



ash - through the esses

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Through The Esses - David Donohue - A Realistic Racer

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David Donohue has been in the driver's seat of the #58 Brumos Racing Porsche-Fabcar Daytona Prototype since it first turned a wheel on a race track back in October of 2002. He was in the driver's seat when the car took three wins in the inaugural season of the Grand American Road Racing Association's Rolex Sports Car Series DP class. He was there when it landed on the podium in 7 of 12 races in that first year. And he has been there for all 16 of the races that have been run since. But the podium visits ended with that first season.



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The series has grown faster than a weed on an unloved lawn - with more new quality teams coming onto the grids almost with each passing month. With that growth has come tremendously competitive racing. And with all that competition Donohue has found the road to the podium is a whole lot longer than it used to be when the series was still in its germination stage.

We talked with David Donohue about the growth of the series and the Porsche-Fabcar just not seeming to have the spark needed to kick it back up to the front of the grid. As we have come to expect from this serious, intelligent and quiet gentleman, his opinions are worthy of our consideration and serve to validate his determination to make an ongoing positive contribution to his team and to the sport of road racing.

The Porsche-Fabcar

"We have been running a new Porsche engine since Homestead. There hasn't been a real dramatic improvement in lap times, but the drivability, especially in traffic, has improved. We are still the smallest engine out there so we are running without restrictors. Actually, once we max out the power we can get from the Porsche engine they just regulate everyone else to us. Therefore the problem is we can't cheat...even if we were tempted to!"

Well, we certainly wouldn't suggest cheating would ever be considered an option for Bob Snodgrass and the Brumos Racing team. But the lack of results to date might make for a strong argument in support of some serious subterfuge to speed up the pace. But winning in a dishonest way would never be satisfactory to an organization with such an honorable history behind it.

But it is that 'behind' issue that needs to be addressed if David Donohue, Darren Law, Hurley Haywood and JC France (co-drivers in the #59 Brumos Porsche-Fabcar) are going to get their names into the history book chapters yet to be written. We wondered what it might take to turn things around.

"None of us at Brumos are satisfied with where we are running right now. There is a lot of hope and a lot of effort being made to try and correct the situation. I am satisfied with the Brumos organization, and with

being teamed with Darren (Law) and Hurley (Haywood) and JC (France). I can't think of better teammates to have. The only bad thing I can think to say about Darren is that he is too tall for a perfect driver change! Hurley is a legend and he spent a lot of time with my father (Mark Donohue) and I really enjoy spending time with him.

"But the car is really frustrating us right now. We have seen the whole series pass us by. I just hope that the situation gets corrected sooner rather than later.

"I don't think the problem is the Porsche engine. I think the engine is quite good. That said though, I don't think it is the easiest engine to put in one of these cars installation wise. The beauty of the boxer style engine is that it is low and flat, but it has a high crank centerline. While that doesn't sound like it should be a real problem, we are not allowed - under the Grand Am rules - to use a drop gear in the transmission. That means the whole back part of the car's structure ends up being about four inches higher than the other cars. Plus, because of the shape of the engine, low and wide, it is a little more challenging to get a supporting structure around it.

"If they allowed drop gears, our problem would be reduced so that we would at least have the transmission at the same general height as the V8s. But like I said, it is not allowed by the regulations."

About The Grand Am Approach To Road Racing

"I think that it is just one thing that Grand Am really didn't think of when they started out with this new series. But, that said, they are really sticking to their guns about not changing regulations mid stream. And as much as that can cause frustration in some ways, that is also a point to admire about this sanctioning body. They have been willing to admit some mistakes and to make changes to correct some issues. They didn't get some things right the first time out of the box but it would be foolish to think that everything would have been right the first time.

"From the beginning their goal has been to try and smooth out the peaks and valleys that have always been a part of sportscar racing. One thing that causes this ebb and flow problem is the expense attached to racing, especially when the people in the sport get infected with the "I want" disease. Cool new technological gadgets and concepts come along and they want to get them on their cars, even though they are spending a lot of money to do so. Eventually even good cars become obsolete before they really have a chance to show what they are capable of.

"Another key part of the Grand Am formula is to allow the series to exist with or without manufacturer participation. They invite them to participate but Grand Am needs to be able to survive without the manufacturer support in case it is simply not available."

Coming back to the ever increasing size of the DP fields in the Rolex Series, we asked Donohue if he is at all surprised by the growth of what Jim France and Grand Am have created.

"Anyone who tells you they are not surprised by the level of competition we have today, compared to when we started, is lying to you. The only people who can really comment on that are those who were in this series at the start. None of them thought we would have 20 some-odd full car fields with grids as tight as they are and with the level of preparation and commitment by the teams where it is today. It is simply phenomenal.

