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Through The Esses - Jim Pace's Career Has Taken Flight Again

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The year was 1996 and the place was the Daytona International Speedway for the Rolex 24 hours of endurance. The men were Wayne Taylor, Scott Sharp and Mississippi native Jim Pace. The trio scored the overall race win in the Danka-sponsored, Oldsmobile powered Riley & Scott MKIII, and Taylor and Pace - with the ever so able assistance of Eric van de Poele - went on to also win the 12 Hours of Sebring. Known then as the "36 Hours of Florida", they could take both races in a single car because both races were run by a single sanctioning body. Sadly that is not the case today, as the Grand American Road Racing Association runs the Rolex 24 and the International Motorsports Association's (IMSA - Formerly Professional Sportscar) American Le Mans Series (Formerly World Sports Car)) sanctions the Sebring 12 hours.



It was a different time in racing just 10 years ago, and in the years that have passed since that 'high watermark' for Jim Pace's career, a lifetime of living has come and gone for this 45 year old racing instructor and professional sportscar driver.

We caught up with Pace on his way home from a day at the Skip Barber Racing School where he has been an instructor for over 20 years. The man has experienced the joys of life at every level, from the ground, to the air, and within the deepest and darkest areas in which one could travel through life. He was kind enough to share his experiences with us - at our request - and his story is one of loss and renewal. A story we think bears presentation in this setting.

"1996 was definitely a high water mark for my career. That was a great season and there was a lot that went on to get to that point. Driving with Wayne and Scott was just a great time for me. The team chemistry was good for all of us. We won Daytona and then Sebring. Scott was doing a race elsewhere the weekend of Sebring so Eric signed on and of course, the three of us went on to win.

"Wayne went on to win the driver's championship and Riley won the manufacturer's championship too. It was a fantastic season!"

We wondered how Pace, the 1987 Skip Barber Racing Series Rookie of the year, came to be a part of such an outstanding team effort.

"The first time I ever drove a prototype was with Jim Downing in the early 90s. I won the GTP Lights class at Sebring - Charles Morgan was my co-driver - in the Kudzu DG2 that Jim and Sam Garrett were running. That was the first ever win for that chassis. I went on to win a couple of other races that year as well. I ran in some of the longer races in Camel Lights off and on with Jim in the early 90s - into 1993.

"I had driven with Wayne Taylor in 1994 when he won his first championship in sportscars. Wayne was

driving a Kudzu with, and for, Jim Downing and the two of them were tied for points going into the last race. At that race Jim started two cars. Wayne was going to have the option of choosing which car to get into as the second driver so he would be the one to have a shot at the championship. Since Jim and I had raced together in the past he asked me if I would start the race in one of the cars while he started in the other one. Ultimately the strategy allowed Wayne to win it all."

As fans of Grand Am and the ALMS well know a new Kudzu prototype chassis has not been entered in competition in quite a few years. It and other designs - such as the Spice - were rapidly outclassed by the then-new Riley & Scott MKIII prototype that entered the series as the American response to the Italian Ferrari 333SP. Pace was fortunate to be one of the people who got to drive this amazingly durable and ultimately extremely successful race car.

"When Riley & Scott first put the R&S MKIII on the market, Rob Dyson was running one or two of them. The rumor mill was that Riley & Scott were planning to run a two car factory effort. They were going to have a 'tall' car and a 'short' car. The tall car was going to be for drivers like James Weaver, Chris Kniefel and Jim Pace. The short car was going to be for Wayne Taylor and Scott Sharp and another guy. I was making sure my name was on the tall list! But as it turned out the budget got cut and so they only ran the one car. But I had a good relationship with Wayne by then so he was a big part of my getting involved with Riley & Scott. We then ran together again the next year too."

In 1997, Pace would team up with a former on track competitor in a sister car to the R&S factory MKIII of Taylor and Sharp. He and Eduardo Dibos pooled their talents for the season and the union took on a more loving connection than is the norm in the sport of endurance racing.

