



ash - through the esses

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### Through The Esses - Canadian Skier Heads Uphill

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"Right now, I am looking for a ride."

In today's economic climate, there are many talented and capable drivers who could have made that statement. It seems there just aren't enough steering wheels to go around for all the pairs of hands that want to grip them. Finding a seat is often tougher than a game of musical chairs played with just two seats and five players. Someone - or some drivers - always wind up losing out.



A former Canadian Champion Alpine skier is currently amongst the group of professional drivers who are walking around an ever-smaller number of 'empty chairs' in sportscar racing. Melanie Paterson knows all about going fast when you are heading downhill - or on the ground in a race car - but she currently faces an uphill climb. Skiers find it much easier, and much more fun, to head in the other direction.

We recently spoke with Paterson about her current and future plans.

"It is really tough this year (to land a ride) as it seems the amount of ALMS teams is decreasing but the number of drivers looking to run there is not. I am also looking at Grand Am - I expect to be at Laguna and I plan to talk to more teams there. My ambitions are to race anything but my first choice would be to race in a prototype LMP1 in the American Le Mans Series. But I am open to anything."

While Patterson prefers the big LMP 1 prototypes like the Lola and Audis that headline in the ALMS, she is not above giving the Daytona Prototypes a go.

"I talked to Andy Wallace about driving the Daytona Prototypes and he told me that while the technology is not what we are used to in LMP1, the series provides really great racing. There are a lot of competitive cars so you are always on your toes. He says it is a lot of fun."

She has made several inquiries and will listen to any offer in either prototype series that will find her seated in a fast race car expertly applying the physical and mental skills she honed on the downhill slopes.

"What I like about sportscar racing, and the ALMS in particular, is the level of intelligence and ability required by the drivers to be successful in endurance racing. I think the difference between a good driver and a superior driver is in the way your brain processes information. There are a lot of very intelligent people in sportscar racing. And when you look at studies that have been done about the mental abilities of Formula One drivers, for example, you see that they tend to have a higher level of intelligence. And

what you also find is that those drivers tend to shine in sportscar racing rather than other forms of Motorsports.

"When I went into sportscar racing from Formula Ford, I saw there was a real difference in the way people approached driving the car. In FF, people relied more on their guts, while sportscar racers tended to rely more on their brains. Endurance racing is all about decisions and how you make them, as opposed to half hour races in Formula Ford where you could be somewhat less intelligent and drive with less regard for the equipment. But that approach doesn't work in sportscar racing. You need to be physically and mentally fit, because you need to make good decisions throughout the entire race. There is more emphasis on working with, and around, the car and making it last throughout the race, not driving the snot out of it for 30-60 minutes. Also, with more cars on the track in sportscar racing - and with all the different vehicle speeds and characteristics - overall, you need to be much more aware than in single class or sprint racing.

"It is about awareness and making good decisions, not just going fast without considering the consequences."

Paterson's experience in a prototype includes driving an LMP 2 Lola for Essex Racing and two endurance races in a Riley & Scott MKIIIC for AutoCon Motorsports.

"I ran the Autocon Motorsports Riley & Scott MKIIIC with Michael Lewis in the 2003 and 2004 Petit Le Mans races. Prior to that I had driven a Lola B2K40 LMP2 car and I really thought the change from LMP2 to LMP1 would be very different, but it wasn't as big a difference as I expected it to be. The car was actually easier to drive and it had power steering which the LMP2 didn't have. But the LMP2 really didn't have enough tire to need power steering. The biggest difference I noticed was the lateral forces on the body. In LMP2, you could get away with a seat that didn't have a lot of lateral support, but the LMP1 cars generate much more cornering forces and you need to be well supported or you move around too much, and eventually get fatigued.

"I remember my very first time in the R&S LMP1 car. Mike Lewis gave me a complete driver briefing except for one item. He never told me that the power steering got turned off at pit stops. I was always getting into the car after one of the guys who never turned the power steering off (at a pit stop), so I never gave it a thought. But one time I got in after someone who had turned it off. I was out there driving and thinking, 'what is wrong with me?', I am so tired and I can't get this car to turn into the corners! I finally came into the pits and the guys thought it was funny that the power steering was off! They couldn't believe I had stayed out that long without it!"

