



This column originally appeared on TheRaceSite.com

Through The Esses - Jeff Segal Used To Drive A Catfish

6/4/2005 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

At Lime Rock Park recently, we met a young man by the name of Jeff Segal. We had a chance to spend some time with him and learn about his involvement with the Ferrari of Washington team that fields a Maserati Light GT (also known as the Trofeo) chassis in the GT class of the Grand American Road Racing Association's Rolex Sports car Series. Segal first took to racing in shifter karts, then moved on to a BMW Club Racing series and then into - and quickly back out of - the Ferrari Challenge series.



And then he was back in the series again. That is, until he got to drive the catfish.

"I actually did a lot of practicing and testing in shifter karts before I went into the BMW series. As soon as I got my driving license I moved into the BMW Car Club of America (BMWCCA) drivers series. About six months later I entered the Ferrari Challenge series.

"The BMWCCA series classifies race cars on their power to weight ratio. It is set up like most other club series are. We raced a BMW M3 lightweight. BMW made about 150 cars that they intended to be race cars. They looked like the street cars but they were white with checkered flag graphics. I was the youngest driver to come into the series- I had just turned 16 at the time - and so they made me go through hoops to get certified to compete. They wanted drivers 18 and over. They made me go to a couple of schools with people there checking me out to make sure that I was mature enough to handle it and drive well enough to compete in the series.

"But even though they let me run in the series, I still wasn't old enough to drive on some tracks - because of the track's rules or state rules."

The now 20 year old Segal is one of but a handful of very young people who managed to wedge their way into a professional drive. He has at least two other young people to thank for breaking through the age barrier ahead of him, perhaps making the process a bit smoother for those who followed them.

"Clint Field set somewhat of a good precedent (when he ran the Intersport Lola at 17) as did my good friend Tom Hessert 3rd who ran at Daytona when he was 16. They had whatever legal parental permissions were required and got into some big races while they were still very young."

Segal still participates in the BMW series "just for fun". His experiences there, and the good fortune of circumstance and opportunity combining forces, led him to get behind the wheel of a Ferrari 360 and go head to head with some rather intense gentlemen.

"I went to the Ferrari Challenge because I had been around that series for several years. My dad, Bob

Segal, owns Algar Ferrari in Philadelphia and he ran a car in the 360 Challenge series. He decided that he didn't want to race anymore and that conveniently coincided with my being 16 years old. I started testing the car a little bit and then I got to race it at Homestead in 2003. I won that first race and then I found out later that I had essentially screwed up by winning! I was kicked out of the series!

"Basically several drivers in the series felt I was violating the rules because I wasn't a true gentleman driver. They were also making the case that I was in it to make a career of this. That kind of driver isn't allowed in the series. I basically just chalked it up to being my official welcome to the world of Italian politics!

"They reconsidered their decision eventually and I was able to get back in the series for four races last year. By then some really quick guys had come into the series and it was fun to have them to race against."

The lesson in politics completed, Segal and his father set about looking for ways to get him back in the car and on the track in a professional race series.

"After being asked to stop racing in the Ferrari Challenge the first time, we started thinking about our options. We had the great Ferrari 360 and we wanted to find a series where we could get some seat time. We had a working relationship with Ferrari of Washington (FoW) for a long time. Every time we raced in the Challenge series we did it with their support and using their resources. At the time the Ferrari Challenge came to an end for me. FoW was running the 360 as a GT car in Grand Am, with Cort Wagner and Bill Auberlen driving.

"We got to talking with them about whether or not the 360 we had would be eligible for Grand Am Cup competition. We talked with Mark Raffauf at Grand Am and he said they were going to have the SGS class the following year and our car would be a good fit there. He told us to modify the car to get it closer to the new specs and to bring it to the race at VIR so they could evaluate it and classify it accordingly. This was in 2003.

"We ran the car in the race but were not officially classified as we were one of the field-fillers Grand AM used that season to support the then-new Daytona Prototype class.

Running with the big boys was a revelation for this former kid in a shifter kart.

"That was my first Rolex race. I definitely enjoyed that race as it was a real eye opener for me! In the 360 Challenge series there are fast drivers and slower drivers but you really don't have to deal with closing speeds as the cars are all essentially the same. In the BMW club races I was on the track in a class of car that was always one of the fastest cars out there. I had to pass people, but I never really had to worry about getting passed by a different class car. On the track with the faster prototypes it was a completely different ballgame and it took a lot of getting used to.

"I had to learn to glance in my mirror every time I would get ready to turn into a corner. I had to check my mirrors on the straights as well to see what was coming up on me. To be honest, it was very difficult to get used to."

That first outing was nothing to write home about, but he was hooked on the prospect of moving up in the finishing order - and having his name show up in the record books.

"After VIR we tried to put together a program for the 2004 season running a full SGS schedule with the 360. As we were in the process of organizing that, we learned that Ferrari of Washington was planning to run the Maserati in the GT class. Naturally we were interested in that as it seemed to be a better alternative than the 360 for a variety of reasons. So we figured, OK, we will hop on board with that, and so we ordered a car for ourselves.

"The FoW guys were going to have their car for Daytona and we were supposed to get our car in time for Homestead or for the race after that. Well, they got their car but our car was delayed endlessly because we kept waiting for more and more updates.

"Last year, over the course of the season, the FoW Maserati team basically completely reconstructed the car. They moved the engine back five inches in the chassis. They put in a sequential gear box. They did all sorts of engineering work, transforming the car from one that was off the pace to one that was competitive. While Maserati was building our car they decided to stop production on it and wait to see what other modifications and improvements the FoW guys came up with.

