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Through The Esses - Pete Lyons: A Life Inside Racing

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"I sold my first photograph to Autosport magazine in 1958 when I was 18 years old."

The long and enduring history of auto racing is comprised of many feats of bravery, several acts of treachery and skullduggery, more than a few fits of frustration, colorful characters galore, a myriad number of independent contributors of assorted means, and miles and miles of column inches. That last item on our list refers to all the space allotted to all the words and the photographs that have appeared - and continue to appear - in all the magazines, newspapers, internet sites and race programs that have existed over the years.

The task of relating the tales and presenting the images of the historical actions of the rest of the cast of characters - the villains as well as the champions - we listed has always fallen on the shoulders of great writers and photographers. Without the dedicated application of the professional talents they possess, much of the inside history of racing would not exist. Yes, we would know what we were fortunate enough to witness in person, but how would we have ever known about all the other racing exploits that were occurring out of our reach?



Everybody loves reading a good story or viewing great photographs. Words and images help to cement our memories and fill in the gaps in our recollections, and they expand our understanding and awareness. And when presented to us by professionals, we soon learn to appreciate the gift that they are bringing us through their work.

When one looks back over the last 50 years or so, there are several names of prominent story tellers and racing photographers that most race fans would recognize in a minute. Names like Peter Brock, Dave Friedman, Leon Mandel, Brock Yates, Chris Economaki, Jonathan Ingram, Regis Lefebure, John Brooks and Pete Lyons come immediately to mind. Each of them has endured over the years as professionals on the inside of the sport who allow us to hear what goes on when the racing stops, or see the action up close when the cars are at speed.

One man we have long admired for his writing and photographic prowess over the years is Pete Lyons. He is a long time contributor to AutoWeek magazine, and was for many years a regular contributor to Autosport magazine as well. He has also authored five books on sportscars and frequently is asked to contribute stories for inclusion in racing programs and for other periodicals. As he told us in the first line of this column, Lyons sold his first photograph in 1958, and in one form or another he has been on the racing scene - in North America and in Europe - ever since.

This California resident, and former New Yorker, spent some time with us looking back over the roots of his career and some of the experiences he enjoyed along the way. Lyons didn't ask us to let him tell his story. No, he talked with us because we wanted to hear it. And as we said earlier, a good story is something we enjoy. A good story about someone we have long admired is just that much better yet. So please take a few minutes to read the tale we are about to relate of the life of one Pete Lyons, a racing writer and photographer who has long been appreciated by his peers and countless thousands of avid racing history buffs around the globe.

Pete Lyons is the son of Ozzie Lyons, himself a well respected journalist and photographer whose own involvement in covering auto racing set the stage for what would eventually become his son's occupation.

"My dad was a professional photographer who worked for the General Electric Company for many years. His racing related activities were done in his free time, but he took pride in carrying himself in a professional manner at all times.

"Dad was an engineering draftsman when he started with GE and then he moved into a role in photography and eventually headed up a motion picture unit in the space technology center, located in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. But all during the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s, he liked to go off to sports car races and all sorts of car events on weekends. Even before I was interested in cars, as a young teenager, I would go with him but I would spend my time off doing other things. Then one day my father taught me how to drive and I suddenly realized what all the excitement was about! The year was 1956 and I was 16 years old."

Like most of us car enthusiasts, once the bug bites, we start looking for new ways to enjoy the rides to come. It was that way for Lyons too. But unlike most enthusiasts, he would eventually come to be not behind the racing wheel, but instead be behind the lens and the keyboard, bringing the excitement of racing to fellow racing enthusiasts at points far and wide.

"Once I expressed an interest in racing, dad would give me one of his cameras and several rolls of film and we would go off shooting. We would go to places like Lime Rock, Watkins Glen and Bridgehampton. These tracks were close to our home in Westchester County, north of New York City. I was born in Schenectady in upstate New York, but when I was 8 GE transferred my dad to the big city.

"And every March we would take a family vacation to go down to Sebring, Florida, for the annual 12 hours race. Sebring figures big in my development.

"Dad worked for various magazine publishers in New York City. I recall that one was called "Speed Age" and another was called "True". True was more of a general interest men's magazine but he would do stories about auto racing for both publications. He also contributed quite early on to Automobile Quarterly. But the primary connection he had with racing was through Autosport, the English weekly.