"I married Eduardo's sister! He became my brother in law! I had raced against Eduardo a few years earlier for the GTU Championship. I was driving a Nissan for Bob Leitzinger back then. Eduardo and I were battling down to the wire for the championship in 1994 and I ultimately won it. We got to be friends during that season and it was that year that I first met his sister, Solange.

"Eduardo went from running a GTS car to the R&S prototype and we ran a few races together in 1997. We were part of the Riley & Scott team that season. I think that was the year Toshiba was our sponsor. We ran a few races with the Riley and then he switched to a Ferrari 333SP that he raced along with Fermin Velez. I wound up finishing out the season with another guy who, like Eduardo, was from Peru."

We were at the Lime Rock Park round of the IMSA World Sports Car Series in 1997 and it was at that race that the impact the Riley & Scott MKIII chassis would have on the fortunes of the Ferrari 333SP would take on a very literal meaning.

"On the final lap, coming out of the downhill turn onto the main straight, I was closely following the Ferrari. I'm pretty sure Bill Auberlen was driving it but I'm not positive. Our car was faster and we were catching him. I thought, 'OK, I'm going to catch him at the bottom of the hill and get across the line ahead of him for third place'. Just as we pulled out of the corner together- going real fast - he ran out of gas!

"At that point I was thinking that if I try to avoid him not only am I going to go off the road at a high rate of speed but no one is going to know that he just ran out of gas in sight of the finish line. I figured this Riley is tough so I just pointed the front end straight ahead and center-punched the Ferrari square in the tail! My car never left the racing line but it lost the nose and the radiator and everything else. Our momentum took us across the line in third!"

As the days of living life in the fast lane continued, Jim and his bride Solange would come to know the heights of companionship, and the low extreme of separation brought on by illness. Pace recalled for us the short yet wonderful time he and Solange had together as husband and wife.

"Solange and I met when I was racing against Eduardo and I just fell head over heels for her. We married

and she was with me at all the events. She was there when I won Sebring and Daytona and driving a factory car and going to Le Mans. With all the things you wish to have happen in your racing career Solange was right there with me all the time. She had grown up around racing with her brother and father so I never had to explain to her why I was at the race track. I never had to apologize and have half the budget go to whatever shopping spree she wanted to go on because I was at the race track. None of those sorts of things ever happened.

"She was very supportive. She was there to help with timing and scoring and always very positive which really gave strength to our marriage. That is just how it was.

"When we met, she didn't speak English and I didn't speak Spanish! But you overcome little things like that. She was living in Peru and I was living in Mississippi. But our eyes and our hearts communicated very well. I never learned Spanish but she did learn English.

"We got married in 1999 and after about four months she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I spent all my time over the next year and a half with her, at her side. At the time the prognosis for her was not very good at all. She was the most important thing in my life.

"I had a new Rolex watch that I had won at Daytona. The day that she was diagnosed I took the watch off. I said, 'I don't need to be anywhere but right here with you.'

"She underwent treatments for a little over a year and then she passed away in 2001.

"After that, I went back to the race tracks to try and get my life back in order and try and do all the things that you have to do. But it just wasn't the same. You know, when you travel in racing you pass through the same airports for each race that you come back to each year. For me, traveling the same paths just didn't feel the same as it had before. Racing just didn't have the same passion to me that it had before.

"I continued to work for Skip Barber in the Southern and Mid Western regions. When I was with my wife I stopped doing all of that. Skip was great about it when I told him I needed to do something other than teach guys to double clutch downshift for a while. Skip said, 'just do what you need to do and call us when you are ready to come back.'

"I came back to the track and I did a few more races in Grand Am and ALMS, doing a few races with Jim Downing. But it just didn't have the same passion.

