



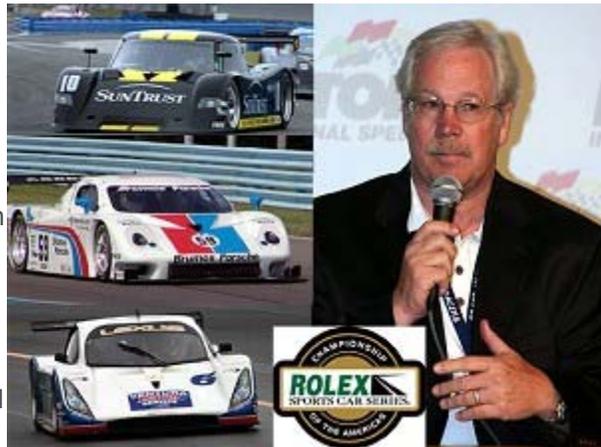
**This column originally appeared on TheRaceSite.com**

**Through The Esses - The Grand Am Plan Has Worked So Far**

10/7/2005 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

It was easy to be skeptical back in February of 2002. Back then, who knew?

It was in February of 2002, at a press conference at Daytona International Speedway, that Grand American President Roger Edmondson introduced the concept of the Daytona Prototype to the world. It was during the Rolex 24 hours of Daytona weekend, the penultimate Grand Am 24 hour race to include open-top prototypes, that we -members of the media - first got a glimpse of sportscar racing's future, as espoused by the leaders of the Grand American Road Racing Association.



The car presented that winter day in warm Florida existed only on paper at the time of the announcement. It was what has become the now-familiar blue, red and white #59 Brumos Racing Porsche-Fabcar. Fabcar owner Dave Klym had come up with the first designs for the first car of this new era and he would soon become an officially approved constructor. He became a charter member of a still-exclusive club that boasts of just seven participants. Well, make that seven members and four active participants. But we are getting ahead of ourselves here. (Funny, that is something most critics thought would never happen - a DP getting ahead of anything.)

At the time of the announcement, many thought Klym suffered from a case of mistaken identity. That is as in, "You want us to believe that little colored egg is a real race car?" And many (most?) media members who were at Daytona that weekend thought the France family - the people behind the Grand Am - had lost their minds. Those little 'fat-headed tubs with wheels' would never appeal to traditional sports car fans. What were they thinking behind closed doors at ISC? Who could have ever thought this idea was a good idea?

Well, it now seems that quite a few people thought so. At least, they did in time.

In 2003, exactly one year after the announcement, the first Daytona Prototypes appeared on the grid for the Rolex 24. Six new cars were there, not as drawings on paper, but as three dimensional, real race cars representing the beginning of a new era. The 'first six' included Brumos Racing with two Porsche-Fabcars ready to go. The cars had been extensively tested during 2002 and were the crown jewels of Grand Am - at least for a little while. Kevin Doran had a hastily assembled Doran JE-4 there for Forest Barber's Bell Motorsports team. Doran too was one of the 'lucky seven' selected to build the new DP cars, but his timing was not quite so sharp as was Klym's, so he came to race with little testing time logged. Ultimately the lack of preparation time cost the blue and silver car dearly as they wound up completing just 67 laps

of what was to be a nearly 700 lap race.

Multimatic also presented its first car that weekend, with David Brabham, Scott Maxwell and David Empringham going on to take the first ever DP victory, driving a Multimatic FORD Focus. The overall win that year went to a Kevin Buckler Porsche GT car that completed 695 laps after 24 hours. In fact, the top three places were taken by GT cars with the Multimatic finishing fourth overall. But it did finish, with 679 hard laps done.

Two other cars debuted for this race as well. The Picchio had an all star lineup of Boris Said, Dieter Questor and Darren Law pedaling the G&W Motorsports entry, but even those six fast feet couldn't get the car to go fast enough or last long enough to be a contender. They dropped back to complete just 451 laps overall.

Running a tad behind the Italian marque, Darius Grala's Cegwa Sport Toyota-Fabcar gave the Klym-built model a different look than the Brumos cars, but no better a race result. 403 laps are credited to the team that carried the Polish word for brick - "Cegwa" - as its team identity.