"According to the story my mother used to tell, Ozzie was at a race one day when a woman came rushing up to him. Her name was Ruth Sands Bentley. She wrote for magazines under that byline and one of her clients was Autosport in England. According to mom's story she said to my dad, "Oh sir, you have a camera around your neck, would you take some pictures for me?" Dad gave her a roll of exposed film and the images were later published in Autosport. In time Ozzie became the American photographer for Autosport. This was in the 1950s.

"That was really the springboard for my career because Ozzie was getting published in this wonderful magazine that came in the mail every week and told us all about the Monaco Grand Prix and the Nurburgring 1,000 kilometers and other races in Europe that otherwise I would never have heard of. As a new car enthusiast I was starting to get real excited about the world of racing.

"Dad was keen on import cars - what were commonly called 'foreign cars' in those days. We would go to

the New York auto show every year and photograph the cars for Autosport. I would get to look at all these keen cars and dad knew people who owned them and I would sometimes even get to drive them, so it all became a real passion for me."

Young Lyons' shared passion with his father's vocation led to their sometimes combining talents to produce photographs that would later appear in print. Most times the photos were taken by the senior Lyons, but once in a while one of Pete's shots would be published, under the Ozzie Lyons credit line.

"The very first photograph of mine that I got published under my own name was taken at a race that I was working as a volunteer. The father of a friend of mine in high school owned an MG TC. He was also an SCCA flag worker. They invited me to come along with them one weekend for a race at Lime Rock. How we ever got three people into an MG TC I will never know! I can't recall how we got there but, I spent the whole day at their corner station. The event was a 10 hour sedan race called the Little Le Mans. It had cars like Saabs and Volvos racing in it.

"There was a particular moment when a 544 Volvo had a problem. At a fueling stop they had mistakenly poured water into the gas tank instead of gas. The car made it around the track as far as our station and just stopped. The driver got out and was on his back underneath the car draining the water out of the gas tank. He then ran across the infield and got a can of real gas to put in the car. Anyway, I photographed that and the picture was published in Autosport. That was my first published photo and I was as excited as hell!

"Back then we were doing this as a hobby and as something we both enjoyed. Of course dad was getting paid for it but it was really something we both just enjoyed doing. When I got out of high school in 1958 I decided to ride a motorcycle across country to attend Stanford University. And I did. For one year. Let us just say that I did not establish myself academically. I was much more interested in doing things like helping my buddy rebuild his motorcycle engine on the dorm floor than I was in attending classes. In other words, I had entirely too much freedom and took entirely too much advantage of that.

"University officials expressed that perhaps it would be better if I went away and matured a bit before returning. And I can say today that I am still in the midst of that process!

"After Stanford I had a series of odd jobs and I was hitchhiking around the country. In 1961, just before my 21st birthday, I thought it would be very important to go to Europe. So, with a \$500 stake from my grandmother I went to Europe for the summer. At the end of the summer I didn't want to come back home so I ended up spending two and a half years there.

"I took odd jobs in both England and Germany during the wintertime. In the summertime I would travel around on a Norton motorcycle I bought and then when I really did run out of money I traded that in for a bicycle and I did some cycling around Europe.

"During this time I attended as many European races as I could. Unfortunately I can't find the film from that period, just a few scattered prints. I have a sequence from the Monaco Grand Prix from 1962 that shows Ritchie Ginther's BRM losing a wheel at the first turn. I also have a single photo of myself on my Norton motorcycle at that year's Targa Florio. Whatever happened to all the film from that time is unknown.

"I am very nostalgic for those days. Racing was an adventure back then and it has lost some of that today. It has all become a bit too homogenized."

While his young and formative days in Europe were well spent, there would come a time when this American would return to his home country and find his future path in life. But it took a bit of time before the signs that would lead him to that path became clear.

"Having spent two and half years working odd jobs in Europe and having exhausted all of my grandmother's money, I came back to the US and my dad got me a job working in a small movie company in Philadelphia. I processed film and coiled up cables and we even went to Hawaii once to do a film about the Tsunami warning system in the Pacific. While working for them, I would go off on weekends to attend races and, after having only been with them one month, I announced that I was taking a week off to go to Sebring to attend the 12 hour race. Well the guy I worked for looked at me and said, 'You have to be here a year before you get any vacation time!' I thought, 'You know, this working for a living isn't all it is cracked up to be.' I missed the Sebring race in 1965 when Chaparral won in that major rainstorm."