"During that time I started a unique automotive business in South America. I run a 4x4 off-road adventure experience in Peru called "Soli Peru 4x4 Aventura". This is not a competitive racing series but rather a tour operation I have been running that combines breath taking scenery, exhilarating driving conditions and fine accommodations for a unique experience.. I started this shortly after Solange passed away and it gave me an opportunity to see her family and spend quality time with Eduardo and his brother Juan and all the family I had become so close with.

"We didn't sit around and mope or feel sorry for ourselves. We did, and continue to do, things that let us do something positive together and we continue to build on that. I was down there for a few years doing this, when I also decided I would follow through on a lifelong dream.

"I decided I needed to do something that would consume me the way that racing had consumed me. For me, that was flying. Racing is one of the things that consumes you and takes all your other distractions away. For the time you are racing the effort simply out shadows everything else in your world. And I have seen this time and again with the professional people who come to Skip Barber.

"The doctors don't think about the patient in the hospital and the attorneys don't think about the big contract going through when they are racing. For me, that is what flying could do for me, just as racing

had before. I took lessons and got my license and I now use the plane I bought - a single engine Beechcraft Bonanza that seats four - to take care of my travel needs to the race tracks. The whole adventure of flying has been very rewarding to me. It has opened up a whole new level of excitement for me, in addition to going to the racetrack - and it has made the racing environment fun and refreshing.

"I love to just go fly out to nowhere with my dad. He decided to take lessons at the age of 70 and he got his license! Whenever I am home we go out just to fly around for the enjoyment.

"Having the plane has rekindled the passion and it is all about the adventure, the performance, the precision, and doing a good job. It isn't about how fast you went on that particular day but about sharing the experience with others. Flying has really given me the spark I needed to get back into racing again."

This season, Pace is sharing a Porsche 997 with Dr. Jim Lowe, the Chief of Neurosurgery at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center in Atlantic City, New Jersey (USA). They have raced under the TRG / J Lowe Racing banner in several Grand Am Rolex races. Pace gave us the background on this effort.

"I met Jim through Skip Barber. He raced in the Skip Barber Series and I was working with him a lot through the races and the school weekends. He approached me about how to get into sportscar racing and wanted to know how to race at Daytona. I told him how to go about getting sponsorship and a car and a team together.

"I knew Kevin Buckler from years past when we raced against each other in the GTU Championship. I had also driven with him at Daytona and Sebring and several other races. Jim, Kevin and I got together to do the Rolex 24 this year, and Jim said he really enjoyed it. After that, there were some select races they wanted to run. They weren't ready to commit to a full season but they wanted to do races near New Jersey, like Watkins Glen and Virginia.

"The arrangement works out best for everyone because Kevin gets income from the car and Jim gets to test the waters to find out how big an investment in professional racing he really wants to make."

Pace has made a long term investment in racing, one that has seen him win championships and premier race events. Even now, after 20 plus years of being part of this oh so fast sport, he continues to enjoy his 'job'.

"I absolutely love working with the Skip Barber School. Every day I get to meet professional people who want to take that one big step to see if they can drive a race car. I may do one school a week time and again, but for those guys it is most likely a once in a lifetime experience. Being around that much enthusiasm is great!

"And I have found that I do still want to drive. I still love it. Endurance racing gives me more opportunities to get into a seat that I might not otherwise be able to get into. This season with Jim Lowe is one for which I am very grateful. He is learning about the many aspects of being directly involved, from the racing itself, to team strategy, to working with a team of people towards one goal. And it has been good for me to get back in the car and help him advance. It has been very rewarding for me personally to work with Jim.

"In a perfect world we would love to have enough sponsorship to move into a full time Daytona Prototype program. I think that series is continuing to grow and the higher profile DPs are where it would be best for us to be. Of course, starting with the GT class was the right move for now. But next year I would love to see us running a DP."

Whatever Jim Pace decides to drive in competition, we will be watching. And we feel certain that somewhere, Solange is also checking her stopwatch on every lap her husband completes.