Many thought the appellation appropriate to both that team's car and the entire DP class.

But Roger E, Jim France, and the Grand Am officialdom donned flame retardant smiles and let every knock, ping, bluster and discouraging word bounce right off. They had a plan and they were going to follow it no matter who said it was folly to do so. And follow it they have with so many others deciding eventually to follow it too.

From that first race with just six cars, the series began to take on real momentum as more and more racing people came to realize the Grand Am plan was written in stone. The traditional plan in sportscar racing was to have no plan. Or at least, plan only to plan for a short term plan. If you want to call that having a plan, that is. The notable exception of course, would be the American Le Mans Series. But that plan had a European flavor to it and direct ties to the 'other France' involved in sportscar racing. No, the Grand Am plan was American born and intended for a North American audience. Not the few who understood and enjoyed the nuances inherent in sportscar racing, but the many who though any mention of "car racing" meant NASCAR.

Roger E made it plain right up front that this was not about continuing the traditions of sportscar racing. No, this was about breaking from tradition via a plan that could be implemented for the long term, and for the long term benefit of those who decided to come along for the ride. Not the least of these participant-benefactors being the business that is the Grand Am Road Racing Association.

"Grand American Road Racing exists to produce and promote road racing in America. That means we have to have racing that fits the needs of American racers and provides the entertainment that American fans want to see. All of our planning and operations are within the context of the need to provide a stable platform for an American championship series that will stand the test of time."

What was the essence of the plan? No more recurring trips to the technology bin before coming to the race track. No more wonton spending on 'new' and 'better' bits and pieces, looking to buy an edge on the competition. No more rapidly obsolescent race cars. No more mixing of three, four or six classes within a single race to confuse the fans. No more boring races with few front runners and a genuine lack of competition. And no concern for whether or not the traditional sportscar fan would come to be a fan of the Daytona Prototypes. There was no need to court the small fan base of the purists when a whole world of opportunity was out there for the taking.

Roger E once said, "We felt there were 300 million people out there who would be interested in this kind of series, one tailored for this marketplace. We felt there was a need." It seems quite a few teams came to agree with him on that one. The fan base is slowly building - despite continuing media skepticism

sometimes tinged with a hint of envy, and perhaps, in extreme cases, Cacophobia - and more and more racers are showing up on the grids with each passing race.

Roger E made it succinctly clear back in 2003 that the goal was to create a commercially successful series. At the time he said, "The original idea behind Grand-Am was to do what the USRRC was formed to do but appeared unable to do. That is to eliminate the peaks and valleys that have gone on in this sport since 1948. I have told the story many times that NASCAR and sportscar racing started at about the same time in the United States and the success of one and the failure of the other - in terms of commercial acceptance - is quite obvious to see."

And it has become obvious to even the most skeptical that the complete achievement of that goal draws ever closer. This weekend's Virginia International Raceway (VIR 400) event has no less than 24 DP entries competing for a win. That is quite an improvement over the original six car count starting at race number one. The numbers don't lie so a skeptic or two has to have been knocked off somewhere.

Yet, while the original plan outline is still intact, there are some within the DP community who have yet to reap the rewards the plan attempts to attain. The next few months will find the inherent tenets of the plan put to the test as the questions of balanced competition and of how long to continue to support the 'silent members' of the original seven constructors will begin to loom larger and larger. We do not envy them the task of finding the right answers.

For three constructors, Picchio, Multimatic and Chase, there has been precious little to point to as a success. For Klym and Fabcar, finding a new buyer outside of George Snodgrass and Brumos Racing has been as difficult as getting sportscar purists to accept the look of the DPs as even moderately appealing. And Kevin Doran wouldn't mind selling a few more cars but the reality is, anyone coming on board in DP racing today is either calling Bill Riley or Max Crawford to place an order. And Riley's switchboard has been a few bulbs brighter than Crawford's, over the last 12 months.

And therein lies the new challenge for Roger E and his band of still-smiling skeptic-killers. How do you get the five constructors who aren't selling cars to catch up to - both on and off the track - the two constructors that are selling cars? How do you make a Multimatic match the race performance of a Riley? Can a Picchio ever go toe-to-toe with a Crawford? (Or is that toe-in to toe-in?) Will a Doran or a Fabcar both endure and endear? Is this weekend the last chance for the Chase?

