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Through The Esses - Bob Miller Is At Speed In Motorsports

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As we were getting ready for our annual trek to the Rolex 24, we checked the entry list and found there were no less than 44 cars entered in the GT class. As we made our way down the list of team names we came across a name that was not familiar to us. We decided to find out who they were and what they had planned for 2007. The team is At Speed Motorsports, and we soon learned they will be running at least one, and possibly two, Porsche 997 GT3 Cup cars for the full season.



Bob Miller is the owner of this race team that has been steadily climbing up the ranks of the professional road racing ladder. In just a few years time they have moved up from Porsche Club events to the SPEED World Challenge series and now into the Grand Am Rolex Series GT class.

Operating out of a 12,000 square foot shop in Maryland, At Speed was the first team to bring auto maker Volvo into the professional racing scene in the United States. While that effort has since been handed off, the team hasn't had much time to lament the loss of the unlikely passenger cars they converted – virtually from scratch - into successful race cars. After several seasons of running in the SPEED World Challenge and proving they had what it takes to create a winning car, they are about to embark on a whole new direction in a new series. At Speed Motorsports has been busy preparing for what they hope will become a breakout year for the team.

Miller filled us in on the background of At Speed Motorsports and how he came to form the company that would allow him to pursue a passion he discovered later on in life than most other professional racers.

“At Speed started back in 1997. It started because I decided, after dreaming of it for years, to try my hand at pursuing a career in professional racing. I came out of undergrad at William & Mary and went right into a position in strategic marketing consulting. I worked for a few years and then I got kind of cocky and decided I was smarter than the guy I worked for. Three other guys and I started our own company and systematically put our previous employer out of business

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over the ensuing year. I guess our cockiness paid off. Then, it was off to grad school in business...again, nothing to do with motorsports.

“But I had always thought that I wanted to race...although I really knew nothing about it. And I certainly didn't have the right last name. I mean, I wasn't an Andretti or someone born into a racing family. One day in 1996, when I was 28 years old, a friend of mine suggested I take my street Porsche to a Porsche club event and see what racing a car was all about. I went around the race track with an instructor alongside and did about 5 laps. When we pulled into the pits he seemed to be impressed when he said, “OK...so how long have you been racing?” I said, ‘About eight minutes!’

“He encouraged me to consider taking up driving. Now, when you get that kind of encouragement from someone who knows about racing, you just have to go forward. But I quickly realized I didn't have the funding to go racing so I applied everything I had learned in marketing and consulting and decided I would run my racing program as a business. At Speed Motorsports was born to address that objective.”

While kicking off his career much later than the kids who kart first and cash in later as young adults, Miller was determined to find the right path to success. Of course, as the saying goes, ‘every journey starts with one step’ but for Miller, the question was ‘which way do I start walking?’

With a friend, he set his sights on starting down several paths, looking for the right one to take to make his dream of competing as a professional a reality.

“My friend Paul Amico has been with me and At Speed Motorsports since the beginning. He and I did some Skip Barber races, and we ran a Dodge Neon in SCCA, and we also did some Porsche Club races as well. Around 1999 we decided to step up our game and so we went out and found some sponsors. And this was at the club level which was pretty much unheard of at the time. Back then we had companies like FORD Excursion, The Net Investor, and some high level financial groups that recognized the demographics and psychographics of my program as being a very strong potential ROI to their marketing investments.”

Gaining momentum with respectable driving performances, Miller decided to step up to a higher playing field in 2000.

“We entered the SPEED World Challenge series in 2000. We bought a car and had it flown into Dulles International shortly before the Lime Rock race. The car arrived on a Thursday and we were up at Lime Rock with it on Friday. It was a used Porsche Cup car and I had never even driven it before, let alone been to the track. That weekend we managed to place 16th overall. Then we did two more World Challenge events that year.”

Soon thereafter, Millers marketing proficiency would come to pay off in a big way.

“Later on in the 2000 season I signed Rogaine on as a sponsor for the following season. With them as our backer, we launched a full out campaign in 2001. We sold the car we ran in 2000 and bought another used Porsche for the 2001 season and were off and rolling.

