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Through The Esses - Baldwin Is Back With RVO In GA, In A DP

11/15/06 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

When you look over race result sheets from the last 30+ years or so, there are some names that appear time and again. They are the names of the people who kept coming back at the competition race after race and season after season. And they appeared at or near the top of those sheets for so many years because their talent and competitive spirit never waned. They are the names of people who were always solidly in the race, carrying the determination to do whatever it takes to keep their names on top.



Photo courtesy of www.grandamerican.com

Of course, over 30 year's time some of the names begin to disappear from subsequent sheets. Time has a way of erasing the old to draw the new. But time does not erase every name. Some names are, well, timeless.

One of those names often found at the top of the results sheets is the same name that appears on the mail the post office delivers to Jack Baldwin's house in Georgia. Baldwin is a long time road racer with an extensive and extremely successful background in Trans Am, World Sports Car, Grand Am, IMSA and ALMS racing. His resume includes championships in Trans Am (1972), Formula Ford (1972), and in IMSA GTU where he was crowned season champion in both 1984 and 1985. He also spent several seasons running in prototypes owned by his long time friend, Texan George Robinson, the owner of the 74 Ranch Resort.

Baldwin collected 30 career wins in major races held in five different series. He won the grueling 12 hours of Sebring twice (1984 & 1997) and took home the GTU class win in the 1984 Daytona 24 Hours. He was elected to the 1992 American Auto Racing Writer's and Broadcasters Association All America Team and was invited to participate in the prestigious International Race of Champions (IROC) series in 1993 and 1994.

Jack Baldwin also holds a very unique record in sportscar racing. One most folks probably don't know about. He is the first driver in the modern era to complete every lap of every race in a championship season (1992). If that doesn't tell you about the man's competitive spirit and determination to put his name at the top of the results sheet than we don't know what will. Just

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ask the guys who raced against him when he ran in the Hot Wheels Camaro if you need further proof.

While Baldwin has been away from driving full time for a couple of years - he has been selective in his choice of races but has not stayed away from racing entirely - he is still actively involved in the sport. He is currently working as the Director of Motorsports Business Development for Mesco Building Solutions.

Baldwin recently participated in the Grand AM November test days at Daytona. He was there with long time friends Roger Schramm and Dave Watson, trying an almost-new RVO Motorsports Pontiac Riley Daytona Prototype on for size. Even at 56 years young, Baldwin found he still had something to learn. He learned that driving with and working with friends is still a great way to enjoy racing.

We asked him to tell us a bit about his new project and what sort of goals he and Schramm and Watson had set for the RVO Motorsports entry in the Grand Am Rolex Sports Car Series for 2007.

“The team is out of Rockford, Illinois. You might know the name Dave Watson. He was the first competition director for Grand Am and has been around the sport for a long time. He runs the team and Roger Schramm owns the team. RVO stands for Rock Valley Oil, Roger’s company.

“I’ve been working with Mesco Building Solutions. I am the Director of Motorsports Business Development. We have programs running in the Craftsman Truck Series, the Busch Series, and we sponsor the Rolex Series Rookie Of The Year Award.

“Mesco is a leader in the integrated metal building industry. We actually do a lot of car dealerships and strip malls and a lot of race shops. Mesco is a great company and we are looking for opportunities within the racing community. There are a lot of people in the sport who are developers and business people and this makes it fertile ground for Mesco.

“We do a lot of work with NASCAR teams. We have built shops, warehouses, industrial parks and hangars among other things. We are a manufacturer and we are involved with people who need workshops and buildings, like all the NASCAR shops.

“The advantage of metal buildings is that they go up fast, they have the ability to span great distances like you need for a race shop or a hangar, they are high quality, and they are relatively inexpensive compared to a brick and mortar structure. They are highly engineered and their appearance can be made to look like a conventional brick and mortar structure

“We at Mesco feel there is a great opportunity in motorsports to market our products. And we are pleased to be sponsors in NASCAR as well as the Rolex Sports Car Series.”

Baldwin will be working to help get the former Lowe’s sponsored Riley up to speed in 2007. Not that the team will be chasing any dreams of domination, but Baldwin says they intend to put a serious face on having fun.

Baldwin told us how the RVO program got started.

“Last year Roger called me asked me to come down to Daytona during test days and drive a Fabcar they had, with a Pontiac engine. The wanted to know what I thought of it because they were thinking maybe they could make some improvements to the car and create a competitive

effort. But things didn't work out the way they needed to. So the decision was made to stop that project, but at the same time Roger was still interested in running a car in the DP class.

"As the year went along we talked to several people and then the Adrian Fernandez cars became available. Being well aware of that team and that operation I knew they were going to be really nice cars to buy. After looking at the cars, Roger and Dave decided this was the opportunity they were looking for.

