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Through The Esses - Donohue And Brumos Make A Change At 50

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We recently took a minute to add up all the races held to date for the Daytona Prototypes that run in the Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series. From modest beginnings rooted in a handful of cars from just three constructors taking to the track at the first race, this "new business model" for sportscar racing has sprouted into a very large - and green, as in financially successful - racing series. Adding up the numbers we learned the July 30th race at Barber Motorsports Park was the 50th for this modern day interpretation of "American" sportscar racing.

It all began at the 2003 Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona, with Dave Klym's Fabcar chassis leading the way. Championed since day one by the veteran and very talented Brumos Racing Team, led by owner Bob Snodgrass, the Fabcar was the first chassis to have, and the one to have to finish first. But that was three racing seasons ago and while the speed of time remains unchanged, over time speeds increase.

After 49 races with the Fabcar chassis, the Brumos team decided to make a switch. They purchased two new Riley chassis - one to be designated #58 for Darren Law and David Donohue to drive, and one to become car #59, for Hurley Haywood and JC France.

Brumos stuck with the original Fabcar chassis since the series first started. They endured while progress raced past them in the form of the Riley and Crawford built cars that dominated the podiums. They endured through every single race, despite the lack of success. They demonstrated complete support for the series and they certainly worked harder than anyone to try and turn the fortunes of the Fabcar chassis around.

And through it all, one man who was behind the wheel for Brumos at every race was David Donohue. For the 50th race, Brumos owner Bob Snodgrass decided it was finally time for Donohue, and his co-driver, Darren Law (another one who has raced in all 50 events, although not all with the same team) to try a new set of wheels. Snodgrass purchased a new Riley MKXI chassis (chassis #29!) and the team then set about debuting the car at Barber.

With just a short week to run some tests at Mid-Ohio, the team got the car to Barber, and set some pretty quick times out of the box. But no one gets a podium in this class, in this series, the first time they hit the track. Never mind the 49 races that came before, this time they were starting over with a new car that the team came to learn simply wasn't anything like the one they raced before.

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We talked with David Donohue early in the week, before he was about to drive up to Watkins Glen for the Crown Royal 200, from his home in Pennsylvania. He gave us some insight into how the switch to a Riley chassis came about, and what lies ahead for this veteran team that is, in effect, starting over at the "age" of 49.

"Dave Klym needs to continue to develop the Fabcar as I feel there is still potential there. But, simply put, the way our schedule runs, and the level of competition just does not allow time for that kind of development. No one expected the series to have grown as quickly as it has. Not only in terms of the number of teams but also in the level of competitiveness and intensity."

In a team press release, Dave Klym echoed Donohue's suggestion that time away from the hectic pace of a race season is his best shot at getting his chassis back onto the grid. He said, "With the time now available we can work on the parts of the chassis that we have identified and test our updated configurations in conjunction with Grand American's rules. I look forward to setting some more records with FABCAR as we did when the Daytona Prototype class started in 2003."

Donohue is, perhaps, the most qualified observer of the growth of this series, having been at every race since the beginning. He has seen the competition level increase significantly with each new race and he offers this example of how competitive this form of sportscar racing has become.

"A good example would be one of the practice sessions at Barber. We were just six tenths of a second off the fastest time, and yet we were in 12th place. And Barber is a driver's track, a technical track. It is not like a Portland or Lime Rock where you expect to find many cars within a second of one another because there is not a lot to the track. But you would expect bigger gaps at a difficult track like Barber.

"What I like to do to measure the compactness of the field is to compare how many cars are within a second of the second-fastest car. This season it has been often as many as 17 cars, and sometimes even more! I say the second place car because there is always someone who pulls out a stupid fast lap. The second fastest car is usually more representative of the rest of the field."

Recognizing the obvious, that the Fabcar chassis in its current configuration just wasn't going to put the Brumos team on the podium, the decision to go with another chassis - to try to rekindle the competitive juices in the Brumos team - was made. We wondered how the final choice came down to Riley.

"I know that Bob spoke to both Bill Riley and Max Crawford and considered both cars to replace the Fabcar. I feel both cars have the capability of winning. Just the fact that there are more Riley's out there means, statistically, they should out finish the Crawford. I am not so sure this is a reflection of which car is better though. But I liked them both and my suggestion to the team was to look at their own priorities with the off track stuff - like delivery times and such - and go with the choice that worked best for them.

"I drove both cars in test sessions. They have very different feels and philosophies about them. The way I explained it to Hurley (Haywood, his opposite teammate who drives the #59 Brumos car along with JC France, and another driver who has been in every GA race) was to say that the Crawford feels more like a Porsche 911 and the Riley feels more like a Porsche Boxter. The Riley feels fast. You work hard behind the wheel, but things go by you fast. Your inputs are right there. It is like you are wearing the car.

"I went quickly in the Crawford but it was like being in a big expensive luxury car on the highway where you are going 100 but it feels like you are going 40. When I drove both cars I only got to run 6 laps in the Crawford and 4 in the Riley, so these descriptions are really just first impressions. But I told the team both cars could win."

Brumos had two complete Fabcar chassis before the arrival of the new Riley, but the twins have been broken up with bits and pieces off the old #58 Fabcar finding a new home on the Riley. Donohue explains.

"We cannibalized a lot of the parts on the #58 to make up the Riley, for economic reasons. We used parts from the Fabcar to build the Riley. Things like the **Brakes** the engine, wiring harness and so on. Any parts that could be transferred over were put on the new car. It was less costly to reuse parts than to buy the same parts all over again."

