



Through The Esses - On The Dissipation Of Clouds

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"We're very pleased to race a Ferrari again in the American Le Mans Series. We believe that this is the leading sports car series in the United States, and we are looking forward to the competition in the GT2 class." - Risi Competizione Team owner **Giuseppe Risi**



Being fans of the first Ferrari to rejuvenate top level prototype sports car racing in America - the Ferrari 333SP - we were pleased to hear that Risi Competizione will be returning to the American Le Mans Series this season. They plan to run a pair of Ferrari 430 GT race cars in the GT2 class. That news was also met with great enthusiasm by ALMS President Scott Atherton.

"Ferrari embodies many of the same qualities that the American Le Mans Series embraces. Exotic, prestigious and elite are descriptions that come to mind when discussing both. Ferrari has played a significant role in the American Le Mans Series throughout its history, and we are ecstatic that it will be returning to our grid."

What pleases us is that another traditional, established, and known manufacturer of performance based cars has decided the old way is still the best way. We refer of course to the ALMS approach to sportscar racing, which is in contrast to what is offered by the Grand American Road Racing Association via its Rolex Sports Car Series.

We did not just say we like one and not the other. No, we are thankful that we have choices, and even more thankful that to enjoy both series is our right and our privilege. And, quite frankly, the taking of sides for one series and against the other is getting old. You don't have to like one or the other. Like them both or dislike them both. Who cares?

For us, we really get a kick out of the growth of the Rolex Series as it seems every week new participants are announced and with each new team that enters the series there comes another level of variant in the potential of each team to take down a podium placing.

What's not to like about the Rolex Series? The racing is always close. The cars are fast enough to make it obvious that we could not drive them at their limits. The team members working behind the wheels, the wrenches, and the computer screens possess levels of experience that range from hopeful to proven. And some of racing's biggest names can be found on the grids. This is a very good thing indeed for we enjoy seeing professional drivers having yet another opportunity - another arena - in which to ply their trade and make a living at it. We support any initiative that translates into a low unemployment rate for sportscar drivers!

But what we are talking about today is the subtle yet certain signs of rejuvenation for the one top-level series that insists on presenting sportscar racing the way it has always been presented. The American Le Mans Series understands and appreciates the roots from which it now appears to be blooming once again. Those of us who feel a real affinity for those roots, and the incredible history of the sport they contain, are thankful the ALMS alternative is showing some vibrancy and sense of stamina.

Are we making too much of the Ferrari announcement? We don't think so, for we can look to other recent news and see that a kind of mini-resuscitation is firmly underway. Taken separately, these announcements may not convey a sense of the anticipated rebirth to come. But when you compile a list, as we are about to do, you simply have to recognize that the clouds some envisioned to be firmly fixed above the ALMS are giving way to the warming rays of the sun. Well, at least things are looking brighter. And at least they look really bright indeed for the first race of the new season, the 12 Hours of Sebring.

First, there is the introduction of the all new Audi R10 diesel powered cars. The concept is new and the cars are new. We want to believe that the chances they won't be as dominant right out of the box, as the R8 quickly became, are reasonably good. Lord knows the Audi folks will do all that they can to minimize the chance of showing poorly, but it isn't unreasonable to assume some gremlins will appear - at least at the start of the season. Of course, we could be showing some bit of bias (and perhaps, wishful thinking) here. After all, no one likes a bully.

Next there is the pair of brand new AER powered Lola B06/10's currently being tested by the elite crew of Dyson Racing. As one recent article noted, Dyson Racing is "one of the top racing teams in the world". Rob Dyson, Chris Dyson, James Weaver, Andy Wallace and Butch Leitzinger (and others who joined them at select races) found the answers to the question of how to be competitive with the Audi R8s. Yes, ultimately the incredible resources available to the Audi camp allowed them to prevail, but surely no other 'private' race team could have come as close to stealing Audi's thunder as did the Dyson gang.

At the Rolex 24, Chris Dyson told us he could not wait to get back behind the wheel of his new open-top prototype. He had so much enthusiasm in his voice for what the new Lola can do on a race track and it was obvious he intended to take the fight to the Audis once more, only this time with a bigger weapon.

Other positive series news that has filtered out over the last few months includes the return of Tom Milner's Team PTG BMW cars. Bill Auberlen, Joey Hand and Justin Marks will pilot the cars and Auberlen for one is thrilled to be back. "My best years in racing have been with BMW in the American Le Mans Series, and I'm absolutely thrilled to go back with BMW Team PTG and my teammates to compete at the highest level of sports-car racing,"

For the sake of brevity - yes, we do know what that word means - we present a quick list of the announcements made to date concerning the ALMS. And with each announcement we see yet another break in the clouds appearing.

