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Through The Esses - Chris Dyson Is On Track For A Stellar Career

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"I have so many great childhood memories of racing. When I was small, I used to wake up from naps to the sounds of Pat Smith and my dad checking the timing of my dad's Datsun 200SX."

Those words appear on the Dyson Racing website as part of a biography of Chris Dyson, the son of Rob Dyson, long time sportscar racing competitor. Rob, and Pat Smith - his crew chief and head engineer from the early 1970's right into the late 1990's - tuned many a motor along the path of a very successful sportscar racing career. Chris Dyson grew up with his dad's racing all around him. Like father, like son, over the last few years, he has firmly established the roots of his own sure-to-be-lengthy and already successful career in racing.



Dyson has competed in several different types of race cars and in several series. He was the 2003 American Le Mans Series LMP 675 champion, driving a Dyson Racing Lola. He took four class wins that season including the coveted 12 Hours of Sebring. The Dyson team moved their Lolas into the P1 class for 2004, and managed to pull down six podium spots in nine races.

Chris Dyson has a full plate these days as he recently completed running a limited schedule of Toyota Atlantic (open wheel) races, plus a limited schedule of Grand Am races (in a Howard Motorsports Crawford Daytona Prototype, along with his father and Harrison Brix) and the full ALMS schedule in the LMP1 Dyson Lola. In 2004, Chris competed in the 24 Hours of Le Mans, partnering Jan Lammers in a Dome-Judd. (They finished 7th). And as if that weren't enough European flavor for this young American, he also drove a Zytek 04S in the Le Mans Endurance Series (LMES) race at Silverstone, England, and finished 4th.

We spent some time talking with this 27 year old professional racer and learned a bit about his time behind the wheel and what he would like to achieve over the course of his racing career. We talked about the Grand AM Daytona Prototypes, the Lola LMP1 car that he drives in the American Le Mans Series, his stint in Toyota Atlantics, and what the future holds for Dyson Racing.

We wondered why an established sportscar racer would want to 'go backwards' and run in an open wheel series like Toyota Atlantic where the cars are not nearly as 'big and burly' as the prototypes.

"Basically the Atlantic program (for Dyson Racing) was born to achieve a few goals. We wanted to

expand the horizons of our team by getting it involved in another series. We added some manpower for the effort. And I viewed it as a great opportunity and a complimentary program to the sportscar series. Atlantic races are a very competitive atmosphere. I think we did a more than a respectable job in the five races we ran. We were able to pick up some cars from some excellent teams that were winding down their involvement in the series last year. I think we put the whole program together on a very cost-effective basis. It was a program that slotted in nicely with our existing operations.

"The Atlantic is a very nimble car and on low speed corners it is far superior to any sports prototype. But in terms of overall down force levels, and overall feel, it is actually quite close to the ALMS prototypes. The biggest difference is the tires. The spec Atlantic tires have nowhere near the grip of the tires I have raced on in sportscars. It's a very hard tire. That was probably one of the bigger adjustments I had to make. And the Lola is obviously heavier than the Atlantics which means you can get shorter stopping distances in the Atlantics. But coming out of the open wheel cars into the prototypes doesn't really require too much time to get used to the differences. You have more power available in a sportscar and the Atlantics are very similar in downforce so the transition isn't that difficult.

"The experience and the quality of the competition were all beneficial to me. I just think I am a stronger driver because of my involvement in the series. And I think that we proved that no matter what the challenge, Dyson Racing team is up for it. I think we proved that we were as good as everybody else out there. Overall, I thought the whole experience was very positive."

Then we have to say the 'step backwards' we assumed was the case was our mistake. Dyson wisely took on the challenge of open wheel racing to improve his overall driving ability. The effort was an admirable one for sure. But we still wondered if the taste of open wheel racing had whet his appetite to try a series like CART or the IRL?

"I think that if the right opportunity came along I would go open wheel racing, but I do think sportscar racing is where my future lies. I don't want to be limited to just one discipline or category. I think if you look back over the history of racing there have been great drivers who can go fast in whatever they are driving. If an opportunity came along I would have to take a look at it.

"If you look at the very best drivers over the years they have proved to be very versatile. I do not want to be limited. I prefer the challenge of using different parts of your brain. Even though it is all racing, there are different things to think about in different formulas."

In the ALMS series, the Lola LMP1 cars of Dyson Racing have consistently been pacesetters - at the start of a race weekend. Unfortunately the Lola's have yet to demonstrate they have the stamina to finish what they started. For a team that had successfully campaigned the Riley & Scott MKIII chassis for many years, winning a number of championships and races, the Lola has been a disappointment. Lord knows the team has worked hard and long hours on developing the potential in the car. That showed up in the practice and qualifying times. But there always seemed to be some mechanical gremlin just lying in wait to expose itself at a most inopportune time.