"People criticize the series for what has been called the 'dumbing-down' of sportscar racing. The technical minds at work on many of the Grand Am teams are just as sharp as those found in any other series out there. And I would argue that the power output for the DP cars is quite similar to what other top level sportscar racing has, yet for a fraction of the cost. The cars are cheap for some and expensive to others, but we saw last year that another strength inherent in the series lies in the ease with which repairs of the chassis can be made. Remember the huge wrecks we had last year? Only days later those very same

cars were back racing again.

"There are different kinds of creativity that come to light in racing. You look at a NEXTEL Cup car and you think, 'They look like stagecoaches'. But they are probably the most refined race cars in the world. One reason is they really haven't changed much for decades. But the teams will spend a gazillion hours on simulation and in the wind tunnel fighting to pick up hundredths of a second per lap."

One argument for the Grand Am approach to road racing has been the containment - or perhaps enforced limitation of - spending required to field a race car. But that approach can only cover the initial outlay for the car and supporting equipment. Once the team starts to actually race the sky is often the limit for expenses. Donohue concurs, but sees real value in the attempts that Grand Am has made to date to keep costs 'down to earth'.

"All racing is expensive. But, if a series is worth being in, then the expense is worth it in terms of the results. And the series that is competitive is the series to be in. I like the exotic and high tech exclusive cars as much as anybody but to watch one or two cars race around the track by themselves isn't quite as interesting to me as watching several cars all vying for the front spot for three or more hours.

"It is also worth mentioning that the Rolex Series has the tightest tire restrictions I have ever heard of in racing at this level. We are only allowed five to six sets of tires on a normal race weekend. Furthermore, testing is restricted by only allowing three sets of tires to be available to each car after each three race segment of the season. This represents a significant effort to contain the cost of competition through effective testing limits."

Challenges Ahead For Grand Am

With the third season of Daytona Prototype racing still in its early months, there remain many challenges for the series going forward. The original 5 - 7 year plan of sustained growth and regulated activity seems to be right on track, working very much as designed. But we are just now starting to approach the half way point of what has truly been a rocket-like ride. Donohue noted that the path to be followed for the second half of the plan will introduce new challenges that did not need to be addressed at the beginning.

"So far, I have to say the series has been a tremendous success, but they will have a tough road ahead. The series has experienced explosive growth now they have to manage it and maintain it. That is a whole different set of obstacles on its own. It is like getting a fire started with gasoline. That doesn't mean the fire will keep burning.

"I really don't know what it will take to keep the series growing and make it even stronger. There are just so many variables. It is fan based and television based and competitor based. It is a lot of different things and they all have to gel together. I think many people would like to see more work done in the area of promotion, but I have talked with Grand Am officials and they have a very set plan. The plan has never changed since day one, which is why I now believe in the plan, whatever it is, more than I did when the series first started. The fact that they have remained consistent is important, and that gives them credibility in my mind.

"When you look at it, the question at the start of the series was 'how do you promote something that doesn't exist yet?' For the first few years what did they really have to promote? You needed a core group of competitors. You needed to have a race. You need stability, and teams, cars, and sponsors. If there is turnover all the time people don't want to have to keep relearning the sport. Grand Am said at the get-go that they were going to simplify the differences between the classes and they have done that. If you can't tell the difference between the GT cars and the Daytona Prototypes then, I am sorry but I don't know what you are going to get out of these races.

"People comment they want to see bigger speed differentials. But I would ask, 'to what purpose'? We

know we can make cars go obscenely fast. But there is a price to pay both financially and in terms of safety. What we have seen them do is create a series where there is enough speed differential between the classes that the DPs can get safely by the GTs without a problem.

Should Grand Am Separate The DPs from the GTs?

What would Donohue suggest Grand Am do if the explosive growth in the DP class continues as it has these last 18 months or so?

"If it continues to grow I absolutely think they should split the fields. I even wish they would split them now. They will do it this year at small tracks like Phoenix. But it is not as easy as you think. They know they could do it right now with the fields as large as they have been, but who is going to do the TV? Who will the TV cover? The teams have made sponsor commitments. They rely on that. And if you split the fields, how do you get enough track time on the weekends? And there are other logistical and financial issues as well. What is the right thing to do? I think they know. No one is fooled thinking that having 50 cars in the race is a cool thing. Hurley hates to have single class races, but I am all for it. I think it would be great."

On Achieving Satisfaction

Donohue has toughed it out with the Brumos squad through the recent downturn in team fortunes. For him, the sense of community and the camaraderie found on a solid team of likeable people is a key component of a satisfying experience. He feels he has been fortunate to have that situation before in racing, and he certainly feels that way about the Brumos team.

