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Through The Esses – Dana Moore Seeks A Checkered Future

09/13/06 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

We recently came across a very interesting posting on the Driver Ride Board section of the Grand American Road Racing Association website. This is the area where drivers can post information about their availability and hopefully draw some attention to themselves, resulting in a paid ride with a quality team. Now, we have seen drivers from the famous to the unknown post here, as it is a perfect venue for connecting talented hands with capable machines. But on our recent visit we encountered a name that, quite frankly, had never been on our radar screen before. And after reading the post, we just had to find out more.



The posting as it appeared on the Grand Am site:

"Looking for a ride in any class (pref. GT) with any car. I have tons of road racing experience...took a few years to go in circles and have decided that I'd rather road race!

"I'm looking for a team that is willing to work with me (yes, I am a girl - if it's an issue for you)...I'd like to get in a couple races towards the end of the season and then make a go of it for next season. I want top of the line equipment and crew! If you are just an "arrive & drive" - no thanks.

"If you are looking for a competitive & talented driver that can get sponsorship, talk to the media and already has a fan base then I'm your girl!

"See my resume and stats - www.DanaMooreRacing.com"

DanaM51@adelphia.net

Dana Moore? We hadn't a clue who this clever person was, but her sense of humor and honest approach to the task of landing a ride piqued our interest. So we visited her website, read about her background in Legends cars and the Panoz Women's GT Series, and decided to contact her to learn more about her and her aspirations in the sport of road racing.

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During our conversation her sense of purpose, her intelligence, and her easy going manner came through very clearly. She is a person who has the desire - and apparently, the talent - to persevere through a serious personal setback and work as hard as she has to to land a quality ride in the Grand Am Cup Series.

We asked California native Dana Moore to tell us her story and we gladly present it for you here. For Dana Moore is someone we expect more people will want to know more about.

"I started racing in time trials and slaloms in a parking lot back in San Diego, where I was born and raised, back when I was sixteen. My dad thought it would be a good idea for me to learn some car control, especially in San Diego where there is not a lot of bad weather. He thought it would be a good idea if I could learn how to drive in wet weather or control the car in a skid. The first time I was just in my street car. I was doing some pretty good times and the guys at the school told my dad he should think about putting me in his race car. That was a hobby that he had just started so racing was kind of new to the whole family then.

"We had a C Sports Racer - a 1969 Ocelot Mark IV - that we ran in vintage racing. It is still my favorite car to drive and we still have it. And all the races were run on road courses so I spent all of my early years in road racing. It was only recently that I ran in circle track races.

"At that time in vintage racing, you couldn't race on a track unless you were 18. The vintage organizations would sometimes have driver's schools for people under 18. I did those too. And don't you know that three months before I turned 18 they overturned the rule about being 18!

"So, right before my 18th birthday I got into my first vintage race at Las Vegas. It was an absolute mess. The first time I went out in the car, the Brakes stuck on. The second time I went out, the throttle stuck on. I was facing every driver's worst nightmare right out of the box. But I handled it pretty well, I think. My dad always told me that he thought driving was a natural thing for me. So when the gas pedal got stuck I just decided to turn the car off. Everybody later told me they thought that was a great way to handle it and that most people would not have thought to do that. I just thought it made sense to me to do it, so I did!

"That weekend I think I finished in the top 5. And then my racing started to take off to the point where I basically wound up stealing the car from my dad. We would go to the races and, at first they would let me race the next class down, while my dad got to race in the CSR class. Then I got too good in the car so the drivers got together and told me they wanted me to get out of that class and move up to the top class!

"Around that time dad also bought a Formula Ford. I only raced that for a short time because, for whatever reason, my mom just didn't have a good feeling about that car. I ran three races in it, she didn't like it, and so my dad finally stepped aside and let me race the Ocelot.

"There was a big vintage race in California back then called the Tustin Thunder. They ran it on a military base. I won that race three years in a row and from that I was invited to run in the Panoz GT series. This was in 1998 and I ran the first season of 1999. They invited a bunch of women out to test - I think it was about 500 all together - and I passed all the original testing requirements. Later, about a year into the series, they dropped the invitations approach and opened it up to anybody.

"I did well in the series and I did every race except for the very first one. The organizers ran everything and kept tight controls in place. In a series like Skip Barber you could at least argue your point and seek changes to the car. That simply wasn't the way it was done in the Panoz

series. The reason I didn't make the first race was because I kept on complaining about my car but they didn't want to hear that I had diagnosed a problem. I drove the car anyway because I was there to race after all, but I wound up spinning off the track and breaking my thumb.

