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Through The Esses - Dominic Cicero – A Difficult Past And A Bright Future

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At the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona last week, we met a young man named Dominic Cicero. He was there to drive the #57 Stevenson Motorsports Corvette along with Marc Bunting, Lou Gigliotti and James Gue. The brand new Crawford-built GT car made it through the entire race, with some to-be-expected teething pains putting them in for repairs several times.

Cicero is just 26 years old, but he has already experienced the pain of severe loss, and tasted the life of a European racer, and established a reputation 'over there' as a true racing talent. And now he has landed a season long ride with Johnny Stevenson in the Corvette, running in the Grand-Am Rolex Sports car Series.



Photo By Molly Hammond



Andrew S. Hartwell / ashautomobilia.com

Growing up in Vancouver, Washington, Cicero first became aware of racing through old photos his parents showed him. Little did they know that initial exposure would have a profound impact on their young son – their only child. And little did Dominic Cicero know that his time with his parents would be tragically cut short, just as he was beginning to make his mark in the racing world.

While his story of coming up through the ranks from karting upwards is, in outline form, not too different from that of many other young racers, his tale took several dark turns that many of his peers can only be thankful they too did not have to endure. We think his story will provide our readers with an understanding of how committed this young man is to establishing his own identity within the racing community, which has become, in an abstract way, his replacement family.

We asked Cicero to tell us about his start in racing and how some of the events of his life played out as he moved from boyhood to an accelerated pace into adulthood.

"I grew up in Vancouver, Washington and I still live here. I started having an interest in racing when I saw pictures of my dad who raced karts before I was born. I started in karts myself when I was eight years old. I ran local and regional races as well as the Nationals in California. I even made it to the finals my first year. Overall, I won three national championships in karting.

"My parents were very supportive of my racing efforts. We traveled a lot. My mother, father and I were on the road something like 30 weekends a year. But my parents insisted that if I wanted to keep going with karts I had to stay on the honor roll in school and I had to work on the kart myself. I was busy enough that I couldn't get into trouble!

"I stayed in karting until I was sixteen and then I went to the Skip Barber Racing School. Not too much came of it though because, after a successful class, they complemented me on my talent, patted me on the head, and basically told me 'good luck'."

Luck would prove to be an intermittent ally, and at times, a cruelly absent one.

"One of my friends, John Bender, was racing in Europe around the time I finished up with Barber. He went to the Elf Winfield Racing School in France so I went overseas to check it out. I wound up winning the Pilote Elf Scholarship and spending my senior in France where I drove for Elf. The series was called Formula Campus. They had all sorts of trainers and support people. I was always surrounded by people who had the right work ethic. Patrick Friesacher, Sebastian Bourdais, Frank Montagne and Henri Pescarolo were all involved in the Elf team at the time.

"Back then, I saw the Elf series as my only chance to make it in racing. My mom had been diagnosed with cancer and she passed away in 1997. The expenses left us totally broke. We didn't have any money so racing in Europe with the scholarship was the only way to stay involved in the sport.

"And while I was in Europe, my dad developed cancer too.

"When dad was sick he wasn't making any money. I got in a half a season over there but I had to come home early to take care of my dad. He had started an espresso business called Latte Limo and I worked there for a while. After the season, Elf called me and they asked me to come back and run with them in Formula 3 but it would have cost around \$80,000 so I could not do that. I was basically just about ready to give up on racing when someone from Forsythe Racing called the guys at Winfield. I was invited to test in a Formula Ford 2000, with John Baytos from Van diemen to see how quick I was.

"Before I left I met this guy named Craig, who wanted to help me out from the PR side. At the test I was really quick and I thought I had made a good impression. Then Craig suggested I run in this professional kart race to stay in shape. When I did, I got into a really bad accident. I had to be airlifted out of the track. I was given last rites on the way to the hospital. I wound up being in a coma for a month and a half.

"Before I came out of it John Baytos called my dad, who by this time was really sick, and said he had a ride for me. But I wasn't really in any condition to even know I was being offered a ride! My dad told him I couldn't let him know because I was still in a coma!

"When I finally came out of the coma I went through rehab. As I was getting better, my dad's condition worsened until he finally passed away in 2002."

Dominic Cicero, the only child, was now alone. He no longer had supportive parents to be there for him. He would have to find his own way now. And that is exactly what he did, although the path he took was anything but a straight one.

