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Through The Esses - Pumpelly Won His Race For The Rolex

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Spencer Pumpelly has inked his name in the racing history books by doing what so many others have tried and failed to do throughout their racing careers. For every **Hurley Haywood** who has won the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona multiple times, there are a thousand others who have never come close to seeing the checkered flag first. To win this race takes perseverance, determination, an ample supply of luck, preparation, and a solid team effort. Pumpelly can now testify that putting those pieces together has given him a reward like no other.



"It feels incredible. It actually hasn't really set in yet. And it is very humbling when you think of all the people who helped me with my career along the way. I am very appreciative of everyone who was there for me and I am extremely proud of the TPC team."

Back in 2000, we first met Pumpelly at Watkins Glen where he was campaigning an old (ancient is more like it) Porsche in Grand Am. He was the team owner, driver, crew chief and head mechanic who was running up against established stars like **Randy Pobst** in the then-newest model that Porsche had available for racing. But Pumpelly impressed many people with his outright speed in his much older car. Even Pobst told us he couldn't believe how much speed Pumpelly was getting out of his racecar.

Pumpelly is proud of what he was able to accomplish given his circumstances. And the experience would serve him well when his first real opportunity to race in competitive equipment came along.

"That was really the only way I could go racing at the time. I had some funding but not enough to go to a big team and say I want to run a full season with you. Had I done that, it would have been difficult to run past that one season. The only way I could afford to go racing was to run the team myself. I ended up doing a lot of work from painting the car, to working on the engine and loading the car onto the trailer. By renting the second seat in the car I was able to cover my expenses for the weekend.

"I was also teaching at Skip Barber at the time and I was fortunate enough to meet **Steve Ivankovich** at a three day school that I was teaching. Steve was interested in racing and thanks to the two years I spent running my team, when I met him I knew the series, and I knew the people in the series, and knew which car to get and what to do. With the help of **Paul Chabris** and some of the other guys on my team, I helped Steve start up Zip Racing.

"Zip Racing started in the Rolex series in 2001. Steve was able to run two seasons in Grand Am and then he ran most of the races in 2003 in the American Le Mans series. That was a fun season with Hazardous Sports!"

The next year, Pumpelly took the advice of his good friend **Andy Lally** and ended up in a great ride which then led to yet another opportunity.

"It got tougher after Steve decided to dial it back. I was really looking for something in Grand Am. I went down to the 2003 Rolex finale trying to find something and couldn't. Then I went to Daytona test days to try and find something and couldn't. And then I went to the race trying to find something and couldn't. I remember talking to Andy Lally who is a really good friend of mine, about some of the things he has done to be successful in racing. He is always in a top car and everyone knows who he is.

"We sat down one night in an Outback restaurant and I was feeling completely frustrated after spending all day walking the garages at Daytona and not getting anywhere. He changed my approach to talking with team owners that night. Thanks to his advice and his mentoring about the business side of driving race cars I was more successful in 2004.

"I went back to the track the next day and continued my search. I had no luck but I left with a pretty good feeling. As I was driving through the tunnel to leave the track I got a phone call from **Peter Sereta** who sells insurance for race cars. I had mentioned to him that I was looking for a ride and he actually called me back and said he knew of a team in Grand Am Cup that was looking for a driver and would I be interested? I turned right around and went back to talk to the team (Race Prep Motorsports) and we put a deal together for that one cup race. Even though we finished several laps down due to a throttle cable problem, the team was happy with the pace.

"That night after the race, we put together a deal for the entire season. Now I suddenly had an excuse to keep going to the race track and I continued my relationship with them through all of last year. That is also where I met Mike Levitas, as he was driving Race Prep's second car.

"It's funny but, from a season that started out looking bleak I ended up running 9 of 13 races in Rolex. It was the first year I was able to run in two series."

Pumpelly has a season long deal with TPC Racing for 2006, as well as a ride in Grand Am Cup, where he is teamed with Andy Lally in the Marcus Motorsports Porsche. The competition, and the fans, have come to know his name very well And his story, while not too different from that of many an aspiring professional racecar driver, has a warmly happy ending to this, its most recent chapter.

During that first meeting with Pumpelly back in 2000, we asked him to tell us about his aspirations. In that conversation he told us his biggest wish was to one day wear a Rolex watch. But he had no plans to buy one. No, he planned to win one. He wanted a Rolex watch that he earned by winning the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona. They say good things come to those who wait and here we are, six years later and he is indeed wearing a Rolex watch. The timepiece sought by many, but acquired by few, (Rolex, you have our permission to use that line in your advertising - for a small fee...) took its honored place on his wrist when he finished first in this years Rolex 24 in the GT class, driving the #36 TPC Porsche GT3 Cup car along with his co-drivers **Mike Levitas, Ian Baas** and Randy Pobst.

We caught up with Pumpelly a few days after the race win and talked about his journey from jack of all trades to professional race winning driver.

"I remember when I first got interested in racing, being at the track watching my dad (Tom Pumpelly) race. It was the 24 hours of Daytona I would go to, his first race every year. That is my earliest memory of racing and it has always been pretty prominent in my mind and is my first connection with racing.

"When I first started driving race cars it was in the Skip Barber Racing School. I wasn't sure where it was going to take me but I eventually found myself in sportscars and of course, Daytona was one of the places everyone wants to win. It is considered a real highlight of a racer's career to win the Rolex 24 hour's race. The guys that have won it want to win it again."

Coming back to that first interview at Watkins Glen, Pumpelly told us he was going to live without a watch to keep him focused on winning one. We wondered if he has in fact been carrying a bare wrist all these years.

"Actually, I have to admit I have worn a watch! After the 2003 season, Steve Ivankovich gave me a real nice watch as a gift. I couldn't just take it back, and it was too nice of a gift not to wear. Last year my co-driver **John Littlechild** gave me a really nice Bell & Ross watch that really fits my style and it was a very thoughtful gift that I will always treasure."

After the Rolex we asked Pumpelly to open the beautiful green box and show us his prize. Instead he lifted his wrist to let us take a good look at the watch sitting proudly on his arm. After 5 plus years of striving to get the watch he seemed to waste no time wearing it.

"I was actually scared at first because I didn't know how to get it out of the box and I did not want to break it or even scratch it! But Randy and Mike started putting theirs on and so I figured it was an appropriate time. When I lifted my arm up for the first time the watch fell down to my elbow! But I didn't care because I was just so proud to have it."

And proud he should be for, after all, he earned it.