Multimatic Motorsports Team Panoz recently announced that "long-time Panoz pilot David Brabham will join the team for the entire 2006 American Le Mans Series season. Brabham will join Scott Maxwell in the team's No. 50 Panoz Esperante." And Brabham told the world he was glad to be back when he said, "I always have taken great pleasure in competing in the American Le Mans Series. Returning full-time has been a goal of mine for a couple of years, and to do it with Multimatic Motorsports Team Panoz is a great feeling."

Let us not forget the almost brand-new Penske Racing Porsche RS Spyder that won its first time out last season. During the American Le Mans Series Winter Test at Sebring International Raceway, Lucas Luhr posted the fastest time on the first day. After some glitches were ironed out, the car "stood up as the fastest LMP2 class time of the Winter Test, and was bested overall only by the Audi R10."

And the Audi is an LMP1 car, not an LMP2 like the Porsche.

Sascha Maassen shares the driving chores with Luhr and he sees the challenge of Sebring to be a daunting one. "It's the toughest race of the year, so we are preparing the car and ourselves as much as possible during the winter. After the 12 Hours of Sebring, you feel like someone who has been on a ship for a long time -- you cannot walk straight!"

Roger Penske has driven at Sebring but he was still able to walk straight into the Porsche factory during the off season and come away with a second Spyder. Timo Bernhard and Romain Dumas will be piloting the second car with additional drivers Emmanuel Collard and Patrick Long joining the twins for the longer races.

It feels so good to say Porsche is back full time in a prototype!

Also returning to the series again this season are at least three teams that can say they can be competitive, based on past performance or potential. Among the proven are the Intersport Racing team Lola and the Chevrolet Corvette camps. Among the potentials we find the BK Motorsports Mazda-Courage C65. (Will they switch marques or models this season and park a rotary engine in a? - stay tuned).

And remember those Lolas we told you the Dyson guys had whipped into a competitive state last season? Well they are coming back in the hands of new owners for 2006 and, let's just say the bugs have been exterminated by Dyson Team Manager Randall Kelsey's killer crew. At least the bug population living within these race cars has been substantially reduced. Autocon Motorsports will campaign one former Dyson chassis and Duncan Dayton's Highcroft Racing team will look to bring the other one home first. Both teams will be in cars with a pedigree and we think both have a shot at procuring a podium or two along the way.

Dayton thinks so too. "Our primary goal is consistency and trying to deliver a good product for our sponsor. We realize that we're probably not going to be the fastest. But hopefully from our standpoint, we'll be the most reliable. Given the level of competition in P1, it's unlikely to expect us to win this season, but I do think we can get on the podium."

Autocon Motorsports team owner Mike Lewis sees an open window of opportunity for his new ride and he intends to go through it. "The chassis-engine combination has proven it can be competitive with the best sports cars in the world. We think that it will continue being a worthy contender during this period where teams are ebbing and flowing between the current generation and the next generation of cars."

'The next generation of cars' - we like the sound of that.

Is it getting brighter?

Coming back to the cars with roofs for a minute, Lexus also plans to join the ALMS this season with a pair of IS 350 sport sedans in the new GT2S class. Lexus Group Vice President and General Manager Bob Carter probably best summed up the spirit of the ALMS when he said, "We view the American Le Mans Series as an aspirational series. It's an ideal fit for Lexus because it celebrates the technology and performance inherent in the best cars."

Flying Lizard Motorsports will be back to field two Porsche 911 GT3 RSRs in GT2 in what will be the team's third ALMS season. Crew chief Tommy Sadler thinks the third try will be the charm. "In our first two years of competition, we finished in the top three in the Drivers and Team Championships: second in 2004 and third in 2005. We will do everything in our power in 2006 to fight for the GT2 championship."

And then there is the recent announcement that two Aston Martin DBR9s will make an appearance at Sebring. Again, Atherton was pleased. "Aston Martin and the American Le Mans Series go hand-in-hand. Both are high-tech, premium products that appeal to the same upscale, elite audience. The addition of two DBR9s to the Sebring grid will add to the anticipation of America's greatest sports car race."

Will they stay all season to take it to the Corvettes time and again? Or are they just out to prove last year's Sebring win was no fluke. We can't say but it would certainly be worthwhile to be at Sebring next month in case this is a one race deal. The cars are beautiful in their British Racing green livery.

And is it true that perennial ALMS competitor Tom Wieckardt will finally park his forlorn Viper and settle in behind the wheel of a new Saleen SR7? We hope so. We love the Viper but his Carsport America team deserves to have a car that is closer in ability to the competition. We wish him all the best, for he has stuck with this series year after year despite his continuing also-ran status behind the Corvettes.

And that brings us to the end of this piece. The future for the Grand American Rolex Series is certainly looking as bright as a day at the beach. But happily it appears the fans of traditional sportscar racing may have cause to pack some sun block, for the ALMS does appear to be regaining some strength. Will it grow strong enough to blow away all the clouds? Perhaps not, but then again, too much sun can give you a bad burn. No?