These are very tough questions to answer. And, in keeping with the promises made to all of the original seven constructors, they are questions that Roger E and the Grand Am leaders must answer. Can they do it? We choose not to be skeptical. And there does appear to be some cause for optimism as several recent announcements suggest a part of the problem may go away naturally, without official intervention.

Don't call the owners of Synergy Racing, Cole Scrogam, Danny Marshall or Steve Marshall, skeptics. They just today announced that they will campaign a Porsche-powered Doran JE 4 in 2006. They are switching from BMW power and perhaps there is a sliver of hope for the Brumos boys to be found in this line from the Synergy press release: "The Synergy Racing Daytona Prototype will feature a new Porsche engine specifically designed for use in Daytona Prototypes."

We wonder if the new powerplant will be a better fit in the Fabcar chassis than is the current one. Certainly the Brumos squad has earned the right to give it a try. They have been on the grid for every race since that first one back in 2003. Sheer perseverance alone has earned them the respect of the fans. But it will take a steady record of running at the front of the pack before someone else will write a check for a new Fabcar DP. Can the new engine speed them forward?

We are also encouraged by hearing that racing stalwart Porsche is building a series-specific engine and taking a page from Pontiac's book by providing factory support. At least it is yet another step in the right direction. And perhaps an impressive showing for the new Porsche-Doran will get the phones ringing at Doran Designs? And the Crawford has shown it can get it done with the right drivers behind the wheel.

But what is to become of the Multimatic, the Chase and the Picchio?

We haven't heard anything new about the Multimatic DP, but that company might yet surprise by coming back with FORD factory support to fend off the advances of Pontiac and Porsche. Then again, we might not ever hear from Multimatic about the future of their DP chassis. We simply have no information to pass along to you today. But we can tell you that the achievements of their race-winning Grand Am Cup Mustang are proof positive that Larry Holt and company can build a winner. But will they even try to resurrect the DP project, or concentrate on customer support for the Cup series and let someone else take their place among the DP constructor ranks?

ADI Motorsports recently announced they were going to campaign the Picchio in 2006. Will they be the 'factory team' Picchio Racing Cars General Manager Francesco Di Pietrantonio was referring to when he said, "In 2006, the Picchio cars will come back to a full-time commitment to the Rolex Series, which we believe will be of great interest for the future strategies of the factory itself."

The ADI Picchio will be driven this weekend by Shawn Bayliff who said - without a hint of skepticism we might add - "I am anxious to get the Picchio back on the track; it is my personal challenge to update this car to the current competition level. I have no doubt that the Picchio can again be a top contender in the Rolex Series."

OK, so the series gets a bit of Italian flare and some new German blood next season, but what of the "good old boys" from Virginia who have but one Chase chassis to offer prospective buyers? Can they continue to exist without at least that first buyer? This weekend, Robert Chase and company have rolled their DP into the paddock of nearby VIR one more time, hoping to make the kind of impression on the track that leads to an ink impression on a buyer's check. Zach Arnold and Johnny Miller will be behind the wheel, doing their part to fill their rear view mirrors with Riley's and Crawford's. We happen to think the Chase is one of the more attractive body designs in the series, but our pen is out of ink (and our account is out of dollars) at the moment, so we sincerely hope Robert Chase finds another willing writer soon.

There you have it, a series that many said would never attract fans seems to be well on the way to creating a fan base. Surely the teams that have signed on over the last two seasons have brought along friends, relatives and business partners to watch the action. And once people go to a race, they tell others about the experience. And so far, the close racing action that defines the on-track Grand Am experience has been very positive indeed. We will not be surprised to see even bigger crowds at the races in 2006, as the word about the Grand Am Rolex Sports Car Series starts to spread even further, with the addition of new race venues already announced.

We have to salute Roger E and company for sticking to their guns since that first day in February three years ago, despite the many skeptics. And we trust that the tough choices to come will result in decisions that strengthen the series for the benefit of everyone connected with it. After all, who wants to be skeptical at this stage of the game?