"Roger bought the whole team which included two cars, engines and spares. And the whole process of buying the team was great. Adrian Fernandez and Steve Miller were absolutely terrific and totally professional. They sold us two great cars.

"Our first real outing was at the recent Daytona test days. Now it's all about the team learning everything we can about the car and working on our execution as a team around the car. We are moving along real well. Everyone is happy with it."

Running the team means having a place to keep the car in top shape between races. Schramm didn't need to buy a place to keep his new cars, and he didn't need to labor too long over the choice of powerplant.

"Roger has a race shop up in Rockford, Illinois. When he bought these cars he already had the infrastructure in place. He was pleased a Pontiac was already in the car because he likes them and because RVO does business with the automotive industry so it was a good fit. Plus all of us have GM backgrounds so we were all comfortable with running a Pontiac engine."

Comfortable about sums up the way RVO is approaching this season in the autumn sun for a bunch of veteran racers.

"All the guys on the team are racers. They have all been in racing a long time. We are not doing it for the prize money; we are doing it for fun. And I don't mean we are taking this lightly. There is a lot of time and effort in this project. On the track, we intend to stand on it!"

To those who know Baldwin well, it is obvious he has high regard for the many friends he has made over the years. In the case of George Robinson, Baldwin ran in several 74 Ranch sponsored prototypes over five years with him, including time in one car that never really busted out of the pack and made a mark of its own.

"Remember the Riley MKIIIC prototype? Everybody bitched about it but I liked it! We had some work to do on it – and George still has it – but I have to say it was my favorite car to drive. It was an awesome car. We spent a lot of time developing it and then the rules changed so people never really got to see all the work we put into it. It was a great car.

"Actually, I've liked every Riley I've ever driven. I never drove one that wasn't good."

Baldwin is looking forward to enjoying his ride in a Riley once again. After a long and fruitful career – that saw his name high on the sheets time and time again - he isn't out to prove anything to anyone except himself.

"After all these years, I'm just looking forward to doing some good hard racing. I think it's time to have a little fun.

"I'm real pleased to be back behind the wheel and to be with Mesco. I love driving. The competition in Grand Am is real tight. There are lots of cars. It's not perfect, but nothing is. At least you don't have the haves and have-nots, per se. I mean, there are teams that will always get more out of things than others. But you don't walk over to another car and say 'why can't I buy one of those'? or say 'why can't I have those tires?'; or why can't I have this or that'? Everybody has the same cars and motors to choose from.

"And the cars are fun to drive. Are they blinding fast like the open cars were? No, but you know what, it's all relative. They are fun to drive. Heck, any car you drive at 10/10ths is hard. Any car, when you start to push to get everything out of it, the degree of difficulty goes up. I think our Riley has a pretty large sweet spot which makes it fun to drive. You feel like you can trust the car and when I get out of it I tell myself how much I enjoyed driving it.

"At the test days I think we were about mid-pack. Not bad for the first time out. After all, it is a tough crowd. We learned a lot and like I told Roger, 'How many laps have you had lately? How many do you think Scott Pruett's got?' You think he has put about 20,000 miles on it?' I said to him this is the first time we had the car and the first time you are sitting down with the laptop and looking at what the car is doing. If you put it all in perspective the car never missed a lick, we had no mechanical problems. It has just been a joy. We're in the game, we love the car, and we are learning all about the car."

Baldwin's name on all those result sheets means he has been out there, in front of the fans, putting his best into every race. And he appreciates the many fans that know his name well and still look up to him for his competitive spirit and his amply demonstrated talent behind the wheel. Without question he is one of the most respected and popular drivers at the track.

"I have to say I really appreciate it when fans come up to me at the track. I've seen some of them grow up and it's just real nice. I get letters from their parents and everything. I just feel really blessed that I can still be part of it all.

Baldwin will probably have many opportunities to see his competitors in his mirrors. We wondered who else might be sharing that view with him, other than Schramm.

"We don't have our driver line up in place for Daytona yet. We are talking to a bunch of people and we just don't know yet. We aren't in any great hurry to make that decision.

"The plan is, Roger and I are going to run most of the races in 2007. Which races hasn't been decided yet, but we aren't out for a championship. Nobody is trying to set the world on fire. This is not a team where you want to look to build a career. This is a team of mature guys who have been racing for years and just want to go out there and compete and enjoy it. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to come back and be a part of it."

And we are sure the fans are equally thrilled to have Jack Baldwin back on the track as well. And it's a reasonable bet that anyone looking to get around him will have to earn their way past. At the very least, we can expect to find his name on the results sheets yet again. And that is about time.