We wondered how this champion skier could have transitioned from fast slopes to fast cars.

"I was very involved in ski racing and my interest in car racing sort of grew out of that love of going fast and challenging my mind and body to stay in control of a fast-changing environment. I always loved driving and I appreciated the mindset of it. David Empringham was a ski racer too and, after talking with him about it, I decided to try a racing school. I was hooked! I caught on fairly quickly but with no money to go racing on my own, I signed on as a mechanic at the Bridgestone Racing School in Shannonville, Canada. I worked with them one summer and then went kart racing the next year.

"A colleague of mine started a Legends race team and I was able to drive one of his cars for a season. I really enjoyed that. Soon thereafter I was able to secure a sponsor for a couple of Formula Ford races. I did that and then one of my two sponsors decided to step up and back me in a whole season of Formula Ford. I had some great partners there and that allowed me to have two full seasons in open wheel racing.

"I also tested in several other series like Formula Atlantics, Formula Palmer Audis and in Indy Lights. I tried to put a program together in Atlantic and Indy Lights but securing sponsorship was just too difficult for a Canadian driver. Canadian companies just don't seem to have the resources that American companies do. I knew that sportscar racing was always something I had an interest in, and that the costs

were usually shared with another driver, so I went in that direction and I have never looked back."

Looking ahead is the only way a skier or a race car driver can succeed. Paterson is a businesswoman who knows what it takes to win both on and off the track.

"I make my living as a partner in a business called Driving Unlimited. We do a lot of police driver training and high end training. We also do car manufacturer introductions and client training. We do press launches and almost anything to do with driving or instructing. I even drove a stunt car in a movie once! It was a "B" movie called "Men of Means". I drove this old 1979 Pontiac boat! I had to drive through a warehouse and bounce the car off some boxes. Then I drove it off a loading dock. I did some slides and I had to drive through a plate glass window. It sure was a different type of precision driving, but I would do it again in a minute!"

"But, stunt driving is a whole different discipline. And there are some professional stunt drivers who are outstanding at what they do but have some terrible habits when it comes to street driving. A stunt driver doesn't necessarily make a good race driver - it is a different skill set. But they know how to do certain things and that is how they make it work for them. In that sense, we are very much alike, but I prefer racing where I can pit my skills and abilities against the best over a longer period of time."

Like all of us, Paterson harbors a dream that she would very much like to have come true. Unlike the skill deficient among us, however, her dreams include having an enduring relationship with an endurance-built race car. But like most of us, she could accept a scaled-down version of her desires - for at least a short period of time. Hey, if you can't have it all, at least have some of it. Right?

"My last ride in a prototype was in the R&S at the Petit last year. Right now my dream would be to have a full season in an LMP1 Prototype. I will race anything from Grand Am to NASCAR, but the open-cockpit, closed-wheel prototype would be my first choice. But when you are sitting on the sidelines, any ride that gets you into some good racing is a good ride!"

Paterson feels she has a lot to offer a quality race team.

"I think I am strong in two areas. I feel I am flexible enough to get into any type of car and drive it well, while protecting the car from damage or abuse. I think the other strength that I have is in my ability to assist with the development of a race car. I have strong body awareness and that allows me to accurately "feel" what the car is doing. I think this comes from having been involved in ski racing from the age of 12. It is a level of awareness of what is happening to the car at speed that I think gives me an edge in setting up a car.

"That said, I look back to my last race (the Petit 2004) and we had little to no time to set up the car! I think I had about 20 laps total before the start of the race, due to mechanical issues. There were no test days in advance so there was no time to sort out the car before having to drive it for 10 hours straight.

"In my season with Mike Gue and Essex Racing in the Lola LMP2 car, we did limited testing and had time to develop the car. That was a good season with some good results."

Paterson is searching for a ride that will bring back the sensation of speed that intoxicates the soul of a racer. She has been fast on the downhill and fast on the track, but right now, that old obstacle called opportunity is keeping her parked in the pits. But no racer stays on pit lane forever. We will be watching for her return.