Chaparral's Jim Hall was someone Lyons would come to know well in later years. In a momentary diversion from our chronological progression, he recalled first being focused on the tall man from Texas at a Formula 1 race in upstate New York.

"I believe it was in the fall of 1963 that I went to the US Grand Prix at Watkins Glen. I remember that Jim Hall was racing a Lotus and I remember particularly watching him there. I had heard of him and I think I remembered seeing him at Sebring before that. Of course, at that time I was nothing more than an amateur taking pictures so I would never have thought to walk up to him and introduce myself. Mind you I was published but I wasn't at *that* level!

"Thanks to my dad and Autosport I had credentials for the race, and I remember standing almost literally with my toes on the edge of the track at the apex to the turn they used to call the 90 at Watkins Glen. You could actually kneel down and have the wheels pass by within a few feet of the lens of your camera. So I was fortunate to have some advantages back then."

Coming back to his lack of affection for a 'real job', Lyons decided he would simply have to consider other options outside the world of a time card and structured hours. After all, the world of auto racing was now becoming a world in which he wanted to live.

"I would say it was around 1967 that I became a serious journalist. The Can-Am series had started in 1966 and I went to the second ever race held at Bridgehampton. I don't think I ever published pictures from that event but, because I was already doing photos for Autosport from places like Sebring, I wrote them a letter saying I would like to cover some of the Can-Am races in 1967. I ended up doing the first three races held on the east coast for Autosport. That basically kicked off my journalistic career as I worked for the next ten years covering racing for them."

And what a decade of opulence and advantage it was not for this young man who was starting to build a reputation as a serious and committed journalist and photographer. He may have spent time writing about and photographing the efforts of people of means but young Pete Lyons was not living an extravagant lifestyle by any standard. Looking back, it was a difficult way to make a living but one that cemented his standing as a professional.

"The last Can-Am series I did was 1972. I did almost every race that year. And in that same time frame I was doing other races too like the Daytona 24 hours, and Sebring 12 hours, the Indy 500 and Daytona 500 along with some USAC races and Trans Am races. In those days I was living in a Ford Econoline van, spending about 200 nights a year on the road, driving about 40,000 miles in a year.

"But at the end of the '72 season the Can-Am series was showing signs of dying and, let's face it, I had no home. In the wintertime I would go to New Mexico and stay with friends or go back to Pennsylvania to spend time with my parents. I was 32 years old and was just burnt out. Then, in October of 1972, I was at Riverside (California) for the Can-Am race. I can still remember walking the pit lane, standing in front of the two Penske Porsches and the two Team McLaren cars. Four cars away from me was Leon Mandel, the publisher of AutoWeek and I remember him looking up at me and sort of yelling across the four cars, 'Lyons! Don't go away! I've got your future all planned!' I thought, 'Hmm that's interesting!'

"Earlier that year I had gone to Europe for a few weeks to have some time for myself and see some races

over there. I didn't have an assignment but when Leon found out I was going he said 'Well then, you can do some stuff for us!' He authorized me to write a story from the Spa 1,000 kilometer race in Belgium. I wrote a nice long story and I got paid \$36 for that! Then I went down to the Targa Florio and wrote an even longer story so they paid me \$48 for that!

"And a side note here: That summer I had borrowed a motorcycle from Mike Keyser with Toad Hall Racing. When I told him I was going to Europe he said, 'Hey! Maybe you could help me out. I bought a new Honda 750 as a pit bike but I don't know how to get it from the airport to the race.' I said 'I'm your man! I own one of those bikes myself.' I went to Heathrow and got his bike out of customs. I gassed it up and rode it around Europe for several weeks.

"Unfortunately, just an hour before I was to deliver it to him, I crashed it at the Targa Florio! I did a lap of the 44-mile mountain course because I figured what the heck. I had the bike and I was there, so off I went. I did not complete the lap though because there was a patch of oil on the road at the apex of a sharp turn over a little bridge. But one more dark stain of oil on that old battered piece of road didn't really mean anything to me but I hit it and the bike went "Wham!" I bent up the exhaust pipe and skinned my elbows. I remember sitting in the press room the next day trying very hard not to lean my elbows on the table!

"You know, about 5 years ago Mike and I were talking and he told me he still has the motorcycle and was still planning to restore it!

