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Through The Esses - Shawn Bayliff Looks To Put The Picchio On The Podium

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A single life is comprised of a multitude of journeys and experiences. The paths we choose and the steps we take to move forward can bring us to where we want to be or leave us wondering who switched the road signs along the way. Race car drivers know all about switched signs and wrong turns. They all find themselves looking to make the right connections to keep them at speed and moving ahead. But sometimes knowing where you want to go just isn't enough to get you there.



Shawn Bayliff's story in racing is not unlike that of many a professional with talent and ambition but no money to power their dreams. We caught up with this driver of the ADI Motorsports BMW Picchio in the Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series just prior to the Long Beach Grand Prix race. We wanted to know more about him and the soon to be unrecognizable as a Picchio, Picchio Daytona Prototype.

Bayliff is hoping that people will not only notice the new look for the car this weekend, but also notice the talents of the driver behind the wheel as well. His personal story somewhat parallels that of the Italian-bred car he intends to pedal to the max the rest of this season.

"Growing up here in the mid west my dream was always to race at the Indy 500. I won several national championships in karting. I won several indoor championships which were called world championships but were really just short track coliseum races. I drove for Bridgestone Tire and Margay Karting back then. Scott Pruett was a factory driver for them too and I replaced him when he started moving up the ladder. I had won the national championship in Camden, Ohio and Margay picked me up and Bridgestone soon followed.

"In karting I won a bunch of races and then I reached a point when I was about 21 or 22 when I thought I needed to do something to get moving towards my goal. I had been making a decent living racing karts but I didn't have the kind of money I needed to go Indy racing. I needed to promote myself.

"I do have to say though that I had the good fortune of being the guy who was there to step in when someone else had some misfortune. One owner driver got hurt in a motorcycle accident. He raced a midget and I wound up filling in for him. I won a bunch of races - I think it was 6 of 12 events. I also ran a sprint car for another guy who had gotten hurt. It was a World Outlaw race. I ran a few years in sprint cars and did real well, winning the Michigan State Sprint Car Championship. I think that was 1995.

"That year after the championship I was working as a bartender and one of the patrons and I got to talking. His wife had recently passed away and she had always had a dream of owning a race team. He had the ability to do that so he asked me what my goals were and I told him I wanted to run Indy cars. We ended up getting a Toyota Atlantic car and we ran that and did real well (four wins).

"In 1997 I was the runner up in the run-offs at Mid Ohio. In this same time frame, Tom Kelly - a friend who knew me since I started racing in sprint cars - helped me out a little bit. He said he bought six cars from Riley & Scott to help them get their new Indy car chassis together. He said he didn't really want to start a team but this whole series is about bringing up young talent so we got together.

"I thought we would actually get to run at Indy but the engines we ordered didn't get done in time. The chassis was sitting there with no engine and on the last day that I could take my rookie test at Indy the engine finally arrived. But there was no time left to get the installation finished so I wound up sitting on the pit wall.

"It's been a tough road for me because I don't have money to make it up the ladder, and it always seemed like the teams I was with went defunct. But that deal I had with Jim Downing to drive his Kudzu-Mazda for one race in the 1998 United States Road Racing Championship (USRRC) was a great experience. I ran a bit faster than he did and he was impressed with me for that and because I didn't tear up anything.

"The funny thing is that Jim and I had never met before he called me. He had been in an airplane and read an article in Automobile magazine about myself and two other young guys who had taken a rookie test out in Phoenix. He called me after reading that article.

"Jim has been just fantastic to me. You know, right from the start he was trying to push a HANS on me! Back then the HANS device (which Jim and his brother-in-law Dr. Robert Hubbard invented) looked like the collar on Dracula's cape! But it was a blast to jump into his car in a pouring down rain with that screaming four rotor Mazda engine. That car didn't have much down force but I think I made a decent impression on him. Jim has helped me since by telling people I'm not a crazy driver who goes out and tears up the equipment."

A long term prototype ride did not follow for Bayliff but none the less he was working at speed.