Chris Dyson knows the pain as well as anyone.

"It has been infuriating at times. If you look at how competitive we have been the last few years, from the start of a race weekend, and then you look at the final results, I think there has been some real frustration for us. It is one of those things where you work your tail off in this game and at the end of the day the car is just a machine. And that package has to be working correctly throughout the race. It has been a real character building experience for all of us.

"On the one hand you are there fighting every single weekend and yet we haven't won as many races as we should have, for a variety of reasons. I think there are a lot of people out there who know that our team is better than what our record shows. Unfortunately, more often than not, the machinery has let us down. Looking down the road I can say that we don't want to relive it. You can't change the past but you

can try to shape the future."

"We had a tremendous record with the Riley & Scott MKIII-Ford. I think it showed that, given the right package, we can deliver. I feel we have been delivering competitively for the last few seasons but we haven't won enough. We are in this game to win races and to win championships. There is still a shot at us winning a championship in the American Le Mans Series but we simply haven't won enough races. The ALMS is so competitive that you have to win the races to win the championship."

Chris and Rob Dyson have run in a Grand AM prototype a few times this season and will be at Watkins Glen again this weekend for the CompUSA 200. Chris and Harrison Brix will race a Crawford DP03 under the Howard-Boss Motorsports banner. The association will continue for a few more races this season and it is possible they may join forces again in 2006. We asked Chris Dyson what it was like to drive the Crawford.

"Well, the DP is a totally different approach to what is running in the ALMS. The DPs are far and away from the old Riley & Scott MKIII. Max Crawford has done a really nice job with the car. It is well built and extremely safe and I think we are going to be competitive with that program. But it is just a totally different approach to driving. You have virtually no aerodynamics from the car and given the weight of the car, it is not overpowered. You really have to drive the cars aggressively to really get the most out of a lap time. And because the car is on really small tires you have to really look after the car. It is a challenge to drive one and they are quite a bit different than the prototypes that run in the ALMS.

"Over a lap, the Lola is more fun to drive because the limit is so much higher. No question. But in the Grand Am, the emphasis is on close racing with cars running together. And because the cars are not overly aerodynamic they create a very good tow when you are racing with other people. With the ALMS cars there is still room for the kind of sophistication that we have come to expect in traditional prototypes."

Dyson Racing has been on the scene for a very long time. Chris Dyson sees no reason why the team can't continue to participate in sportscar racing in North America for an even longer time. Today, with two primary sportscar series to choose from, Dyson's fans are all wondering which series they will choose

"I think you will see us in the major sportscar series in 2006 - with an emphasis on plural. Right now, it is all in flux but it is our intention to run in both the Grand Am and the ALMS in 2006. We are just trying to put ourselves in a position to run up front wherever we are racing in 2006 and I think our fans will be happy to hear that."

Chris Dyson's admiration for what his father has achieved in his own racing career (which continues today) is evident to anyone who has watched the two of them together in a race paddock. Chris Dyson is proud of his dad, and he is working hard to keep his dad proud of him. So far, Rob Dyson must be one of the proudest fathers in upstate New York, where the Dyson family calls home.

"My dad has accomplished everything that he wanted to accomplish as a driver. He wasn't someone to live vicariously through me. My decision to go racing was just that, my decision. My dad has been extremely supportive and has not put pressure on me-- at least not any more than there is on any other member of the Dyson Racing team. He was always a supportive parent who wanted me to carve out my own identity.

"I always thought that I could be competitive in motor racing but I honestly didn't think it would happen as quickly as it did. In terms of where I am in my life I am extremely happy and pleased with my progress, both personally and professionally. This is a very exciting point in my life because a lot of things are happening. There are a lot of goals in my life that I would like to achieve but right now I am just taking things in stride and trying to make each race better than the last one and just keep building.

"I think if I had to look back on my career 10 or more years from now, I would love to have won a few

major championships and some of the bigger races like the 24 hours of Le Mans and Daytona. The way things have been going lately I have just been enjoying every day as it comes. I am thankful for the opportunity and it is just an exciting time for me and the team. I certainly hope we are still doing this 10 years from now."

Chris Dyson has firmly moved out of the benevolent shadow of his father's legacy and is shining brightly on his own, with his ever-increasing talent becoming more and more apparent with each passing race. We expect to be hearing a lot more from him and we expect Rob Dyson will be smiling quite a bit as he watches his son carry on a great family tradition.