



ash - through the esses

Through The Esses -Sabre Wants To Cut In On Grand Am's Dance

5/17/2006 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

"Right now we have a group of constructors that we have frozen, to make sure they can do an adequate business and an adequate job of supporting the teams at the track." - **Roger Edmondson, President of the Grand American Road Racing Association, August 2003**

Three years ago, when we interviewed Roger Edmondson about the whole then-new Daytona Prototype racing experiment, he told us that the plan was to start out slowly and try to build a new race series from the ground up. Of course, what has happened is that the series has grown at a more rapid rate than has ever been witnessed before in the history of sportscar racing. With the explosion of new entrants and race venues, a number of issues have arisen that will surely tax the patience and decision making skills of the leaders of Grand Am.



Tommy Riggins & Ron Ogletree Rob DeBardeleben



As noted in the quote above, one of the founding tenets of the series was to invite a limited number of manufacturers / constructors to participate. Rather than let just anybody build DPs, the plan was to protect the pioneers who made an investment in what was generally perceived at the time to be a significant risk. The series selected and approved just seven constructors. In exchange for their commitment in time and money to this new idea, Grand Am minimized the amount of market competition these constructors would have to face.

Before the final seven constructors were selected, approval for other car designs were said to be granted. Why the final seven were chosen out of the pool of approved designs is not readily evident. Regardless, the original seven have been the subject of much discussion amongst fans and the media alike.

With three full seasons behind them, it has become obvious that the seven original constructors have been split into three groups. On the winning side there is Riley and Crawford. On the Laguna Seca entry list, 24 of the 28 cars were either Riley or Crawford chassis. In the middle group there is the Fabcar and the Doran. Two of each of these appeared on the same entry list. In the bottom group are the three remaining manufacturers/ constructors, Picchio, Chase, and Multimatic. None of these marques ran at Laguna or Phoenix.

What does this tell us? We suggest it says that, despite the best intentions of the Grand Am senior management team to minimize chassis sales competition, and thus give every approved manufacturer / constructor a shot at turning a profit on their investment, several marques have simply withered away. Is this Grand Am's fault? We don't think anyone would conclude that. After all, in professional ball sports the league might specify the dimensions of the playing field and the rules of the sport but it

remains the responsibility of the teams to score runs and win ball games. The quality of what the team puts on the field ultimately determines their chances for success.

So then the failure of the bottom three to succeed, and the ongoing struggle for the middle group to catch up, suggests - we think - that the time for Grand Am to consider lifting the limitation on constructors is rapidly approaching. Of course, to make such a decision would carry enormous political and economic ramifications for all the players involved. And we believe making the right choices would be both a complex and perplexing process. But when we look at the reality of the situation we see that, essentially the cars in the bottom group are in a hole from which there seems no escape.

The Chase Competition group should be applauded for at least making several attempts to put their one lone chassis on the track. Without adequate funding they haven't much chance to move forward and without track time for testing and competing, they haven't much chance of securing adequate funding.

The Picchio and the Multimatic Constructors, on the other hand, have shown little effort for which any applause could be provided. To this observer, it would seem they both either expected their cars to be so superior to the rest that they would need no development or factory support, or they simply came to realize their chassis and body designs were flawed from the start and therefore not worth an expensive attempt to improve. Which of these scenarios - or other possibilities - is actually the case is unknown. Regardless of the real reasons, the reality is that the Picchio and the Multimatic are not being championed by anyone. (We are not including the recent ADI attempts to run the Picchio because all indications are that effort is not being supported in a true 'factory team' manner by the manufacturer.)

All of this means the series is really about two marques that can win versus two that need some kind of engineering surgery just to gather the wind to be able to step up onto a podium. This middle group probably isn't out of breath just yet, but they do have to find a cure for the wheezing.

This brings us to a conversation we had this week with Ron Ogletree of Sabre Innovations, and his partner, Rob DeBardeleben. They were one of the first manufacturers to have their design for a Daytona Prototype approved by Grand Am. We believe there were others as well, but at some point in the early stages of the DP creation period, Sabre, and anyone else outside of the 'selected seven', failed to receive approval as a constructor. In other words, all the kids lined up to play ball but only a few got picked to play. The rest simply had to leave the field.

Or perhaps, sit on the bench waiting for the call to go into the game?