"We had planned on running almost the full season last year but it turned out our car didn't arrive until September. We only had time to do the last three races of the season. We rolled out the #34 car at VIR for the first time last October."

The #34 Maserati had a white and yellow color scheme, with black striping running along the hood, and featured the Algar name as the primary sponsor.

"A lot of the crew guys seemed to think the graphics on the front of the car made it look like a catfish. Somebody called it 'catfish' and the name stuck.

"Darius Grala ran with us at VIR. He had been in the Ferrari Challenge and he had ties with Glenn Marquis at Ferrari of Washington. Glenn was orchestrating the whole Maserati deal. We ordered the car from him and he was the team manager. Darius knew Glenn and when our car finally came in Glenn started making calls and that is how we hooked up with him.

"The VIR race was a great experience. Darius is a great guy. I never got to race him in the Ferrari Challenge where he did really well. I was very interested in seeing how I stacked up against him, given that we both enjoyed success in the Ferrari Challenge series."

For the 2005 season, Segal set his sights on running a full race schedule. But the right bait just wasn't in the water for the catfish to swim to the front. In fact, the catfish never even got wet.

"This year we started off planning on doing a full season with the exception of the Rolex 24. We really didn't want to do that race unless we knew we had a good shot at it and we didn't have everything come together early enough for that to happen. We decided to start the season at the next race. But then we got hit with more delays and ultimately the parts and updates we expected just never materialized on time. After missing Homestead we decided to just go ahead and modify the #33 car on our own and we finally had it ready for the Fontana race.

"We went into the race with zero testing. It was not the kind of start we had hoped for. The rules had forced us to make the car over completely different from where we started. The Hoosier tires were so different from the Dunlop's and we just didn't know what the car needed to run with them. We simply struggled the whole weekend. No matter what we tried it never seemed to be what we needed.

"When we got to Mt. Tremblant we tried a different setup and some different ideas and they seem to be working so far. The weekend there was really good. We went in there saying that if we finished in the top ten we would be thrilled. And to be honest, at the end of the weekend a lot of the guys - and me too - were disappointed that we finished fifth. That is how good the car was compared to our expectations going in. Once we started running in practice we knew the car was fast. Fifth place is really good and it was a good and encouraging result for us, but it doesn't really represent how much we think we can do with that car."

And what became of the catfish?

"The catfish is sitting in the garage. Over the last few months it has undergone a complete restoration. It really only ran in a few races but, we took it apart and replaced a lot of parts and repainted it to look brand new again. We have had a few people express interest in buying the car but nothing has panned out yet. It is just sitting there waiting for someone to drive it away. I can say you could probably get it for about the same price as a Porsche Cup car but that is all I will commit to as to price! Let's just say the selling price would be in that region.

"The car we are running this year is the same #33 car we ran last year. And the team name has been shortened to just Ferrari of Washington. But on the car the only Ferrari dealership you will see is Algar Ferrari. I know that is a bit confusing but, basically the team and the crew and the equipment are the property of Ferrari of Washington. It is their team and it is sponsored by Algar and by Empire Paintball."

"Joao Barbosa was hired by Ferrari of Washington last year to test and develop the Maserati and he drove a few races for them. He really impressed everyone so we saw him as the number one guy to get for this year. He is unbelievably fast and a great development driver."

"As for when we will race the car, we are hoping to run the rest of this season. Barring the arrival of some kind of huge sponsorship support that we haven't seen to date, we won't be in Mexico. And depending on how the rest of the season goes we may miss one or two races near the end to go testing and get the car ready for next season."

Segal feels the Maserati can win in GT and, like any competitive racer, he would love to have his name listed first in the race results. But he knows that he is still a young racing driver with a long future of racing ahead of him. He told us he isn't going to be locked in to just one choice for the future, if he has the choice, that is.

"I think the Maserati has the potential to be competitive right now. I think Grand Am has gotten the cars to be pretty close in terms of speed. Overall I think they have done a great job so far. But even with the Maserati being competitive, that doesn't necessarily mean I will continue to be in the Maserati. I am going to take whatever opportunities may come along - whatever works. Next year is dependant upon where we find the right deal to do well, and win, and be competitive."

Would Segal entertain the thought of driving a Daytona Prototype? Perhaps down the road, so to speak.

"I have never driven a DP car so I can't tell you if I would enjoy it or not. I can say that the other DP drivers seem to be having a lot of fun and you can't argue with the quality of the racing. But when I do things I want to do them right. Sure, potentially we could put together a DP deal for next season but the questions are; will I be ready, and do we want to run around in 15th place and know that if you finished 12th you had an incredible weekend? I really want to spend more time in a GT car so I can develop myself as a driver. I still have a long way to go."

Segal's name may be one that the fans become very familiar with over time, provided he lands the right rides and studies his craft well. He told us it is his intention to learn all he can to make himself a top notch racer.

"I haven't done that many races and I don't have a lot of experience. But I want to keep doing this and I want to get experience. I'm really enjoying the challenge of racing in such a competitive series with such professional teams and excellent drivers, and I hope to keep upping my game to be able to compete at the front end of the grid on a consistent basis. Give me a few more races, I'll get there!

Actually, Jeff Segal, we are expecting to see your name on many an entry list to come.

Hmm, Jeff "Catfish" Segal, perhaps?