"When they tore the car down after the wreck, they found out the wheel bearings in the right front of the car had shattered. They were bad before the race and that was what I had felt in practice and what I had complained about. I told them that I realize there are women out there who really don't know anything about cars but I said I may not know exactly what the cause is, but the wheels felt like they were turning on their own. And that was exactly what they were doing because of the bad bearings.

"After the race the mechanic came to me and said, 'I am so sorry. You were telling me exactly what was happening and that is exactly what that would point to and that is what would happen.' But the good thing that came from that was that from that point on all the mechanics trusted me when I told them something was going on!"

At this point we asked Moore if she found this sort of resistance or reluctance to her input to be prevalent within racing.

"My issue has never been to prove that women can race. It is only to prove that I can race. When I come across people who have worked with a woman who is out to prove that a woman can do something they often seem to have a sour taste in their mouth. I've tried to overcome that and I think it is really sad. I find that I don't have to overcome someone's prejudices; I have to overcome their bad experiences.

"When I have dealt with people who never raced with a woman before, I find the people are very nice, honest, and open with me. I have been really lucky and I don't know if that was because most of my racing was in California or what. I think a part of it might be because so much of my racing was in road racing. I think the people in road racing are a lot more open to women. NASCAR is what it is. Circle track racing is good old boy racing - at least until recently. When the women's series was over, I thought I might try circle track racing. It seemed to be a case of good timing."

Moving from a national series back to a local one came at a cost but not so dear as to prevent Moore from keeping her speed up.

"I started in legends cars because they were easy and the track was in my home town. I have been lucky with sponsors. In the women's series I was sponsored by Tony Gwynn and his clothing company called Steady Play. They were with me for three years but when I went to local track racing, the fit wasn't right for their needs. They were trying to reach a national audience far outside of the local area so I had to get other sponsorship. While I was in Legends cars I had sponsorship with the Weekend Warriors trailer company, the Curves for Women Gym and Cuddeback trailers. They were great sponsors for me."

Moore was rapidly establishing herself as a competent competitor who knew the quickest way to the front of the pack. But just as her reputation was beginning to get her noticed, and a breakthrough into professional sports car racing seemed imminent, she got a break of a different kind all together. It was a most unwelcome break.

"In the winter I went to a legends race in Las Vegas just for fun. While I was there I broke my neck. That was really tough because that all happened right in the middle of negotiations for a BMW ride in the SPEED World Challenge Series. It was brutally bad timing. I mean, it's never a

good time to break your neck but it couldn't have come at a worse time. It was one of those times when it seemed like every door was open and then disaster struck.

"It took about six months before I had my cervical fusion surgery. The delay was due to my insurance company wanting to fight it out with the track over who was going to pay for the operation! I don't have that insurance company any more, thank GOD! At that time, I didn't have any option but to sit it out and wait to see who was going to pay for the surgery because I knew I could never afford it.

"By the time I actually had the surgery they saw that my neck had started to heal itself. When they got me in the operating room they kept me on the table an additional three hours while they tried to decide whether they were going to have to re-break my neck and fuse it back together perfectly, or fuse it how it was, working around what had already healed naturally. That is what they ultimately decided to do. They knew if they had re-broken it, it would mean a minimum three year recovery period. But in the end it seems like it has taken about that long anyway! It would have been nice to be able to go back and tell them to go ahead and re-break it.

"I really haven't raced since the accident. I went through major therapy and recovery and spent a lot more time in therapy than is typical for this kind of neck injury. But, what are you going to do? You can't change it now."

Every bit the heart of a racer beating within, Moore decided she needed to get her hands back on a wheel as soon as possible, despite the premature state of the healing process. She did just that, and found she was indeed one lucky racer.

"There was one race - the last race before I was getting ready to move to North Carolina. I went against doctor's orders so I could get in one last race at my home track, Cajon Speedway. I raced the legends car and then a late model car. The legends race went OK, but the late model race was a case of bad luck waiting to strike again. Something was wrong with the A-arm. It broke during a caution period. If it had happened during the race it would have resulted in a major accident. Thank GOD it happened under caution because it still turned me right into the wall. Of course, it had to do it right in the middle of a turn!

"I think the damage to me was more mental than physical. I knew that was going to be my last race at that track and it really got me down more than feeling physical pain. It put me out for a few more weeks and of course my doctor said, 'I told you so'. Well, those weren't exactly his words!

"But the upside to that last race in San Diego was that my husband proposed to me! I said yes and then went right into bed to continue my recuperation for the next three weeks!

"And you know, they have since closed that track so I am glad I had the chance to at least be there and run one more time. We had a good car and I would have liked to have had a shot at it but&"

Moore told us that she can tolerate having a part fail or someone else making a mistake on the race track. While she is never happy to be taken out of a race for those reasons, she is completely upset when her dropping out is a result of her own doing.