Ogletree and DeBardeleben have been watching the growth of the Rolex Series with great interest. They would like nothing more than to get a call from Roger Edmondson telling them they can step in and help fill the void created by the absence of the marques in the bottom group. And we learned during our conversation that Sabre has invested over 6,000 man hours into the process of refining their designs and creating a unique Daytona Prototype. And they feel the car they have created can compete in this ultra competitive series.

The funny thing is, the car they have "created" contains not one ounce of metal or a single shard of carbon fibre composite material. No, their car exists only in a computer program. But, if Grand Am would 'let them play too' they say they have lined up the financial resources and supplier network to build the first car and campaign it proactively in the series.

Despite not yet being in the 'big game', Ogletree has been active in Grand Am, working on the Stevenson Motorsports Corvette in the GT class. He may not have a place on the DP grid just yet, but he is staying close to the inside of the Grand Am scene.

Ogletree: "Before we get into the conversation about our Daytona Prototype design, I just want to express my gratitude to John Stevenson and Tommy Riggins. It is their friendship and belief in my abilities that has made it possible to be active in the series beginning with the Heritage Mustang which won the 2003 GTS championship. Being fortunate enough to be part of a championship effort only raises my personal expectations for any effort I am engaged in.

"As for our prototype, we were the fifth manufacturer to have our chassis and body designs approved by Grand Am. Rob submitted our design artwork and computer generated drawings for the Sabre DP.

"The basic concept behind the Sabre approach was to build a car in a computer, run all the tests needed to determine the initial structural, kinematics and aerodynamic properties, and then provide the computer files to contractors who would manufacture the components directly from those files. We would then assemble all the parts into a real car in our facility. This is how it's done now in all types of advanced technology engineering companies, such as the aerospace industry.

"Sabre is a company that Rob and I formed to design and develop the engineering aspects of commercial and industrial products that people want to bring to market. We also have another partner at Sabre who is not directly involved in our racing efforts. His main focus is the acquisition of commercial and consumer product design concept customers. His name is Jim Coker and he is a terrific conceptual ideas man.

"The DP is - and we hope still can be - a positive example of the kind of professional services Sabre can provide. The car would be the heart and soul of Sabre for our real passion lies in racing.

"When Grand Am made the decision that no new designs would be accepted for approval, we thought, 'OK. We are in', since our design had already been approved. There was no implied or written timeline from Grand Am that said you had to have a car built to retain that approval status. Being engineers, we had spent thousands of hours working up the design of the Sabre DP on our computers. We employed processes like CFD (Computational Fluid Dynamics) and FEA - finite element analysis - which lets you take a computer designed mechanical part or assembly and provide static, dynamic, aerodynamic, kinematics, and thermal analysis of the parts to make sure they are going to withstand the rigors of what you define them to be subjected to. At this point, no physical part existed.

"The cost implications are tremendous! You can do your 'what-ifs' on the computer and never have to cut a piece of metal or worry about a big facility with machine and personnel overhead and so on. Our objective was to keep the overhead costs as low as possible to pass along any savings to our customers. So we would do all the computer testing and once we had a part where we wanted it, we would use a vendor partner to make the part for us.

"We would send them the computer file for the part and they could directly translate that file into a machine set up to cut or shape the part. The lead time from giving the vendor the file to seeing a physical part could be as short as one day.

"The same is true for the bodywork. The 'old' way was to make endless molds and work hard at trying to get all the parts to fit together. What we can do with our vendor in Jacksonville is have them cut the molds in a process using a large 5-axis CNC router. The finished body parts will be within thousandths of an inch of what was designed on the CAD model. All we have to give them is the center of the car from one side and they can make all the pieces mirror image from that one file.

"From the point that we give them all the files for all the body pieces, with all the necessary recesses and cut outs, they can build us a body in as little as two weeks. The whole point of Sabre getting into the DP field was to bring the highest levels of engineering processes to the sport. Essentially, we collect all the parts from our suppliers and we just assemble the car in our shop."

We don't know what requirements Grand Am applied when choosing the builders on its preferred list. Ogletree suggests it is possible the criteria revolved around having a hands-on "real car" available when the decision was to be made. But to this day, he still can't tell us what the actual criteria was, for he said he was never told.

"We did not have an actual car to show Grand Am. I suppose they wanted to see a physical car and we did not have one to show them. Rob told me that Greg Otte from Grand Am did come to the shop one day and asked for a status of the car. Rob showed them the computer designs. He left and the next thing we knew an announcement came out about the seven constructors they had chosen. We heard about their decision through the press release. No one actually talked to us before announcing what they planned to do.