"Coming back to 'my future' as outlined by Leon Mandel, I was asked by him to go to Europe in 1973 and cover Formula One races for AutoWeek. I thought that that beats retiring so I did it on the basis that I would do it for one year. I ended up doing it for four years. But at the same time I also wrote a letter to Autosport telling them that I could no longer do American racing for them. I said I had an assignment to come to Europe and cover Formula One and I wouldn't be able to do anything for them in the future. They came back and said that, 'As luck would have it, the chap who writes about Formula One for us doesn't wish to do it anymore.' I wound up having two assignments and writing two race reports for every race!

"I took that seriously and tried to write two separate reports. But I know there was at least one occasion where it was 4:00 in the morning and I had to have my stories to the people who were going to carry them to the respective magazines on Monday morning, so I did do a carbon copy report. Needless to say writing two different reports about the same race was quite a task. But the magazines had different likes. Autosport gave you more space and they wanted more technical detail and anecdotes about the drivers. And AutoWeek was more interested in the American drivers who were competing in F1 at the time. It was logical then to create two stories.

"At that time, stories were anywhere from 4 to 6 thousand words. Funny thing is I wrote the longest story for the shortest race of the year. It was the Swiss Grand Prix. Of course, Switzerland doesn't allow racing so it was held at Dijon in France. As I recall the race ran about an hour and twenty minutes and I wrote about 9,000 words. That was probably about 8 or 9 pages in Autosport magazine."

The ability to collect enough information to create such large stories is an attribute that Lyons first began to develop in his teenage years.

"We would get Autosport when my dad was writing for them. I would also pick up other magazines like Road & Track, often times having as many as four magazines with stories about a particular race. I would lay them out in front of me on my desk and go through them. Because I was struck by the differences in the reports I started writing notes to myself to find out what really happened. I was sort of creating digests of these races mostly motivated by trying to resolve the differences and the conflicts in the different reports. So I would actually wind up writing my own race report from the published stories. That is actually how I started doing this.

"I am not necessarily a painstakingly detail oriented person. If you were to ask me to wash your car or

sweep your floors I wouldn't do a very good job because I wouldn't care. But when it comes to writing a story or cleaning a photograph I am so meticulous."

In his early years as a journalist, there were no laptop computers or word processors to make the process easier. Typewriters were used to put down words to paper and in a pinch, a plain ordinary pen or pencil and pad would be put into service. Lyons remembers a day when his trusty keyboard companion decided to retire mid-sentence.

"I was staying at a little hotel in Monaco and it was Monday morning, right after the Grand Prix. They had a little garden where you could have your breakfast out on the patio. I brought out my little portable typewriter and started writing my story. Now this is Monday, so I must have been working on a follow up story. Anyway, I just get ready to start typing the second page of my story and my typewriter just goes 'bong' and it breaks. I got out my Swiss Army knife and tried to repair it but I couldn't figure it out. So, with time pressing I got out a pencil and finished my story. Talk about writer's cramp! After 9 pages my fingers felt like they were going to fall off!"

At the end of 1976 he decided it was time to stop "living the life of a gypsy" and so he moved into a new position that would not require a lot of traveling.

"I had reached the point where I found myself saying things like, "Oh GOD, I have to go back to Brazil." I had gotten jaded and tired and I realized it was time to quit. I decided to write a letter to the two magazines and say I didn't want to do this anymore. At which point a prudent person would have started counting his pennies and said 'You have \$6,000 in the bank and you are going to run through this pretty soon.' But instead, a friend of mine named Jerry Schmitt and I bought an airplane, an old Cessna 150, which of course was not the most logical thing I could do with the money! Then of course I found I needed more money!

"Another friend, Jim MacQueen, was the associate publisher of a magazine in California that was called Formula. He said why don't you come out to the Long Beach Grand Prix and do a story for the magazine. So we jumped in the plane and flew out there. I slept on his couch. I did the story and then he called me and said his magazine needed a new editor. He asked me to come over and think about taking the job. I finally realized this was the most sensible thing for me to do so I moved to California and became the editor.

"I was editor of the magazine - which later changed its name to RaceCar - for about three and half years. I think our last issue was October in 1980. The publisher decided he would rather build a house in Malibu than support the magazine, so it folded. But I hadn't been too happy there anyway so when it looked like the end was near I put the word out that I was probably available.