"In 1999 I was test driving for this high performance Motorsports College here in Lima, Ohio - the University of Northwestern Ohio. I tried to bring in mechanics to help me from that school because I didn't have any money to pay them. They were fairly talented and one of the mechanics ended up working for Hogan Racing. There was also a couple of mechanics on loan from CBR Racing which was Cobb Brothers Racing - Price Cobb's team at the time. They told me Price was looking for a driver who doesn't necessarily have to have funding. He wanted to build a big team so they said I should give him a call. I flew out to meet him and we became really good friends.

"He signed me to a 10 year Indy Car contract in December of 1999. We just hit it off. I remembered him from watching the GTP cars and I always looked up to him after he won the 24 hours of Le Mans. Unfortunately, he lost his Nissan backing and we struggled for a couple of years with trying to land sponsorship. I helped him with his Atlantic team with some coaching and crew chief duties and that sort of thing. At the same time I was driving some oval track races and working on something we called TRX.

"I had a friend here in Lima, Ohio who owned a speedway. We got to discussing the idea of having a spec truck road racing series. We were going to call it the TRX for Truck Racing Express. The idea was very similar in approach to what Grand Am is doing with the Daytona Prototypes. They were basically just a low slung Trans Am style truck. I had all the equipment to build trucks and we did build two of them. Things were moving along well to create the series and then 911 happened and his business got shaky and he pulled the funding out of it."

Not one to put his dreams aside for a 9 to 5 life, Bayliff took any ride almost anywhere to keep his focus on what he wanted to do most.

"I just ran wherever I could to earn money to pay the bills with. My wife Michelle and I were married on December 1st and we spent our honeymoon at the speedway. I thought since we had signed this contract

we would be spending a lot of time at the speedway but then Price closed up shop. He then went to G&W Motorsports with Cole Scrogam who asked him to be the managing Director for G&W. That deal happened and Price called me up and said he knew I was struggling too.

"At this same time Michele and I almost had an SRP II deal put together with Phil Harris and several sponsors lined up and then 911 happened. But Price called me and asked me to come and help run the shop for him and do all of his test driving at VIR. He said when he could he would get me slotted in to drive for the team. He and Cole really tried to help me get my driving going but the reality is that most sportscar teams are based on gentlemen funding - though that is changing. So I was always there with my helmet in hand to qualify the car and then run a few laps and then let the gentlemen racers get in the car.

"While I was at G&W I helped Steve and Danny Marshall win the SRP II Championship with the BMW Picchio. We also worked to develop the Picchio prototype as much as we could, given the internal politics with the factory and all. Hassel Moran is the owner of American Detail Incorporated (ADI) and we struck up a friendship. He wanted to get into racing and he asked me to get on board with him and help him get started in Motorsports. When the opportunity came to buy all the Picchio assets away from G&W / Synergy we gave it some serious thought. I felt that if we could do what I have wanted to do with it the whole time it could probably be a pretty good race car. It was going to take some TLC and money to put the right parts in it and do some aero changes but I felt we could get it done."

Of the seven approved constructors in the Grand Am Daytona Prototype series, Picchio is one of three (Chase and Multimatic being the other two) builders who have yet to show consistent on track performance. With that unconventional wing on the front of the car making it one of the oddest of an odd lot of sportscar designs, and poor showings at speed in the limited races in which it has appeared, the Picchio has hardly impressed anyone. But Bayliff thinks the ADI effort will open some eyes and give the Picchio a new lease on life in a very demanding series.

"We ended up making some changes to the car and we went to the VIR race at the end of last season looking for a good start. But there was heavy rain all week and we would have had a good start with a top ten finish but the shifter cable broke. It got too hot and seized up. We were then expecting to go into Daytona - the first race of this season - with some funding and top drivers but no one came forward. Everyone was skeptical about the Picchio and our new team so we never got a go. But we had been talking with Tim Hubman and he was interested in the project."

And Hubman's interest did not wane even when the luckless Picchio decided to do some unexpected crash testing at Homestead Speedway.