Brumos purchased two Riley chassis. One was ready a week before the Barber race and the other - destined to replace the #59 Fabcar - is expected in time for Sears Point. The team hopes to have more race worthy knowledge about the Riley chassis in hand by then, having had to scramble a bit to make that first race - #50.

"Riley completed the first car the Friday before the Barber race. They basically stickered it and did some detail work on the Saturday and transported it to Mid Ohio on Sunday. On Monday we tested. The majority of our testing was to perform systems checks, just to be sure everything was working as it should. We ended up running many laps and honed in on some major things that we wanted to change. Things like brake pads, what springs to use, and other generic stuff.

"Bill Riley was enormously helpful. That is also true of Max Crawford as well. I said as much when I gave my feedback to Bob and the team when they were making their decision on which chassis to buy. Both organizations [Riley and Crawford] do a superb job in that regard."

The first time out for the new #58 Brumos Porsche-Riley showed flashes of potential but, as we said earlier, you don't ease your way onto a Grand Am podium. It takes time and dedication - along with a whole batch of smarts and experience. Donohue relates that first weekend in Alabama for us here.

"We went into the weekend with fairly conservative expectations and Darren and I both feel we, as a team, under-delivered. We were hoping for something more than what we wound up with. The car was unchanged from the Mid-Ohio tests and we massaged that set up rather than start with the base set up from Riley. By the time we changed to that baseline we were behind the eight ball. You could say we outthought ourselves a bit. There were also a lot of small details - like two pages worth! - that we needed to address as you normally would with a brand new car. Sort of like when you buy a new house, it takes some time to make it your home.

"For example, Darren and I were climbing all over the front of the car doing our own air ducts. The guys working on the cars just did not have the time to worry about things like driver comforts. It's pretty scary when the two of us have to actually work on the car! (Laughing)"

It didn't take long for their handiwork to go away or for the heat of an Alabama summer to arrive.

"We redid the front ducts and in the opening laps there was something of a pinball effect in the hairpin and I ended up going into the back of the #89 car. I ended up knocking all the air ducts off the car! We didn't have any driver cooling because the helmet cooler decided to quit at that same instant. And at some point after that the cool suit failed too!

And the Riley gets much warmer inside than the Fabcar. We didn't need any aids in the Fabcar. In fact, at the Daytona test days I was actually cold in the car."

Despite an unwelcome "warm" reception at the first race for the new car, Donohue has, once again found that his expectations are high for the future of the Brumos Team in this incredibly competitive series.

"We struggled with the tool that we had up to this point. But it is our intention to get back to being consistent front runners. We have found that the Riley is a whole different animal. We just need to get to grips with it.

"We have good guys working on our cars. The engineers need to adapt to what this car does differently from what the Fabcar did. That is how we ended up so far out at Barber. We used tuning items that we were used to using with the other chassis. This car is not that car and our approach just worked us outside the nine dots, if you will."

Donohue feels the days of the Brumos team working alone are over.

"What is really amazing is that you can walk up and down the paddock and talk to friends who are racing in Riley's and talk about what they are doing to their cars. Nothing too secret or detailed you understand, but things like springs and stuff. We didn't have that with the Fabcar, nobody could relate to us. We were totally alone before, but with the Riley there is more camaraderie in the paddock. I remember one of the first races in 2004, Scott Pruett said in the drivers meeting at Homestead that 'If you are going to go into the oval high, stay high. If you are going in low, stay low. Don't cross the track.' And I remember thinking to myself 'We are not even flat there and I've got to cross the track just to make it around!' These guys were going flat through there without even thinking. We were literally catching the car from a crash every lap. That can get very tiring over a race distance.

"It's just a whole different ball game when you are not alone anymore. It's also great to have both Bill and Bob Riley there to go over stuff with us. We did a lot of development work on our own with the Fabcar. But as I said earlier, it is just too intense of a season to be able to develop and race the car at the same time."

Donohue realizes the late-season switch to a new chassis creates the same issues of time-condensed development Brumos experienced with the Fabcar. But this GT2 Class winner at Le Mans, North American Touring Car Champion, and three time winner in the DP class definitely sees brighter days ahead.

"The new Riley has given the team an incredible infusion of new energy. The #58 car has had some turnover in staff over the years but we have found that our current mechanics, Bill Keuler and Matt Bishop, have just clicked. Darren and I have both noticed they are really on it. They are getting stuff checked off the list before it even gets on the list. It is one of those situations where you just like to sit back and watch them work. They don't even have to talk to each other. They hand each other tools without even looking up. They run like a machine and when it comes down to it, Darren and I have complete confidence in them. I would not want to change anything."

Change is what the Riley chassis has fostered on this team. Donohue concedes that the cycle of change includes a reexamination of expectations.

"I have to say that we are going into Watkins Glen a bit humbled. Darren and I expected to surprise everyone at Barber when all we did was surprise ourselves. We know we have to work really hard here and learn how to tune the car. Is it in springs or ride height or aero? We just don't know enough yet. It's one thing to know it and you just can't get it, but we don't even know it.

"Yes, Barber was an eye opener for us as we quickly came to realize that it is not going to be as easy as we thought. But that is how it should be as the hardest fought wins are always the most gratifying."

Gratification would be a welcome change for the Brumos squad, and for the fans of this admired veteran race team. And now, the team's second 50 chances begin at Watkins Glen this weekend.