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Through The Esses - Andy Pilgrim - A Success On And Off The Track

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Hurricane Wilma had just moved off the Florida coast when we reached Andy Pilgrim on the phone for this interview. This south Florida resident had taken up refuge with a buddy living in the west coast city of Tampa, where the electricity was still on and people were thankful the winds of this season's 21st hurricane had blown south of them this time by. While he had suffered no damage to his home on the east coast, Pilgrim wasn't happy to hear predictions of it taking a week or more to have his electric power restored.



Andy Pilgrim has always been one to make his own power whether it was behind the wheel of a race car or behind the desk as head of his own company. He has won in both competitive arenas and it looks as though he isn't anywhere near ready to slow down in either one.

A native of England, Pilgrim won the SPEED World Challenge GT Driver's Championship this season in the Team Cadillac 500 horsepower Cadillac CTS-VR. Prior to this hard earned title he was a winner at the Rolex 24 Hours overall and in other classes, and the 2000 Petit Le Mans GT class in a Corvette. (This was the race where he made an incredibly brave move to the inside of the Team Oreca Dodge Viper at the first turn of the last lap and stayed in front for the win. People still refer to that moment as "the Pilgrim Pass".) He has several second place finishes at Le Mans on his resume and has a history of finishing at or near the top in many other big races as well.

When not taking turns in a straight line, Pilgrim takes turns meeting with the clients of his company called ECS. Like his early days driving a Renault Alliance to the track and then on it, Pilgrim started out small and worked his way up to become the head of a dynamic company that provides technology support to other growing businesses.

"ECS is a company I started back in 1989. I put my money into it to start and I have had a silent partner invest in it as we started to grow. The business started out of a small office with two desks and now I have close to 160 employees. ECS is an IT (Information Technology) company. Even though this industry has compacted severely over the years due to companies contracting with overseas support services, we have been fortunate to retain our largest customer, the El Paso Corporation out of Houston, Texas. They are, I believe, the largest gas line company in the world. They own all those pipelines that got whacked by hurricane Katrina. They have kept us going very strongly through what have really been lean times for the IT business.

"Our people can write computer systems, they act as help desk people and as IT managers and such on

major contracts. For instance we have a lot of people working at El Paso Corp and others working in Birmingham, Alabama and Colorado Springs and South Florida and other places. They go to the company and provide the on-site support they need to run their business.

"I was a computer programmer out of school and that is how I came to America and how I got my first race car. It was a Renault Alliance that I used to drive to the track, race with, and then drive back home. I ran in the old Renault Cup series in the mid 1980s'. Probably 30% of the guys were like me, driving their cars to the track and hoping they didn't wreck it for the ride home! I never had a problem thankfully but I sure learned the importance of taking care of the equipment. "

Those early track days were lean times with race tires carried in the trunk and a built-in hotel located conveniently enough in the front seat.

"You carried your race tires in the trunk and there was a little cap on the exhaust system which you took off to go racing. You used rain tires in the wet and many times they were the same tires you drove home on. You slept in the car or, like one time, seven of us chipped in to get one hotel room, which was pretty hysterical. Some guys had trailers but for a lot of us we just had enough money to drive the car to the track.

"Mitch Wright (later the SCCA Pro Racing Vice President and General Manager) had a garage business in California and I used to bring my car there for service and storage between races. While I never won a race in the series I did have a couple of podium finishes and I did win the rookie of the year."

The racing bug bit Pilgrim in his 20's and once bitten, he began to realize he would need more time off than his employer would allow so he decided to start his own company because the boss can take off anytime he wants.

"I couldn't get all the time off I needed when working for someone else so I thought 'it is now or never', and I took a big gamble and started my own company. You start a company hoping it might go somewhere someday and for me that is how it worked out. I got my first client by making cold calls. That was how the marketing worked back then and I hired a marketing person as my first employee. I did the recruiting and the books and ran the business and she took care of the marketing.

"We started with a rented room with two desks and one phone. Now the business is run amazingly well by a really talented woman by the name of Pat Gordon. She runs everything for me so I don't have to take care of the day to day business anymore. She has been running it for about 5 years now. We talk everyday but she is running everything out of our offices in the city of Aventura, Florida.

"I started out in Florida because the racing was good there. At that time you had the West Palm Beach Grand Prix, the Miami Grand Prix, the Tampa Grand Prix, Daytona - there was all kinds of stuff going on. It was a good place for me to be."

Pilgrim's race career has included stints in several series including Firestone FireHawk, Barber SAAB, SCCA Corvette Challenge, IMSA Supercar, FIA GT, the Pikes Peak Hill climb, Motorola Cup, USRRC. Lamborghini Trophy, the ALMS and Grand Am. He has started nearly 350 races since 1984 and he usually finishes what he starts having taken 53 wins in ten different series.

"My first real paying job as a driver was with Bayley Motorsports. In my second year with them they were paying me prize money and that was pretty good money. I did some other races where I was getting paid to show up. The Corvette Challenge was one series where I ran my own car and team. I lined up a few sponsors and that worked out well. I also had a few others along the way. And all of this was before I started ECS. I lived off my racing earnings for 1991 and 1992 because I didn't want to take any money out of ECS.