"At Homestead we had a right front lower control arm on the DP break. Tim brought in sponsorship and Picchio brought in an Italian driver so I was going to sit out this race. But Tim said he wanted me to shake down the car before he drove it. I started out fine and even came in once to have the mirrors adjusted. When I went back out the car was effortlessly flat coming into NASCAR turn four then the steering got heavy and the car turned right instantly. I hit the outside wall there at about 170 miles per hour.

"I've got to give some kudos to those new soft walls because a hard wall would have probably destroyed the car. But we knuckled down and got some tubing and just started banging away until we had the body work knocked out. We got it done in time for qualifying and we were putting Alex Ciompi in - the Italian kid Picchio sent over. But Alex wasn't ready for this kind of American racing. I think between the banking and the walls and being his first time in the car on that tough track it was just a bit too much. When he came into the pits he jumped out of the car and refused to get back in. We withdrew his name from the race and Tim decided to have me race with him and coach him for the rest of the season."

And the season ahead appears to be the one that could give Bayliff the recognition he has long sought from his peers and the fans.

"It now looks like we have the funding to go racing all season. We will be at Long Beach this weekend. We

just signed a great primary sponsor and we will have a lot of news coming soon about ADI and the growth of that business. We also signed on to be the Picchio factory team and we will look to help them further develop the Picchio prototype. I'm pretty sure their engineer will be with us at each race.

"We have been doing some development work with them already. We developed a new nose and rear tail for them. We will debut the new nose this weekend as we just got approval from Grand Am for that. It is really attractive and fans won't recognize the car. We have had the opportunity to see what works on all the other cars so the old front wing is history. And we added a BMW grill and a Riley-esque exhaust for the radiators. The car is looking very attractive."

Given all that it took for Bayliff to get to this point, we wondered what would constitute a measure of success for this new team with the new-old race car.

"A successful season for us this year would be to just get the car to finish races! It's been frustrating because we are the only Picchio out there and we have only limited factory support. You know Riley just sold something like their 23rd chassis or something and they have such a large pool of data to work with. We are starting and working alone on this but ADI has some super talented people and I think our recovery at Homestead shows we can get the job done."

"I want people to see what Shawn Bayliff is made of as a driver. It is so hard to get yourself recognized when you are in sub par equipment. I've won in everything I have ever driven except these prototypes. The Rolex Grand Am series is a tight knit community and you really have to prove yourself to them. And some of the best drivers in the world are racing here and I would like to be recognized as one of those drivers."

Bayliff will be splitting his racing time this season between the Picchio and dirt track racing in the World of Outlaws series.

"To me, running sprint cars on local dirt tracks is about the best racing there is in the world. The races aren't strung out over several days and the opportunities to make money and make a living as a driver are good. I'll probably run some of the bigger races."

With his talents in dirt track racing well recognized, Bayliff is hoping to expand his profile across the Grand Am spectrum all in an effort to get him to his ultimate destination.

"I would like to not have to struggle along all the time and instead become a full time driver somewhere. You know your goals change a little as you get older. I'm 35 now but I would love to run in the Indy 500. I'd also like to get a Rolex around my wrist. And right now I would really like to see ADI Motorsports evolve into a really big team. I think Hassel Moran has given me quite an opportunity to showcase my talents I would very much like to see Hassel and his wife April realize their dream to succeed in Motorsports. They have given me an opportunity to help both behind the wheel and with running the team and for that I will always be grateful.

"The way the Rolex series is going I think there are going to be opportunities for drivers like me and guys like Andy Lally, who have made their mark already. The gentlemen in the sport have come to realize it takes a professional to win these races. I really respect Tim Hubman because he is putting his money into this team and he understands that he is still learning this sport. But he has some real talent and I'm excited about this opportunity to drive with him and coach him and maybe get him to the point where he will be a great driver and we can stand on the podium."

Bayliff knows how it feels to stand on a podium with his driving suit caked in dirt and mud. With the new-look Picchio he is hoping to make his next appearance one that projects a much cleaner image.