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### Through The Esses - Roger & Skip Join Forces

5/29/2005 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

*"We believe that the Rolex GT series is going to be a renaissance of the heyday of production based sports car racing."* - **Grand American Road Racing Association President, Roger Edmondson**

A press conference took place today at Lime Rock Park, the 1.53 mile road racing circuit that has hosted every form of sportscar racing from SCCA regional events to Trans Am, IMSA GT, USRRC, Mazda Miata Cup, Barber Dodge and the American Le Mans Series. This racing circuit within a park-like setting has been in business since 1957 and fans from all over the northeastern United States have come here each Memorial Day weekend to sit on the hills and soak up the sounds of fast cars being driven at or beyond their limits.



At today's conference, Grand American Road Racing President Roger Edmondson announced that Grand Am was returning to Lime Rock Park for the 2006 Memorial Day weekend. Today's conference also marked the first public announcement of the creation of a stand-alone race series for the GT cars that currently run with the Daytona Prototypes under the all-encompassing moniker, the Rolex Sportscar Series.

What Edmondson has revealed then is that the single Rolex Series for DP and GT class cars is about to become two series, one for each class. And hopes are high by both Edmondson and Lime Rock Park President, **Skip Barber** that two series will be better than one. Benefits are expected for fans, sponsors and race track operators alike.

Edmondson: "This is going to be an event that we think will develop a heritage and a life of its own. What is really critical for the sport in general is that we make sure our road racing facilities remain healthy. This facility is serenely beautiful and it is located in the middle of a market with 33 million people so any race series coming here would have to create a showcase event here. Grand Am is committed to making this as big as it can possibly be and we couldn't ask for a better partner - or one who has more to offer - than Lime Rock Park."

The Grand Am Rolex Sportscar Series has been growing at a phenomenal rate the last few years, with more and more road racing competitors buying into the philosophy of cost containment and equality that it espouses. We have seen new Daytona Prototype teams - including but not limited to CB Motorsports, Westernesse Racing, Tuttle Racing, and Finlay Motorsports - begin to make appearances on the starting grids of the circuits that this series visits. It seems that with each passing race more teams have come to

believe the answer to the questions of financial solvency, competitive racing, and value for a sponsor have all been answered by the text found in the Grand Am rule book.

We don't think there are many who could successfully argue another point of view for these concerns. Yes, the issues of aesthetics and pure speed will forever ignite the passionate fires that burn within the hearts of sportscar racing purists, but we are putting those issues aside for the moment. At least, we won't come back to them in the rest of this column today. Today we are taking a look at the important news that came out of a small press conference held at little Lime Rock Park this afternoon. But, while the conference may have been host to just a small number of journalists, the announcements made today may very well be the catalyst for the inclusion of thousands.

That is, thousands of paying race fans. At least, that is what Lime Rock's President, Skip Barber, is hoping for. And Roger Edmondson holds the same sentiment. And, frankly, so do we.

But why is Lime Rock bringing Grand Am and GT racing to Connecticut, you ask?

Barber: "When we surveyed our fans over this past winter, the Rolex Series was right at the top of their wish list for new events at Lime Rock. They said they like to see the cars they drive to the races competing on the track. That is exactly what we are bringing to them with the Grand American Rolex Series GT class.

"Our fans have always embraced production-based sports car racing and on Memorial Day 2006 we are offering a race card that pays homage to Lime Rocks heritage, but one that also reflects what our fans tell us they want to see."

Edmondson: "When I got the opportunity to bring the Grand AM series back to Lime Rock it seemed like absolutely the serendipitous moment to do it. Skip has said that this track is going to feature and focus on production based cars at the same time that we are going to try and develop a life of its own for our GT series. It is a perfect match and we are pleased to be coming back to Lime Rock."

As we live less than 100 miles from Lime Rock, and we already enjoy following the competitive racing found in the Grand Am Rolex Series, we agree. But, the creation of a premier event is a complex and complicated matter. Edmondson acknowledged as much in his early comments made today.

"When people think of the Rolex sports car series they think of the Daytona Prototypes. The teams and cars in that class receive a lot of press, but what has almost gone unnoticed is that, at the same time that we worked on a new prototype category we also worked on a new GT category. We believe that the Rolex GT series is going to be a renaissance of the heyday of production based sports car racing."

Edmondson feels the time is right for the two classes to have separate identities as the GT category has begun attracting serious interest from the manufacturers. And he sees the Grand Am 'family of products' as offering potential competitors at least two options for joining in the action.

"An ever increasing number of automotive brands have come to race in the GT class of the Rolex series. And competitors have two options to race with us. They can buy a car, like a Porsche cup car and race it, or they can build a car. This opens the door to a large number of manufacturers and for the first time, as part of this renaissance, we are starting to see an interest by the factories. We are pleased that the Pontiac GTO cars will (soon be) available to customers. And Tom Milner's Team PTG BMW race cars are well known in the series. And FORD has introduced its new Mustang into our Grand AM Cup series and it is a car customers can buy and race as well."

On the issue of what constitutes a full race weekend, Barber noted, "We haven't ruled out what other series may also participate over the Memorial Day weekend. We simply haven't gotten that far with our planning process."

To which Edmondson added: "We can also announce that we will be bringing the Grand Am Cup series to Lime Rock Park next Memorial Day weekend. It is another undervalued product in our mix with some of the most competitive racing anywhere in the world. The big difference between the cup cars and the GT cars is that the GTs are purpose built race cars while the Cup cars are cars you can buy at a dealer and modify for racing."

We now have a good part of the answer to the question of whether or not Grand Am will split the classes going forward. But the piece yet undefined is whether or not Grand Am will maintain the split of the DP and GT cars at all races throughout the 2006 season.

Edmondson: "In the past the prototypes and the GT cars have run together. The growth of the Grand Am Rolex Series has caused us to begin to develop a separate schedule for each class. I expect there will be a separate schedule for the Daytona prototypes and the GTs when we announce the 2006 schedule. They won't necessarily be the same. This is the first announcement we are making of the free standing feature event for the GTs. We are working hard to try to develop the GTs as a co-feature at some events and as a free standing event at others. At the longer distance races they will run together and at the other venues they will run separately."

A question was raised about the Rolex GT Series becoming a second tier series much as NASCAR positions the Busch Series against the Nextel Cup series. Edmondson made it clear that Grand Am is home to several racing "products" and each one will be given ample opportunity to reach the hearts and minds of the paying public.

Edmondson: "We want every product we have to rise to whatever potential it is capable of. While I appreciate people thinking of the prototypes as our premier category, in fact there is no intent to bring a second best program to Lime Rock Park. We think it is going to be great for our teams, and our sponsors, for fans to see the races we run without the prototypes.

And what of the Daytona Prototypes on the 1.53 mile Lime Rock circuit? Are they going to make an appearance in the near future?

"When it might be appropriate to bring the prototypes to Lime Rock in the future, we would have them run a separate race from the GTs. It would be on the same weekend, just two separate races."

So there you have it. Roger Edmondson let the cat out of the bag today. For Skip Barber, that cat arrives one Memorial Day too late but he knows that when it finally gets here, it will come with all nine lives intact. And anything - or any racing series - that can make ticket sales purr is a good thing.

As Lime Rock Park moves closer to 'middle age' (the track will turn 50 in 2007) we too believe the addition of the Grand Am Rolex GT Series will inject some new vitality into the old gal. Or is that, old cat?