"If you look at the letter of approval we got for the original design, we are referred to as a "manufacturer". If you read the press release announcing the seven who were chosen, they are referred to as "constructors". What we can't determine is why events unfolded this way. What is most important is that we went to Grand Am months before the limited constructor announcement to reinforce in their minds our commitment to the DP concept. We felt it was important that they were aware that we believed totally in the DP concept. We also went to discuss the soon to be released GT rules because we also wanted to design a GT car as well. At the time, we were already in discussions with TRD in obtaining the body files for the new Solara. "Unfortunately the potential Toyota program went under because of the changes that took place within that company and its involvement in motor sports.

"When we asked Grand Am why we couldn't submit a car for competition they said because we hadn't been approved as a constructor, only our design had been approved. This was despite the fact that our letter referred to us as a manufacturer. We have never been given an explanation of what changed or what the reasons were. We have heard different reasons from different people but no official explanation was ever given to us.

"When told we weren't permitted to compete, we told GA that we weren't going to give up and go away."

DeBardeleben expressed his frustration when he recited a brief history of two of the three marques in the bottom group: "Chase last competed on October 9 2005, at VIR. They were seen in competition just 3 times in 2005, while a Multimatic was last seen in competition at the Rolex 24 in 2005, some 21 races ago. With such efforts by these constructors, whom does the constructor list protect? How many cars has Riley sold?"

In light of the monetary and other issues that have prevented the 'constructors' in the bottom group from applying the needed resources to develop their cars, it would seem prudent to consider other builders for inclusion in the series. Not surprisingly, DeBardeleben agrees.

"(Consideration should be given to) those that have already approved designs. Allowing already approved designs to be constructed would not give these later constructors a competitive advantage, having designs approved to the original rules at the same time period as those constructors already competing."

As we mentioned at the start of this column however, the process of opening up to new car builders would not be unlike trying to untangle an angry octopus from a twisted fishing net. Ogletree thinks it might be time to take a knife to some of those tentacles.

"I have an investor who is willing to put forth the funding for this whole program. Our business plan includes a program to operate our business on a level that is comparable to Riley or Crawford in quality and customer service. I won't say we expect to be immediately competitive with our DP design, but our goals and commitment to customer support would be as good as theirs.

"Rob and I have extensive backgrounds in engineering within the industrial and aerospace industries. We have been there and know how to design and build products on a scale of our current and prior experience. We do the design work, send the specs to our suppliers, and then receive the manufactured parts into our shop where we would then perform the QA/QC verification to the design and then assemble the car. If we had the green light from Grand Am tomorrow, we could have a car ready for the January test days next season. The first car would take that long because - due to the limit on constructors or manufacturers - we shut everything down. Our investor however is still waiting in the wings. He - along with a second investor - has witnessed the growth of the series and they are there and ready to go."

Neither Ogletree nor DeBardeleben harbors any ill will towards Grand Am. They even applaud them for bringing this potentially suicidal concept for a sportscar series to life. Ogletree knows they made a serious investment in an idea that had never been tried before. But he also knows he is one ball player who is ready to suit up and get in the game.

"Grand Am made a hell of a gamble on those first seven and we salute them for their courage. GA has stated many times that the constructor list was created to support those who made the investment in the DP concept. Sabre made the investment in DP not in money spent on hardware but in personal time spent on engineering...and our time is not free so doesn't that make us one of those who invested in the fledgling series?

"What aggravates me is that we are sitting here, ready to apply the resources needed to succeed, but we can't go forward without yet another approval layer. The investors won't sink money into a car that presently has no place to race.

DeBardeleben: "GA has stated that the constructor list would be opened after certain milestones had been achieved. Yet each time those goals are reached, the goal posts are moved further back. This is very frustrating for those companies which have already approved designs and are otherwise patiently waiting for those milestones to be achieved."

Ogletree: "I don't feel that being a pain in the rear about this is going to get us anywhere other than having people not listen to us. But I do want to be enough of a presence on this issue that a satisfactory conclusion is reached. And I think we have made it clear what we would consider satisfactory!"

Right about now, we think a lot of Grand Am fans are starting to feel a bit itchy about what Grand Am should do to prevent the series from becoming an all Riley / Crawford slug fest. We don't envy Grand Am's position in the least but it has to be an item on their 'to do' list for sure. We bet it already is.

What would you do?