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Through The Esses - Lienhard and Theys - Fast Friends Together Again

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In an earlier "Through The Esses" column we said farewell to **Fredy Lienhard**, the gentleman racer from Switzerland, and the owner of the Lista Company, makers of modular storage units as you would find in race team transporters. At the time, he announced he would no longer be actively involved in a season-long racing effort and it looked like he had hung up his helmet for good. But the fast moving head of a racer is what a helmet is supposed to rest on, not a stationary peg hook or shelf. And so, we are happy to say, Fredy Lienhard is back under his helmet, driving a fast car and riding with a few good friends.

Didier Theys - the '*Belgian Bullet*' - has rejoined Lienhard, his old friend and driving partner, in the Le Mans Endurance Series (LMES), sharing wheel time in a new LMP2 class Lola B05/40 Judd. The new Lola won in only its third race, with Theys and **Eric Van de poele** sharing the driving chores. Lienhard had to sit out that race with back problems but the plan is to have him back up to speed by the last race of the season.



Supporting them this season is a third old friend, **Markus Hotz**, the owner of a racecar-building company called Horag. Thus the team name Horag-Lista Racing. And like Lienhard and Lista, the team hails from Switzerland.

We caught up with Didier Theys the day after he arrived home in Arizona from his victory at the Nurburgring. Sorting through his phone messages and emails, and recovering from a case of jet lag, he still made time to talk to us.

"Markus owns Horag and they used to build Super Vee race cars. It was Fredy who backed the construction of the company. They have been friends for over 40 years. Markus ran Fredy in Super Vees and in sportscars, and he also ran Formula 2 cars with drivers like Johnny Cecotto. He was pretty successful as an owner in Formula 2 and as a driver in sportscars in the early 1970s."

Before we proceed, for the benefit of those who may not recognize the name Didier Theys, a quick recounting of his background in racing might be in order. We can't imagine many of the readers of this column will need this information, as Theys has been a top competitor in sportscar racing for a very long time. However, we do want our readers to know what it is we are talking about (well, at least this time anyway) so here goes.

"My family had no involvement with cars. I always wanted to race a vehicle with an engine. That is how I got started with go karts in 1975. I never really thought I would become a race car driver. I simply enjoyed racing on my home town kart track in Nivelles. I started to win races and then I moved into the Belgian

Championship. I won that and then moved into the European Championship. After that I said to myself 'I am doing well in karting now, so why not go to the next step?'

"I made a loan with the bank and I went racing in Formula Ford in England back in 1978. My folks were not able to help me financially so I made my own way. I won races that first year and I managed to pay the loan back with my earnings from the races. The next year I was picked up by the Marlboro team in Formula 3 and that was a big help. I was managing to get by.

"I came back to the continent to race Formula Ford in 1979 then moved into Formula 3 then into Formula 2. This later became Formula 5000 and there was no way I could find the kind of money needed to race in that series. The first year all the cars were former Formula 1 cars and were very expensive to run. I was then asked to come over to America to race in Formula Super Vee. I won the championship and then I moved to Indy Lights with the Truesports team and won the championship there too.

"I then ran in IndyCar for five years. I always did enjoy sportscars going all the way back to running at Le Mans in 1982. I always kept a foot in sportscar racing by being involved in a long distance race or two while I was in open wheel racing. I won the Spa 24 hours in 1987 with Eric Van de poele.

"I have coached drivers in the Ferrari Challenge and in the Fran Am series and Formula Renault. From time to time I do some private testing with drivers who ask me to help them develop their talents, but I have never been a full time instructor at a driving school."

We wondered how the Lienhard - Theys partnership ever came to be, and what the two of them had planned going forward. For starters, we learned the Horag-Lista Racing Lola is on its way to Georgia for the Petit Le Mans race.

"Fredy and I first met through Markus Hotz, the owner of Horag Racing. I have known Markus since my days in European Formula 2, going all the way back to 1984. Markus hired me to drive a sportscar in a couple of European races and that's how I met him. In 1995 Markus called me and told me that Fredy had just bought a Ferrari 333SP and he wanted to know if I would like to drive with Fredy in America. Of course I accepted the offer and I met Fredy for the first time in Phoenix (Arizona) during the winter of '94-'95.

"I knew of Fredy as the owner of Lista but I did not know him personally. I did my first race with him in the spring of 1995 at Road Atlanta in the IMSA Series. Fredy and I are very close today. For the first year it was pretty much a business relationship but we became friends rather quickly. We have a lot of respect for each other and I consider him to be a very close friend. He is a very good man."

The 333SP is often credited with the rebirth of prototype racing. The teams that campaigned in the 333SP always seemed to find a way to land on the podium. The men who drove them were fortunate to have done so. Some, like Theys, were doubly blessed. "The Ferrari was a great car. I had driven it for Gianpiero Moretti in 1995 and, actually, from 1995 on I was driving both Gianpiero's MOMO Ferrari in the United States and Fredy's Horag-Lista Ferrari in Europe. That car was so much fun to drive.

"You know the two people responsible for the creation of that car were Gianpiero Moretti and Piero Ferrari. They reached an agreement to build that car and they made it to comply with the IMSA rules that existed at that time. Unfortunately what killed that car in 1999 was when Don Panoz adopted the ACO rules and the use of a restrictor. At that time Ferrari did not want to develop the engine for the new rules."