“To help with the name recognition for the brand, I created the Rogaine “Hair Raising” Pass Of The Day award in the World Challenge. It was an interesting program and we quickly learned to utilize models and a wine tasting booth set up in our paddock to increase fan attention. We had contests and fun things for the fans to do at every event. It was immensely successful for

Rogaine. But at this point we were still under funded. It was the Bob Miller Home Equity Line of credit that kept us going.

“We would look across the paddock and see teams running with million dollar budgets. But we didn’t do too badly overall. We won Rookie of the Year, we had a best finish of 5th, and we ended up 9th overall in the points.

“Rogaine came back for 2002. But at this point we were running a two year old car. We didn’t have the funding to buy a new car and that year we really learned the value of having the best equipment. It was astounding that guys we were running with and beating the year before were now showing up with brand new cars and running a second and a half faster than we were. We started scratching our heads and wondering ‘what happened to Bob?’”

Jokes about his driving aside, At Speed soon learned the truth behind the statement, ‘hair today, gone tomorrow’. (Sorry about the pun.)

“That year we ended up 10th overall and then Pharmacia sold out Pfizer – the parent company of Rogaine. The new owners came to me and said they loved my program but they were spending \$25 million with Mark Martin so my support was going away. At Speed Motorsports essentially disappeared overnight.”

Miller’s now-bald checking account meant he had to once again look for new sponsorship. He found it in the land of blondes and sturdy cars. That is, he swung the Swedes over to his cause.

“I continued to look for new sponsorship when, in November of 2003 I landed the Volvo program. I met directly with Vic Doolen, the CEO of Volvo Cars North America and convinced him of why he should pursue motorsports as a marketing tool, and why it made sense for Volvo’s more progressive image. He loved the idea and basically pushed all the buttons to come through with sponsorship about six weeks after we talked.

“That program saw us expanding our operations tremendously. We were literally building new cars out of thin air! We were the first people to bring Volvo to professional racing in North America, with the S60R model. They delivered four Volvo street cars to our shop and we dismantled them to convert them into race cars. We ended up creating and running two prototypes in 2004.”

Getting the street cars to be reborn as race cars was not at all as easy as say, converting a Porsche street car to a race car. No, Miller found out real fast that parts for Volvo race cars were as hard to find as ice cubes in the summertime, in the teeming jungles of the Amazon rain forest.

“What we found really interesting is, we were coming out of running a Porsche where you might complain about the price of parts but at least you could pick up the phone and order what you needed. With the Volvo, we literally created every single part out of thin air. It was an amazing undertaking. The parts didn’t exist anywhere on the planet. In time, what started out to become a dream come true instead became a ‘holy #\$%^’ situation! I had a lot of sleepless nights and I think my blood pressure went up about 100 points during that first year!”

Those weren’t exactly championship points he was racking up, so Miller knew it would take quite some doing to bring to life a race car that had no history and, early on at least, didn’t seem to have much of a future either. The engineers at Volvo Sweden didn’t even seem to think that his vision could be accomplished.

“Volvo gave us financial support, but their engineers told us we could not get 500 horsepower out of their 2.5 Liter engines. They told us there was no way we could use their drive train components. But we worked with Cosworth and Xtrac and literally redesigned everything, building custom components that could handle the power.

“In 2004 we ran three races and were way off the pace! I decided late that season to pull the program out of Florida where it was based, and move it up to Maryland, where I live. Then, we decided to completely redesign the car. We got four new bodies from Volvo and in the course of three months – from about December until early March of 2005 – we totally redesigned the car from electrics to bodywork, cage to brakes...you name it.

“We then debuted a brand new prototype at Sebring and came out of the box by winning the Hard Charger award. All of a sudden we had a car that was capable.”

The transformation from a lump of Swedish steel to polished racecar was fueled in great measure by Miller’s determination. But he also had some pretty effective help along the way, enlisting one of the sport’s most historic drivers, and later, one of its most effective, to push the Volvo all the way to the front of the pack.

“Derek Bell and I raced against each other a lot in 2002, mostly because of my superior car and his superior capabilities. When you drive next to somebody through the kink at Road America and you both get through without touching or running the other off the track, it creates some level of camaraderie. I think Derek appreciated the way I drove and the fact that I was not dirty in any way. We just had good battles with each other.