"Having stability is really important. It gets real old having to go looking for a job every year. The other thing that I find most rewarding is getting along with the people you spend all your time on the road with. Getting along with your crew and showcasing their thousands of hours of hard work and giving it justice. When you really drive well you know in your heart you have done your best for guys you like and care about. That, more than running in any particular series, is what is most important for me.

"At Le Mans in 1999 we broke a timing chain at the 20 hour mark while running a close second. Even though we did not finish, the team still won with our sister car. But 1999 was more personally satisfying than the win I had in 1998, my first year with ORECA, because I felt more a part of the team by then."

While Donohue has competed in many different series - from North American Touring Car to ALMS to NASCAR and Grand Am, he puts his energy into running in no more than one series at a time.

"I mostly focus on just one series and team. I find that a lot of people choose to jump from series to series. It isn't that I haven't chosen to do that, it is just that I haven't had to do it. I ran the Panoz in 2002 but I had already worked out my future plans with Bob Snodgrass, knowing the DPs were coming in 2003. And, despite the problems we have been having with the car, I am very satisfied with my decision to join Brumos.

Donohue did the three long races in 2002 with the Panoz team.

"And I do have to say that the Panoz team I was with in the ALMS was one of the best - as far as the guys working on the car - I have ever been around. The crew guys worked together so well they almost didn't have to talk to each other. I sat in the car at Le Mans in 2002 while they fixed four or five problems all at the same time! When you sit in the Panoz there is nothing behind you so you get to see everything that is going on in front. Watching them work was like watching a ballet. It is such a shame that team disbanded. I'm not so sure Don (Panoz) knew or appreciated what he had there."

Donohue's "French Connection" - when he ran a Dodge Viper for Team Oreca - was a bit different

experience for him. It was an experience that he now appreciates more than when he was active on the team.

"I couldn't communicate with the Team Oreca guys very well because they were all French. But I was with them for three years and over that time I really got to know the guys - their personalities and so forth - without ever really having a meaningful conversation with them. Lack of communication can be frustrating but that organization really had their act together and I didn't appreciate it at the time. It took me a while to get around that car, coming from a 300 horsepower front wheel drive car to a 600 horsepower rear wheel drive car. I actually had to consciously think about what I was doing. I had it so wrong for the first year with them. I was just so out to lunch."

Ultimately the Oreca Viper program was very successful.

"The Vipers were a success because the Team Oreca guys made them winners. It is only now in hindsight that I have a real appreciation for them. Much more than I did when I was there."

#58 - Act Three, Scene Five

The season continues and the next stop is up north of the border at the scenic and historic Mt. Tremblant circuit. Donohue is looking forward to that race, and to all the races to come. The challenges before the race, however, may prove more daunting than getting his #58 Porsche-Fabcar to go around the cars of Max Angelelli and Scott Pruett during the race.

"The worst thing is to go to the track knowing you have no hope of winning. It is very hard to stay motivated. But I do expect our current situation to turn around."

"I consider myself to be a realist. You can be an optimist and say we are going to go to Mt. Tremblant and win the race, but you can't BS the stopwatch. You have to be realistic about things. In this business - which is a real roller coaster of emotions - if you are unrealistically optimistic you are likely to burn out. You are going to get your balloon inflated and then popped more times than anyone can really put up with. You have to be realistic just to keep your sanity."

"We are heading off to Mt. Tremblant which is a good track for us, but I suspect we will have a situation similar to what we had at Laguna. Nevertheless, I am looking forward to whatever developments are on the horizon. I am a little bit out of that loop so I don't know everything that is going on but I have been told to hold hope and be optimistic. And I have no reason to doubt the people who are telling me this."

"This is my third season with Brumos and three years is a significant percentage of any driver's career. Our driving careers aren't long enough to just throw away full seasons unless you think it is worth it somehow. Like I said before, we are not happy with where we are running right now, but Brumos Racing is home to a tenacious bunch of motor heads. They are used to winning, and it is my bet that they'll get us back there one way or the other. If I didn't feel that way, I would have no reason to stay. We are down, but not out, and when we do get back to the front, it will be the most satisfying and rewarding accomplishment of my career."

We too expect that the professionals working at every level within the Brumos and Fabcar organizations have set a course to find those valuable seconds that put just three cars on the winners podium while keeping everyone else off. There are many fans of the Porsche-Fabcar chassis, of Brumos Racing, and of the drivers of the #58 and #59 cars who share Donohue's desire to see them standing tall again on the steps of success.

The journey will be difficult, but, to paraphrase Tom Hanks' character in the movie "A League Of Their Own": "It is supposed to be difficult. If it wasn't difficult everyone would do it."