"I came in as the first driver in the Corvette program after Ron Fellow and Chris Kniefel, who had done the early development work on the cars. I am pretty proud of that pass you mentioned earlier. It was rated one of the top 50 moments of Corvette racing history. It was also the pass that Dale Earnhardt saw on the TV show RPM Tonight. When he saw it he decided that I was the one he wanted to drive with at Daytona in the 24 hours. Dale sent me a FedEx letter right after that saying, 'That pass is exactly why I want you to drive with me at the 24 hours. You obviously know how to rub fenders now you have to teach me to drive that Corvette!'"

"I had heard the rumor that Dale might drive with us but I figured that honor would go to Ron, since he was there from the start. I was really surprised and very proud to race with him. I got to know him really well in the five months before the Rolex. We became really good friends. I was really very lucky because, for whatever reason, he took to me. He would call and we would talk about everything. All my memories of him are good memories."

Coming back to his most recently made memory, the SPEED Challenge driver's championship, Pilgrim considered it to be his hardest fought success to date.

"It was the hardest fought championship I have won, without a doubt. If someone had come to me at the start of the season and said, 'I want you to win the championship but I don't want you to win a race', I would have said they were out of their minds. Of course you don't try not to win a race. But with the competition level, and the fact that we didn't have the fastest car due to rewards weight, it was an incredibly difficult thing to do. The weight penalty system is being changed by the SCCA because once you get the weight on it is almost impossible to get it off. I raced the heaviest car in 8 of the 11 races. That made it so much more difficult."

"But the fact that I had a career year with no driver errors, and that my crew did a brilliant job of giving me a good race car, with no human errors at all, made it all possible. Making correct moves at the right time - not being taken out in a mess like we had at Mosport for example - means so much to have come out with the championship. And the fact that the team was focused mostly on winning the manufacturer's championship made it that much sweeter. And since this was the first driver's championship and manufacturer's championship for Cadillac it just made the whole season incredible."

Pilgrim's 2006 plans are not firm yet. He awaits a call from Cadillac and intends to continue his allegiance to the brand - and GM - despite other offers that have been floated past him for consideration.

"I would like to do some more Daytona Prototype races (He won the 2004 Rolex 24 Hours with the Forest Barber / Jim Bell Motorsports team) and I have done some testing with a few teams. I don't know what will happen with Daytona yet. There are lots of things up in the air. But with the right team I would love to do it. I have talked to several people about it but, the thing is, I can't do anything without first talking to the Cadillac people. I am totally flattered when people call me to drive, but it just doesn't make any sense to drive in a Porsche when I am so closely linked with GM. But it is great that people are calling because of my record! I did win the Rolex three times. I won once in the Daytona Prototype, once in a Corvette, and once in a Porsche GT1."

With only two wrists we wondered what he did with the three Rolex watches he won at Daytona.

"I gave my dad one of the watches. He isn't a very emotional person but that tweaked him pretty good! Mom and Dad still live in England. They haven't been well lately so I just went over to see them."

"But coming back to 2006, Cadillac remains my first priority. I won't do anything until they tell me what they want me to do or offer me something. I have told everybody that and they understand. I have a lot of loyalty for Cadillac and GM so until they tell me we are or we are not doing something I won't make any decisions. I really hope they will want to go back and defend the championship and I can't imagine we wouldn't do that, but I am waiting for word."

We wondered if he had a desire to get back behind the wheel of the all-conquering Corvettes in the ALMS. We learned he feels just being in the game thus far has been a major reward.

"I will drive anything. I love driving anything and the Corvette was an awesome car to drive. But coming back to that program is not something I have really given any thought to. I don't know that there is anything left in racing that I really want to do especially. If my racing career ended tomorrow I can look back at my 50 something wins and five championships and realize how lucky I have been. Winning the driver's championship - where it was just me in the car - was a really big deal for me. I would love to get a win at Le Mans; I have five second place finishes there. But it is not something where I would say my career is not fulfilled if I don't get it. You know what I mean? I feel very fortunate and incredibly lucky!"

Pilgrim has embarked on a new venture where he hopes to impart some of that luck to young drivers through the development of skills they can apply when driving on public roads everyday.

"I just finished making a video called "The Driving Zone" with my buddy Dale Earnhardt Jr. in it. I have talked to high school students for years and this video is the culmination of a lot of parents and kids telling me they heard so much good information we should make a video. I made a 30 minute video with all the things I felt I needed to put in there.

"I felt that if I could get Dale to come in there every minute or so and encourage the kids to keep paying attention it would finish it off perfect. I called him and he didn't hesitate to help. He appears in it 22 times coming up with little tidbits like saying, 'Hey, if you can't concentrate on this for 30 minutes what chance do you have out there on the street?' It just worked out great. And Theresa Earnhardt called and asked if she could get the Dale Earnhardt Foundation involved. She and Taylor Earnhardt appear at the very beginning of the video. She lent the foundation's name to the project and with her and Dale Jr. involved it has all been just so much more than I could have hoped it would be. We just started selling the video and there are several big companies looking at it. The whole project is very important to me."

(For more information [visit Andy Pilgrim's Site](#))

Andy Pilgrim, even without electricity, is a powerful member of the sportscar racing fraternity. He started out small, built up a successful business and a reputation for excellence on the race track, and now wishes to impart some life-saving wisdom to young drivers. We think he is one of England's finest imports (and a proud US citizen) and we trust that race fans across North America will want to see more of his electrifying exploits behind the wheel of a Cadillac CTS-VR in 2006.