"A friend of mine was the managing editor of a magazine called Import Automotive Parts and Accessories, or IAPA for short. She said 'Lo and behold we need a new editor' and would I like to talk about the job. We met on the roof of the garage area in the old Ontario Speedway and she made me the offer and I accepted it. Years later she told me she had some reserve and I could have asked for more and she would have paid it!

"She and I worked there for the next two and a half years. She was the Managing Editor and I was the Editor. Then we got married, and she is still my boss! My wife's name is Lorna. Her maiden name was Fitts. We have been married 23 years now."

Lorna and Pete Lyons live in a southern California town called Big Bear City. They have been residents there since 1983. Today they enjoy a bit more stable and relaxed lifestyle, one quite the opposite of the days of the Ford Econoline or borrowed motorcycles being crashed in Europe.

"Lorna is the webmaster of our site [Pete Lyons website](#). She makes our life work. She organizes

everything so I can do what I do. I am a senior contributing editor for AutoWeek and I do a variety of things for them. That is one of the joys of working for AutoWeek because they let me do a variety of things. I also do a column every month for Vintage Race Car magazine. I feel I am at a good point in my life, especially now that I have my vision back."

"I turned 65 this year and my vision had been deteriorating due to cataracts. I had surgery in the spring of this year to have the lenses replaced. I like to say I traded in my OEM lens for plastic aftermarket lenses! But my vision is just spectacular now. Having cataracts was like looking through a camera lens smeared with mud. It is a kind of cloudiness inside the eyes that blurs the focus of things and makes everything appear yellowish. And it comes on gradually so you don't really realize how bad it is until they take the bandages off after your operation and you say, 'My GOD I can see!'

Lyons' years of involvement in the sport have given him the ability to 'see' so much of what lies both above and beneath the surface of the world of auto racing. He has an insider's understanding of what it takes to make it as a professional. His appreciation for what it takes may be best described in the following anecdote about the first time he became aware of Jim Hall.

"The very first time I remember being acutely aware of Jim Hall was at Sebring in, I think it was, 1959. I had heard of this tall, thin guy from Texas and so when I saw him in the paddock I wandered over near him. I remember this tall skinny guy standing up in the back of a pickup truck hoisting up boxes and tools and handing them down to his buddy. Just as I stood there another guy who knew him came by and said, 'Hey Jim. Man you go first class!' Jim's reply (in a slow Texas drawl) was simply, "Only way to go."

"That just stuck in my mind for years because, in auto racing if you show up with inferior equipment it is going to color your entire performance. In that respect, auto racing is just like aviation. You do not go out there and dabble in it. You have to do it first rate."

First rate is a term that could also be applied to some of the famous and infamous characters Lyons encountered along his life's journey in auto racing. His years as a writer and photographer covered a good section of what we middle-aged folks like to think of as the 'golden age' of racing - the period from 1950 through to 1980. In those three decades Lyons spent time with some of the greats. We asked him who he admired from that period and who might be racing today that reminds him of the great racers of the past.

"In no particular order Mark Donohue was someone I admired very much. Others include Bruce McLaren, Denny Hulme, Dan Gurney, Mario Andretti, Peter Revson, Emerson Fittipaldi, Jackie Stewart, and Jim Hall. And that isn't the entire list. All of them are people who just have that something extra that make them stand out. There is a thing about the people who are in this sport that is different or exceptional about them. They are high quality people. I am confident that I could make such a list of modern contemporary drivers as well but I don't know them as well as I did the others.

"I just read your recent interview with Chris Dyson. I respect and admire Chris. He is that mold of person, I think, where they take what they are doing very seriously. Yes, he came into life with advantages but he is not just using those advantages to have a good time. He is deeply serious and committed to doing a good job. And that is what I respect and admire about so many people in this sport. They are not dabblers or just out to have a good time. Yeah, we can all have fun at races. There are a lot of people who are doing it for that reason. But what is exceptional about so many of the people who have made a famous name for themselves is that they actually made it, they haven't bought it. Racing is the kind of thing where you know what happens when the flag drops."

Indeed we do know. Thanks to professional writers and photographers like Pete Lyons. And we will continue to know for the foreseeable future because Lyons isn't ready to unplug his laptop or pull the batteries out of his camera anytime soon.

"I am still enthused about what I am doing and I am still really having fun at it. And I am still hoping to

achieve the level of maturity the people at Stanford suggested I strive for!"