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Through The Esses - Tony Nuzzo Is In Racing In A MINI-mal Way

08/22/06 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

The game of sportscar racing has always attracted successful and competitive businessmen with cash to burn on a sport that is both fast paced and physically demanding. And they do it while wearing a broad smile brought on by the adrenaline rush of spirited racing. When you have a lot of money, and you know what it takes to succeed in the fast paced world of big business, it seems only natural that you would take up racing to keep your speed up.



You just have to accept that racing can sure take your bank account down.

Today's race teams are very much in tune with the need to sustain an economic footing that ensures continued participation. It isn't about just going fast for a few races anymore. Today the goal is to run a team for a full season as a successful business. And to be the team that attracts the talented - and paying - customers so you can indeed be considered successful.

Our aged mind can't recall who first said, 'If you want to make a small fortune in racing, start with a large one' but this racing axiom can be modified a bit if you apply at least a "MINI"-mum amount of attention to the balance sheet. We know that now, for we recently spoke with racer and Grand Am Cup series sportscar race team owner Tony Nuzzo.

How you measure your success is really a matter of personal choice. For Nuzzo, success means getting wheel time for yourself without running your team in the red. And we suppose, it doesn't hurt that his MINI -Coopers are blue, as in the blue ink every businessman wants to see on his bottom line.

We talked with Nuzzo about his twin- MINI Coopers, #20 and #22, and how he runs his race team in the ST Class of the Grand American Cup Series. He told us his racing career started in a Porsche Boxster, then a Porsche GT3, an Acura, and finally, the twin MINIs.

"I started out in the Porsche Club. I was the first one in the United States to race a Boxster. My first pro race was in the Rolex GT when I raced a Porsche GT3 car in 2001. The next year I ran with the Nonnamaker's HRPWorld.com team. That was my first full season of racing in Grand Am Cup. And that year I took third place honors in the driver's championship."

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Three years ago, Nuzzo retired from his profession and since then, he has made the business of racing his only business.

"I retired from the computer business and at 53 years old all I do now is race cars. I had my own consulting company and in my later years I was working with a financial company with billions of dollars in assets. Back when the Euro dollar was being introduced they needed somebody to come in and manage the conversions and so they called on me.

"Now I am a full time team owner and driver. I chose Grand Am Cup because I like the endurance racing format. I think there is nothing more exciting than when you have a race where you can be in the car for a few hours at a time."

The mighty MINIs' box-like shape makes for a striking contrast on the track when racing against the sleeker and more like-sculpted cars from Acura, Chevrolet, and even BMW. That unique quality appealed to Nuzzo when he decided he would start up his own race team.

"We were evaluating where we wanted to go after our season in the Acura and, like a lot of other people, I am a bit of a control freak. I like to control the whole ball of wax so we decided to put our own team together. That year - late 2002 - I was talking to a friend of mine who was considering doing the same thing. We were sitting on a side of a mountain up in Montreal, having a few beers, just talking and he said he was looking to do what I wanted to do and had been looking at the new cars that were coming out on the scene that year.

"There were two cars that were getting all the attention back then. The Nissan 350Z and the MINI Cooper. I thought the MINI would be the right choice for us and I do not regret that decision in the least.

"Currently we have two cars. The #20 car is the one I drive and the #22 car is set up as a rental ride. The rental car helps to pay the bills. I feel this arrangement has allowed me to be pretty successful. I am kind of an anomaly in this racing industry. I don't have a shop. I don't tune your car. I don't sell you performance parts or hats or T-shirts. I don't have anything to sell so everything I do is strictly for my race team. Of course we work with our sponsors and do the kind of promotion that comes with that. But we aren't a team that is constantly working on the latest go-fast gadget that they want you to buy. I don't have any of that overhead or R&D expense or that sort of thing."

Keeping costs down has been a staple of his operation and he seems to be managing just fine in that area. Of course, sponsor dollars are always both welcome and a baseline requirement. Nuzzo feels his choice of automobile to race with gives a sponsor a unique presentation tool.

"We have set a few track records and we have the single most recognizable race car on the track. When people are watching the cars go by they say, □What was that? An Acura? A Chevy? A BMW? Ah! There's the MINI!!' The uniqueness of the car is certainly something we bring to potential sponsors attention, but there is so much more. We have an established background in marketing and I know business from the ground up. Every team offers the sponsor something different.

"As you know, big sponsorship deals are hard to get. A full season in Grand Am Cup probably runs around the mid six figure range. We have been using a simple business model. I have to race for free! I have been pretty successful at doing that. Some races are more expensive than others to run but as long as I am at net zero at the end of the year I am a happy camper."

