DP motors, and his shop is close to us so it all worked out.

"We also feel the mileage is better on our motor so we think we can run the car harder than the Pontiacs. We think that gives us a little more confidence, plus we can go into Dinan's shop and look to improve between races."

After doing some unwelcome gardening at the bus stop on the first day of the Daytona test days, McDowell and the 10 Motorsports crew got the car repaired and back out in time to run some times in the top 5. There might be something to this combination. But an effective team is the result of blending all the right ingredients in the right measure. McDowell feels one of the key ingredients for 10 Motorsports is his

co-driver, Memo Gidley.

"Memo Gidley and I had run some races together in karting and, like me, he was another American who had to knock on doors to find sponsorship. Rob and I both have an appreciation for that and Memo has a great record of performance, plus he has a great relationship with Steve and Rick. We are confident he will be fast in our car and the Air Force Reserve wanted him to be in a good program so it all came together really well for all of us.

"Memo is the kind of talented driver who could be hired to race and not have to worry about bringing funding. But the fact that he has brought funding to this team is a real plus for us."

The drive lineup for the season opening Rolex 24 hours at Daytona includes McDowell, Gidley and talented young drivers Michael Valiante and Jonathan Bomarito. With so much of this effort being of such youthful proportion, McDowell realizes this trip around the clock will not be without its share of concern.

"We think the BMW-Riley package will be great but in a 24 hour race you never can tell. We plan to race with a level head and hope we have a lot of luck and we are careful. It is really exciting for me to go there for my first time and even more so to know we are going into this first race with a competitive package. It sure beats starting out at the bottom and working your way to the top!"

Yes, it does Michael. But hey, you already did that, didn't you?

(Photo credit: <http://www.mmcdowell.com>)