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Through The Esses - Rolex Reasons - Sans Iguana

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It's time once again to kick off a new year of sportscar racing in North America and, as always, the opening act for this year's sequence of dramas-to-come is the Rolex 24 at Daytona. The Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series presented by Crown Royal Special Reserve will stage an event this year that should see more new cars and teams taking to the famous Daytona Speedway banking than at any time in recent memory.



Each year we prepare a list of reasons why fans should go to the Rolex 24. Now, no one asks us to do it, mind you. And we aren't even sure anyone wants to hear our feeble excuses for not doing anything else over the race weekend. But we do know that there are some good reasons to be in the land of gators and grandmas come January, and we intend to present them here. If you like, you could always stop reading this now and go shovel some snow or play with your pet iguana. It's your call. But if you were thinking about making the trip down to Florida, perhaps our list will motivate you to buy your plane tickets.

The first reason to go is that we get a kickback from the airlines for talking people into buying plane tickets. OK, we are just kidding on that one but right now some of the airlines are running great deals to points south. And in most cases the price of a ticket includes a seat *inside* the plane. But please don't behave like that congresswoman who asked for a seat on the aisle because, "I don't want a window seat because I don't want to mess up my hair." (If you think she had a valid concern then perhaps you should stop here and take the iguana out for a walk in the snow instead.)

If the Daytona test days were any indication of what to expect, then we should all plan to be at Daytona International Speedway the weekend of January 28th. The entry list included 34 Daytona Prototypes and 42 GT class cars. That is 76 entries and we know that some cars are still in the shop being worked on to have them ready in time for the race. (Hmm, that means those teams are already racing against time, to be ready to race against time, at a time in the near future. We hope they don't run out of time. OK, time to move on now with our list....Who said it's about time?)

If you attended last years race you were witness to the grand opening of the all new and improved Daytona infield. There are all new garages for the teams, and a brand new area called "The Fan Zone", where you can find something to eat, enjoy some music, get an autograph or two and simply soak up some Florida sunshine. It is a fan friendly area and everyone is welcome - except iguanas with dirty snow on their feet.

And what about those defending Rolex 24 and Grand Am series champions the SunTrust Riley boys? When Max Angelelli drove the race winning #10 Pontiac-Riley into victory circle, he was surrounded by crew members and team support people. And in the stands were what seemed like a hundred waving arms that were attached to SunTrust employees who were enthusiastically cheering the victory of their favorite black and yellow race car.

For 2006, it is a sure bet that the #10 DP entry will once again be at or near the front of the pack for most of the 24 staggered hours that make up a 'Daytona Day'. So, if you want to root for another team, we would only suggest that you watch out for all those waving arms. Those SunTrust folks might just want to practice clapping their hands with your head in-between their palms. (We are just kidding SunTrust brass. By the way, was our loan approved?)

Looking at the list of drivers announced for the race it seems that everyone except the back markers in the Tanzanian Touring Car / VW Beetle / Lawnmower Challenge Series have a ride lined up. NASCAR stars like Rusty Wallace and Tony Stewart will line up against IRL stars Danica Patrick, Scott Dixon and Dan Wheldon, who will be on the grid next to Trans Am veterans like Leighton Reese and Dino Crescentini. And they will all have to chase down some of the best names in the game of sportscar racing if they expect to have a shot at wearing a new Rolex watch come 12:00 PM on Sunday the 29th. The list includes - just to name 24 - Wayne Taylor, Terry Borcheller, Andy Wallace, Butch Leitzinger, Max Angelelli, Scott Pruett, Max Papis, Ron Fellows, Chris Bingham, Chris Dyson, Guy Smith, Patrick Long, Randy Pobst, Tommy Erdos, Stefan Johansson, David Donohue, Darren Law, David Murry, Craig Stanton, Andy Lally, Johnny O'Connell, Wolf Henzler, Robin Liddell, and Johannes van Overbeek.

The 24 hours of Daytona may no longer be considered an international event, but it certainly can't be viewed as having an "Americans only" slant to it. The drivers listed above - and the ones we didn't list - hail from points around the globe. And if all of them can make it to Daytona, then you should too.

Need more reasons to consider putting the iguana up at a lizard-kennel for the weekend? How about the climate? Florida is known for being ever so much warmer than places further north, like Minnesota for instance. Now, you might think squatting over a hole in the ice with a hook attached to a line attached to a stick attached to your hand, waiting for the big one to bite, is fun, but we would rather stand on line at the supermarket to 'catch' our fish. No, we think soaking up the southern sun would feel a whole (hole?) lot warmer than what passes for warm sunlight up north.

And what about that mix of cars and motors we saw on the test day's entry list? There were such combinations as Pontiac-Riley, Pontiac-Crawford, BMW-Riley, Ford-Crawford, Lexus-Riley, Porsche-Fabcar, Porsche-Doran, Ford-Multimatic, Lexus-Crawford, Stanley-Steamer and John-Deere. OK, the last two weren't on the list, but they too were built in North America as are the other cars - with the exception of the seldom seen Picchio - Grand Am approved for use in the series. And they have been up and running much longer than any current DP design so what they surrender in speed they might make up in reliability. Then again, we might develop a sudden urge to go ice fishing.

Still not ready to surrender your credit card number to your favorite airline? Then consider the following short list of reasons to go: You won't be asked to clean out the garage, shovel the walk, feed the iguana, or visit your Aunt Matthew's for the day. (Yes, Aunt Matthew. You work it out.) You will be up close to the cars and the drivers who make the whole world of sportscar racing revolve. And you can take lots of pictures to bring home to show your friends who did stay behind to visit relatives, or walk their iguanas, or freeze their fishing sticks off.

There you have it - our list of reasons for being in Daytona for the Rolex 24. We are looking forward to some close racing with plenty of drama and excitement. We are also looking forward to spending time with some of our racing friends within the perfect atmosphere, the race track. And we will be looking for you too. But please, no iguanas.