"I know that equipment breaking is something that happens. When I make a mistake, however, that is when I get upset. That wears on me for a long time. I could probably list every mistake in every race I have ever made. That is just how competitive I am with myself. I think that is

probably a bit weird because I've won races and come home and had my mom tell me that I did well and she is proud of me, but I'm sitting there going, "yes, but I really screwed up turn five!"

"I think that is one of the things that have kept me going, and why my true love is road racing. The wonderful thing about road racing is no matter how fast you are, even if you are setting the track record on every lap, it never feels like it is fast enough. You always feel like you have that little voice in the back of your mind telling you that you could have held on a little later going through the esses. I also think that is why most drivers do like road racing because it is a competition with yourself every lap. You always want to go a little deeper into a corner or do a better job with hitting the apexes."

Now that sounds like something a professional road racer would say. Strive when you drive. Be your best this lap and be better the next. Such a determined spirit surely must have a place on a professional team. We asked if there were any such opportunities coming her way as a result of her posting.

"I have a lot more coals in the fire than I thought I would. I have had a number of people contact me in response to the posting on the Grand Am board. They have been up front with me for they know I want a paying ride. They tell me that they are exactly what I don't want but they are here if I don't find anything else. I have also had contact with a few other teams that I am trying to put a deal together with, but I don't have anything firmed up just yet.

"The biggest thing is that it is a hard market right now to find a sponsor in. It is a time in racing where there are so many self-funded drivers who can buy a ride or buy their way onto the right team. It makes it more difficult for the people who are trying to find the sponsors. A lot of those guys who are buying rides will pay 90% of the freight and then go to a sponsor for the rest. This lets them offer a sponsor the same deal you are offering for a half a million dollars for just a hundred thousand dollars. That makes it difficult.

"Being a woman also works against me. It has gotten easier but the biggest problem is that for every Danica Patrick there are three women who they have seen do horribly at a local track, or at a different level. And that's the basic problem. And there is also the perception out there that women can't drive cars. It is one of those things that may or may not be true, but it will always be against me. There are also teams that don't want to work with women. Even if you have the right deal to take to them, they just flat out have heard bad things about working with women.

"But I have been really lucky because most of the guys I have been thrown together with have had a lot of respect for me, or have heard about me from guys I have raced against. Or, after a race or two they realize I am not about being a girl racer, I am there to compete and do whatever it takes. I think mechanics who have worked with women before feel they come in and blame the mechanic for everything that goes wrong on the track. And I think the reason most mechanics like me is that when I come off the track I blame me for everything that went wrong. I think it almost works like reverse psychology because they say; "No, no, it's not you. I can fix it or make it stop sooner or work better."

While recuperating from her injuries, Moore needed some sort of challenging diversion to take the place - temporarily - of being in a racecar. She found an outlet in the business of feeding people.

"My husband and I just opened a restaurant called Stormy's, here in Cornelius, North Carolina (www.stormysnc.com). I will always keep Dana Moore as my racing name but my new last name is Storms. The restaurant is something we are having a good time with. It is the craziest

and most difficult business to be in. I think the two hardest businesses are probably racing and operating a restaurant! I can never make things easy on myself. Who knows? Next I might decide to become an astronaut!

"I like things that challenge me. When I was laid up for a while, the restaurant was something that challenged me mentally. But now I am ready to get back into something that challenges me physically, which is racing."

Moore posted on the board because she feels this is, once again, her time to shine in a professional racing series. Her neck is healed and her heart is still pumping blood with a 101 octane rating so she is ready to get back out there and make more people take notice of her driving talents. We asked her where she wanted to be in the world of sportscar racing.

"My first choice would be the Grand Am Rolex cup series. My background is in GT racing and that is where I would love to be. Perhaps one day I will have a chance to run in a prototype but I couldn't go to a team today and claim I can race it. I think given time I could learn it but driving those cars is very similar to flying a plane and I don't know how to do either one yet!

"And when I look at my position now, where I am just getting back into it, I think the best thing for me right now is to get back into a GT car. I am comfortable with them and having set the Panoz Series track record at Road Atlanta tells me that I am good in those cars. And I feel very confident in that style of car."

And now that we have had the chance to talk with Dana Moore, we too feel confident we will see her behind the wheel of a Grand Am Cup car in the near future. The sport could always use another dynamic personality that will attract the fans and give the rest of the field a run for the checkered flag. Dana Moore has been the first to see that flag before, and she intends to be the first to see it yet again, and as often as she can.