

Through The Esses - Kevin Doran Keeps Looking Ahead

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Kevin Doran has been around the game of racing for many years. He has worked with some of the great names in the sport and has had his share of high and low points. From humble beginnings that saw him in charge of keeping the team transporter clean, to tightening the nuts and bolts that hold a race car together at 200 miles per hour, to managing several very successful sportscar teams to race wins aplenty, he has been deeply involved in sportscar racing and is always moving forward in pursuit of a win.



We caught up with him the night before he was to head to Miami for the third race of the 2006 Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series. Once again the # 77 Feeds the Need / Doran Racing Kodak EasyShare DORAN JE4 Ford will try and climb back onto the podium after a drought that seems to have gone on forever. Doran thinks it is time for the rain clouds to disperse and once again find his drivers Terry Borcheller and Harrison Brix basking in the warm Miami sun.

Doran has felt the sun's rays before. His association and friendship with legendary competitor Al Holbert resulted in several very successful seasons in the IMSA GTP series. When his good friend left us for the finish line that awaits us all in the end, Doran decided it was time for him to start anew.

We asked this mechanic come team manager come car builder to tell us a bit about how he ever got into the racing game.

"My dad, Jim Doran, raced short track late model cars and built them, as a hobby, in the late '60s and '70s. I was born into racing you might say. Right out of high school I went to work for an IndyCar team, Alex Morales Racing. Pancho Carter, and later, Al Holbert drove for that team. I met Al in 1984, when I was about 23.

"I got the job by driving up to Indy and knocking on doors until somebody finally said 'we'll give you a try'. I started out as a truck washer, parts washer and go-fer. I later became a mechanic. When Al joined the team we became pretty good friends.

"I went to work in 1985 with the intention of being the crew chief and team manager of Al's new Porsche Indy Car team which was on the books, but not yet started. Then in 1986 we started putting together the resources and the assets to go Indy Car Racing. We eventually started testing in 1987 and we raced at the end of the year.

"I was supposed to be the crew chief but that's not how it turned out. I hired a bunch of people for that team and Al and I started putting together the support equipment. Then, in the middle of '86, we had a little heart to heart sit down meeting and Al asked me if I would stay with the (IMSA GTP) sportscar team. The team was quite successful and he was concerned that if I spent time with the new Indy Car team he would wind up with two start-up teams. He felt that if I stayed with the sportscar team at least one team would be established and already a success. This decision allowed him to focus his energy on the Indy Car team as he did not have to worry about the sportscar team.

"Al did not drive in the Indy Car program. He was the team owner and had a hired driver to ride in the car. He did continue to drive the Lowenbrau Porsche until he passed away in the fall of 1988. I was with him for four seasons but when he died I went to work with the 1989 Newman-Sharp Trans Am team with Scott Sharp driving. I was the Team Manager but the organization and I came to blows early on and so that relationship only lasted about six months.

"After that I decided that if there are no other teams as good as Holbert Racing then I should start my own team. For the 1990 season I ran a Nissan in IMSA GTP for a private entrant. Then in '91 and '92 I didn't run anywhere full time and that is when I decided to build the Sports Racer called the Doran JE 1 Sports 2000. My idea and concept was to sort of put us in position to build the next generation Can Am car because it looked like the GTP class was going to die. It turned out the new class became the World Sports Car prototypes, but our young company wasn't ready to build a car of that stature yet."

While building a new top-level sports car was not going to be on the table for Doran Racing just yet, what was on tap was the arrival of a distinguished gentleman from Italy. A man who would help Doran to bring back the glory of winning races using a new red machine to chase down the black and white of a checkered flag. Gianpiero Moretti and Doran would go on to win it all in the world of endurance racing in North America; in a car Moretti insisted Ferrari build. And with the help of the folks at Dallara, build it they did.

"Gianpiero Moretti and I got together for the '93 season when I leased a Nissan GTP from NPTI and Gianpiero brought on the sponsorship (MOMO). When he went to Ferrari to lobby them to build the 333SP, we helped out a bit by providing track data to both Dallara and Ferrari. We gave them a lot of information about top speeds and minimum speeds and that sort of thing.

"Moretti and Doran Racing worked together from 1994 through the 1998 season. We won the Rolex 24, the Sebring 12 hours and the Watkins Glen 6 hours all in 1998 with that car. In the 1996 season, Fredy Lienhard and his company Lista started racing with us on a part time basis. Didier Theys had already been driving with Gianpiero in the longer races and it was while on our team that Theys and Lienhard became acquainted. They became pretty tight and in 1996 Fredy bought a 333SP and we would run the car in the US and Fredy would run it in Europe with his long time racing friend Marcus Hotz. I think they have been together for something like 30 years!

"It was a great run for the Ferrari. By 2000 we had put a Judd engine in it. (Back then some members of the media referred to it as "The Fudd".) We even ran it again in 2001 after we had given the Crawford SSC2K a trial in three races. For 2002 we ran a new Dallara chassis in Grand Am and the American Le Mans Series."

When Grand Am announced the new Daytona Prototype class, Doran was both skeptical and optimistic - a common condition for this complex veteran. Wisely he chose to submit renderings of the Doran JE 4 DP to Grand Am at the start and thus became one of only seven constructors approved for the series.