One way to move away from a net zero result is to have your MINI get mashed. Nuzzo had that experience a few years back when one driver took to the track and on their first lap, went into turn one too hot and made contact with the tire barriers. The car was retrieved and repaired and the driver set out again for their second attempt at a first lap. But something about that car and that first turn - and perhaps the drivers own sense of history - just worked together to put the MINI back into the barrier a second time, this time doing more damage than the first hit.

Nuzzo would not like to see that experience repeated anytime soon.

"Let's just say that weekend was a unique experience. Besides the two crashes, the driver had a lot of time on that track in a lot of different cars but we couldn't figure out why the driver's pace was also slow during the race."

We would suggest this is perhaps a case of "MINI-maul' talent?"

But coming back to the business of running his team, Nuzzo explained how he brings talented people together right when they are needed.

"The crew we use is made up of people who have worked with us for awhile. Some of them are guys we bring in to help out at certain races. We have guys coming in from various places like Chicago and Virginia. We have a set crew and we supplement them with our weekend warriors. Some of the guys are architects, some are racers themselves, or mechanics, and come from all different kinds of backgrounds. They are all enthusiastic and have some involvement in club racing. Many have crewed on other professional teams including at the prototype level.

"Between races the cars are shipped to LYNMOR Motorsports here on Long Island, (Nuzzo lives in Glen Head, on Long Island's north shore) where we can work on getting them ready for the next race."

Nuzzo's name appears on the #20 car and is often listed alongside that of Steve Pattee, who has been his regular driving partner for several years now. When Pattee can't make a race, Nuzzo has been able to draw on some more-than-adequate replacements.

"Steve is my regular co-driver. We have been driving together for several years and if Steve can't make a race, I've had some really great drivers join me in the car. Andy Lally raced with me (and is a fellow native Long Islander) as has Shane Lewis. Shane set some records with our cars and earned MINI its first professional pole position. He really knows how to wring out every last drop of speed from our MINIs!

"I think it says a lot about our team and our organization when top pro's like Andy Lally, Shane Lewis or Jean-Francois Dumoulin want to get into your race car."

Nuzzo has taken a business-like approach to his racing fun and he says he doesn't harbor any burning desire to move up the racing ranks outside of Grand Am Cup competition. He feels the competition in this series is top notch and often results in great racing.

"I am pretty realistic about my goals. I really enjoy the competition in the Cup series. I really don't look to drive a prototype. That is the place for the rich guys and the professionals. If I hit the lotto, who knows? But right now I like the level of driving in the Cup class and we have some of the best driving talent in the world racing in that series. You can go wheel to wheel with anyone out there and not have to worry about someone doing a boneheaded stunt in a corner.

"That is not to say I have had all dent-free races! I had my share of bad moves. But if you are in this business long enough I think you will get your fair share. Fortunately most of my mistakes were one-car affairs. I don't know if you saw any of the TV coverage from Phoenix last year but I went into the carousel and dropped a wheel off the track. When I came out the other side of the turn I discovered a six inch high curb was just waiting to flip me over onto my roof. I had just passed an Acura and moved into eighth position, getting ready to check out on these guys. I did manage to drive the car back to the pits and we did get a lot of TV coverage because of it!

"We now sell advertising space on the bottom of the car too!"

With the 2006 Cup season winding down, Nuzzo is taking a look at his options for next year. Will his MINI effort continue? Or is it time to step up to a more conventional body style? Perhaps he has already decided?

"The cars are four years old now and we have been thinking about getting some new cars. MINI has a new model coming out with a totally new turbocharged engine in it. I'd like to be able to build those into race cars and have a run at it with them. One thing about these cars is that everybody who gets out of one of my race cars - I don't care if they are seasoned pros or occasional racers - the one thing they all have is a big grin from ear to ear, just like they did when they got out of their first race car ever. That is how much fun these cars are to drive. They handle exceptionally well. They are lightweight and they have great Brakes They have a lot of horsepower for the car - not enough for the competition right now - but they are fast cars. At the smaller tracks, like Lime Rock, Shane qualified on the front row and during the race passed Turner's BMW for the overall lead! At Trois Rivieres the MINI was third fastest in practice.

"With this particular car we feel we have probably taken it about as far as we can. If we could squeeze a little bit more out of it we would be right back in the hunt.

"We have been looking at all of our racing options for next season. I like the endurance racing format and the racing in the Grand Am cup series so I expect we will be back next year. You know, racing is an addiction. When you get bitten it is worse than any drug out there! It is a challenge and I enjoy that. I also like the business aspects of racing and I wouldn't want to change that either."

Why change that indeed, especially when you can start out with a small fortune and end up with one too?