We well remember the days of the Dyson Racing - MOMO - Lista - Scandia rivalries in North American sportscar racing. While the real front line racers were found in one of just two different chassis makes, there was always a close battle down to the wire between them.

"(During the late 1990s) there were two or three Ferraris and the Dyson Riley & Scott MKIII cars

competing. It was not a lot of cars but the competition between them was pretty good."

We can recall one particular race - at Lime Rock Park - where Theys took the win in the 333SP, but not before he first took a white-flag-lap spin around the track - all in one corner!

"I was behind three GT cars and they blocked the exit to a turn. I lost the down force in the turn but with my IndyCar experience I managed to turn the wheel inside, jump on the brake, make a 360 turn and finally straighten out. I lost about 4 seconds but still managed to win the race."

But before we slip too deeply into a sea of memories, let us come back to Lienhard and his initial decision to retire and then to return to racing. We last saw him in a Doran JE4 Daytona Prototype in the Grand Am Rolex Sports Car Series.

"One of the main reasons Fredy decided to stop running in Grand Am last year was not the cars or the formula, it was the amount of time he had to dedicate to the series. For him, being in a race in America takes a full week. With the Grand Am schedule you test on Thursday and Friday, you qualify on Saturday and you race on Sunday. That means he has to leave Europe on Wednesday and he can't head back home until Monday. And that means he gets home on Tuesday morning. It was all simply getting to be too much.

"He also realized that the increased competition in Grand Am meant more professional drivers would be racing, in place of the car owners, like him. At first, Fredy decided to stop racing completely. Then, in the spring of this year, he and I were discussing different options including running his Dallara with RollCentre in a few races or going back with Markus in the Lola. Ultimately he decided on the Lola for the European races."

The Horag-Lista racing effort got off to an almost untested start, then slipped just a bit, and finally rebounded for a win at one of the toughest circuits in racing.

"We started with the Lola at Monza. We didn't finish there because of a problem with an upright and lost a wheel. At Silverstone I was hit in the rear under braking and that sent me into the grass. I lost three laps being stuck in the mud. And when I look at those three laps we lost, I realize we could have finished fourth overall and first in LMP2.

"By the way, Fredy drove a wonderful race at Silverstone doing a great job in the rain. He really enjoys driving the Lola. He was actually one of the fastest LMP2 drivers on the track in the rain.

"We have had very little time to test and practice with the car in dry conditions. All together I think we have had just 60 dry race laps in the car! We went to test in June and it was raining for two days. We got in 20 laps in the dry. Then we went to Monza, only to practice. Then at Silverstone we had only two practice sessions and it rained all weekend. At Nurburgring we had only 60 dry laps in the whole race."

But the weather in Germany did not deter the Lola - or the Horag-Lista team - as the car took top spot in LMP2 in only its third race. But this time there were no displays of stellar driving from Lienhard to aid the cause.

"At Nurburgring the team did a great job with the set up and the pit stops. I drove with Eric Van de poele because Fredy was recuperating from back surgery. He was in America a short time ago and he called me to say he was having a problem with his back. He went to the doctor and they learned that one part of a disc in his back was loose. He went home to Switzerland and had surgery and is currently recuperating.

"He can't drive for at least a month and will miss the Petit Le Mans. His doctor told him sitting a long time in an airplane, to come over to America, would be bad for him. Fredy wants to recover and be ready for the race in Istanbul in November. And now that we won at the Nurburgring, he is really excited about

getting back in the car."

Unlike the temporary state of his good friend Lienhard, Theys is very able to drive and he too is looking forward to the team's next race, the Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta in Georgia.

"I like Road Atlanta and I feel an LMP2 can do well there in the Petit Le Mans. If you look at the preparation we had at the Nurburgring, and we carry that into the Petit, I think we will be in good shape at the end."

The end for Lienhard and Theys does not appear to be in sight. Theys has enjoyed many successes in racing, and while he appreciates the exuberant sensations one enjoys through remembering a good memory, he is a man who holds little tolerance for regret.

"Daytona (Rolex 24 Hours) was always something magical. Winning there was very rewarding. In my career I have won all the big races except one. I finished third at Le Mans and, while I do not think my career is over, I do not think you can win there without a factory car. But, while I have not won that race, it isn't keeping me from sleeping at night.

"I would like to race every weekend. When I watch a race on TV I am ready to go! The season I enjoyed the most was back in 1998 when I did 22 races. I was racing the Ferrari with Markus in the European series and I was racing with Gianpiero here in the IMSA series. That was also my most successful year. We won at Sebring and Daytona and Watkins Glen. And I was winning in Europe too. When you have a busy season like that you keep your momentum and you are up to speed on the second lap!"

Now that Lienhard has embraced the magic of speed again, fans can expect to see Theys and Lienhard on the track again next season too.

"As of now, we have a long term program for the Lola through all of 2006. We will do two races in the US next year -Sebring and the Petit Le Mans - and run the full LMES schedule. Hopefully we can also do Le Mans."

We would love to see the Horag-Lista Racing Lola at Le Mans in 2006, with two fast friends teamed once again and racing right in the thick of the action.

"I feel very fortunate to have been in motor racing for almost 30 years. And I feel fortunate to still be able to race!"

And sportscar racing is indeed fortunate that Didier Theys and Fredy Lienhard are back and wearing the helmets of teammates.