And from that first race at Daytona in 2003, Doran has born witness to an incredible story.

"I think the series has grown faster and further than I ever expected. There has never been this kind of growth in sportscar racing. I remember when we had 12 or 14 Porsche 962's and a total of 20 or so prototypes in an IMSA race, but that was it. It really is a pretty special period in sportscar racing right now.

"For us, our car sales are not where we thought they could be. We've sold fewer cars than I predicted we would. I think that everybody has their moment to shine. In the beginning, Fabcar sold several cars because they were doing well. Then the Doran cars were starting to do well and dominated 8 of 9 races. I think our period to really start selling cars was in the next six months but in that time Riley and Crawford announced they were getting ready to come into the series. That kind of knocked the wind out of our sails as people wanted to wait and see what they would have to offer.

"I think it has become a case of 'win on Sunday, buy on Monday', and with teams like Ganassi buying Riley's and putting a lot of time into testing with a solid engineering team behind the car, that sort of elevated that chassis right away. Then the Crawford group - in one clever way or another - has managed to win quite a few races with their car and that brought them sales. We have not done that. I mean it is pretty simple but we have not won all that many races. We didn't win any last year."

Does Doran expect that Grand Am management will come up with a way to bring parity back to the series now that two cars seem to have the market cornered?

"It looks to me like Grand Am allowed Fabcar to make some wholesale changes to that car for the 2006 season. There have been bodywork changes, front and rear suspension updates and more. That car has been allowed the freedom to catch up. But I think what really happened is that there was disparity between first year cars and second year cars. I mean, I know that Max Crawford and Bill Riley would argue the point that they had a chance to learn from the first cars before bringing their cars to the track. But ask either one of them if they would like to have a Lola or Dallara come in for 2007. I can tell you what their answer would be! The last man in is always going to have a technological advantage.

"They had to have their car approved by Grand Am going in, just as we did. But the initial approval process defines only a very small portion of the car - like 10%. The performance lies in the details and that is all basically open after the initial approval process."

We asked if Doran thought Grand Am could or would work out a way to achieve parity between the generations.

"I think in a certain sense Grand Am's hands are tied. For the reasons I just noted they can't really bring in another manufacturer. And achieving equality between the manufacturers would probably mean handcuffing the Riley and Crawford cars and giving the Picchio and the Chase a wider degree of freedom to try and move forward. In our case, aerodynamic efficiency would be the most productive area for us to work in. We feel our suspension geometry, stiffness, rigidity, compliance and all that sort of thing is very good. I think the primary area for us would be in aerodynamics."

Seeking sleeker shapes aside for the moment, Doran is satisfied with what the Grand Am organization has done so far.

"When you see the growth of the series it is hard to complain much. Of course, racers being racers and sanctioning bodies being sanctioning bodies there is always something to complain about! I would think the only complaint we have is that, while the cost containment measures in place are effective, they are not as effective as we need or want them to be. I think the costs of testing are a part of the beast but you have to remember that we racers spend most of our time standing around looking for ways to get around the rules. It is kind of like our-job, their job.

"Are the tire limits for testing a good rule? Yes. But is it as effective as I would like it to be? No. I mean, I don't test at all in general and a lot of other people test a lot. And I don't really like that, but the people who already test more would test even more without the rules. And their tests would be more valid as they would always be run on Hoosier tires. You get 12 sets of tires for testing so when you use them up you simply test on Kuhmo's, Pirellis and Goodyear's. For every rule, there is a way to get around it.

"It seems Grand Am is contemplating controlling testing for 2007 by confiscating our ECU's. Well, that will be totally useless because we all own ECU's now that will be made obsolete by the new rules so all we have to do is take our old ECU's and our old harness - which is already on the shelf and already programmed for the DPs - and just lay that in the car and go test. So, controlling testing by controlling ECU's would be even less effective than the tire rules."

We wondered if perhaps the switch to a spec Hoosier tire was a factor in the performance of the Doran JE4 chassis.

"No. A tire is a tire. They are the same for everybody. They require changes in camber and spring rates and all that, but the tires have been very consistent. At Daytona last year the tire was not a happy tire. Wear rate was high and the drop off rate was fast. Since then they have come back with a marvelous tire."
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Having achieved significant success in 'pure' prototype racing, we wondered if we would ever see Kevin Doran leading a team in the American Le Mans Series again.

"Well, never say never for we are a car building company! We actually have a typical Doran (read: under-funded) project with a client who is dreaming about running a GT car in the ALMS. We were looking at a GT car for Grand Am but the right circumstances never developed. (Read: under-funded). Right now the DP effort has my budget stretched to the limits."

When we spoke, Doran had just waved good bye to the transporter which left the shop to head for south Florida and the Miami Grand Prix race there this weekend. He and his crew were going to catch a plane the next day. And a few days after that, the Doran Racing guys - with Terry Borcheller and Harrison Brix behind the wheel of the JE 4- are going to try and catch a few Riley's and Crawford's.

But, despite the performance advantages currently enjoyed by 'the other guys', Doran isn't one to walk away from a race.

"We had a pretty uncharacteristic year last year with too many wrecks. Last year was a downer but this year I am definitely looking for better things!"