“At the end of the 2002 season I asked him, ‘If I ever get a program up and running would you drive with me?’ and he said, ‘Absolutely! I would love to drive with you.’ One of the things I presented to Volvo was Derek’s participation in the program. I presented him as an internationally recognized star of racing and an ambassador unlike almost anyone else in the sport. Derek has since become a very good friend of mine. He is an amazing guy to have as part of a development program and Volvo just loved the idea.”

Once the new Volvo cars became a reality, Miller had to work his way through the labyrinth of racing politics and rules massaging that the World Challenge series is noted for. With the first new car ready to go, At Speed put the car on the track but failed to attract the kind of attention needed to win some concessions from the rules makers.

“What we needed to do was to get the officials to realize the potential of our car so we could get a few breaks to help move us closer to the front. I had been asking for breaks and they were countering that I had a young driver in one car and a veteran who simply wasn’t the fastest guy around anymore. I decided I needed to put someone in the car that was recognized as being among the fastest in the country. Even Derek recommended I do this to legitimize our efforts. I asked Michael Galati to drive the car for a race or two to show the officials just what the car could do.

“It worked, as Mike and Derek switched places for a bit and I think our top finish that year was 5th overall. All of a sudden the car woke up and was showing the world it was capable...but needed some concessions.”

Having survived the loss of Rogaine and the trials of endurance and stamina brought on by building race cars out of passenger cars, At Speed looked set to begin their ascension into the top level of sportscar racing.

That is, until the Swedes decided to withdraw their Kronas from the At Speed account.

“Just when we were making some real progress, Vic Doolen the CEO of Volvo retired. The new CEO walked in and immediately said, ‘Volvo has nothing to do with racing. We build carriers of groceries and golden retrievers.’ So our funding was cut at the end of the 2005 season. It was way too late to find sponsors for 2006 so we put the cars up for sale.”

Most folks know that, generally speaking, a used Volvo is a good car to buy. But a used Volvo race car?

“A gentleman came along who said he really wanted to see the cars run. I convinced him that running one car would be the best way to go as the cars are expensive and difficult. He brought in some funding and we found some other sponsorship and that is how we were able to run in 2006. We ran one Volvo and one Porsche GT3 Cup. I drove the Porsche and Paul Gerrard and Michael Galati drove the Volvo. Success!! We had a first place finish at Mosport and actually lapped the entire field except for one car! We also finished third at Mid Ohio.

“However, we got to the point financially where we could not take the Volvos to the next step, and that has always been my goal. As with a child, I think I potentially need to let them go to a new home.

“At the end of the year we put Randy Pobst in the Porsche and he finished the year for us by winning at Laguna Seca. That win clinched the manufacturer’s championship for Porsche.”

When the season closed, once again At Speed and Bob Miller found they were going to have to start over. This time though, they decided it was time to try yet another path.

“For 2007 we will be running in the Grand Am Rolex GT series. Ian Baas will be driving with me in a 997 GT3 Cup Porsche (# 28). We are also looking for funding to run a second car this season. And getting back behind the wheel, running with Ian in Grand Am, really brings me back to the passion I had to go racing in the first place.”

Miller feels that the costs to race in this series, because of the longer events requiring co-drivers, will be somewhat easier to address.

“The costs to race in this series can be split amongst the team, the sponsors we find on our own, and drivers who bring sponsorship with them. Theoretically, it is cheaper to run Grand Am than it is World Challenge.

“When I look at both series you have to note the differences. Grand Am, for instance, is marketed much better but they tended to race by themselves. World Challenge isn’t marketed nearly at all and yet they run with bigger series like CART or ALMS. In essence, by moving to Grand Am we are stepping up to a much larger series and a more capable series that is essentially saying we don’t need anyone else. We can stand on our own.

“There is a double edge sword to that. If I were consulting to Grand Am I would tell them they are almost there but they should run with somebody else for one more year. Run with NASCAR or CART or the IRL. And it seems they are going to do just that this year. This year they have

one race with IRL and NASCAR and three races with World Challenge and others. It should be a phenomenal year.”

At Speed Motorsports will start their journey down yet another new path on January 27th when they will go head to head against 43 other GT cars in the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona. Surely their first step in this journey will be their biggest yet.