“Just before my dad passed, I went to work for Skip Barber as an instructor. I worked at Laguna, Sebring and Road America, and I did a lot of corporate stuff for them. This kept me involved in the sport, even though I wasn’t actually racing. My dad even said to me it is good to at least be in a place surrounded by racing people.

“After my dad passed, Craig continued to help me out. He brought out a bunch of his clients and two of them agreed to fund my racing in the Renault Series in Europe. That went pretty well but they didn’t want to fund the whole season there so I did some karting events to keep myself in shape.

“The next year I did a full season of Fran Am in the US. We did pretty well including a win at Mexico City and a bunch of top 5 finishes. I considered running in Formula Atlantic but it was simply too expensive so I decided it would be better for me to go back to Europe. But my sponsor didn’t want to cover me while running over there. I wasn’t sure what I would do. And then my buddy bought me a ticket to Europe and said to me, ‘go over there and make something happen’.

“I went to the Autosport show in England and reconnected with some people I knew there from the company called Credit Suisse. They had been watching my racing in Europe and they put me together with Team Jenzer. That was a cool team too and again I found I was surrounded by good people.

“I later met with a manager for a Formula One team and around this time the sponsor I had before came back on board. Credit Suisse called him and said to give me a shot. Credit Suisse helped me with a lot of the things I needed to learn about. But after half a season running the Renault 6, the sponsor pulled out again because his business wasn’t doing so well.”

Again young Cicero’s foundation had crumbled around him. But this determined young man had lived through too much to not want to keep moving closer to his dream.

“I came back to the states and the sponsor – West Race Cars – hired me to help them develop cars. I raced in the runoffs for them and later ran four races in a Daytona Prototype that was painted in the old Gulf racing colors. I teamed with Chad McQueen in that car.”

(McQueen was badly hurt in an accident last year and has been recuperating from life threatening injuries.)

“Chad is a real good guy. I keep in touch with him every month. You know, I just saw him at Daytona riding around in a golf cart. He and I can relate to one another really well because we both had serious accidents and he had to have a tracheotomy as I did, and he had damage to his lungs, as I did. We had injuries in common and he would sometimes ask me if some of what he was going through in recovery was normal.”

The Westernesse Racing Daytona Prototype project fell apart when the money ran out. Cicero could sense the end was near and so, once again, this plucky lad took his destiny into his own hands.

“The whole Westernesse experience just kind of turned sour so I broke away from that and headed to Phoenix International Raceway for the Grand-Am race. I started talking to all the people there. I talked with the Crawford’s and some others and they knew what I was capable of from the races we had with the DP. They knew the car I was in was probably not the best prepared car to be driving but I was getting good results. They saw there was some talent there.

“My motor guy, John Maddox, helped me out by introducing me to a lot of people. I’m kind of shy and not so good at that. John got me to open up a little bit. Whenever I could get up enough money to go to a race that year, I would hang with John.”

We asked how Cicero sustained himself during this time of little prospects but huge desire.

“One of my buddies from Skip Barber started a non-profit organization that teaches kids how to drive safely. It’s called Drivers Edge. I worked with him - and still do - giving lectures and making slide presentations and so on. It’s very hands on for them; they are sliding the car and learning a lot. I also did some work for different companies like Apex and Design Drive?”

This season could be the one that puts Dominic Cicero’s name on the lips of many an American sportscar racing fan. Johnny Stevenson has, in one respect at least, ‘adopted’ Cicero by signing him to a season long deal to race the #57 Corvette in the Grand-Am Rolex Series.

We asked how the two men came to meet.

“When I came back from Europe a few years ago, we rented Johnny Stevenson’s Porsche for the race at California Speedway. Chad and I ran together with another guy. We qualified the car fourth and finished the race. I crashed the car because a bolt fell out of the steering assembly. Johnny was mad obviously, because he thought I made a mistake and was going to have to pay for the repairs. But once he realized the car had failed, we started talking and things turned out alright.

“At VIR in 2005, Johnny rented one of the BlackForest Mustangs and he needed a teammate so we got together. I coached him that weekend and we actually cut some time off his lap times. We hit it off really well but he wasn’t ready to go with any kind of long term program so I was back to looking for a ride.”

Cicero was about to feel the warmth that lady luck is known to be capable of spreading around to signal the end of a period of little success. We refer to the form of luck or fate that brings good people together at a time when both could use some help.

“In 2006, I ran a few long races with Johnny in his Tommy Riggins-built Corvette. When he knew he was going to get the second car (built by Crawford Race Cars) for this year he asked me to join his team for the full season. I can’t tell you how much weight is off my shoulders to have this opportunity! When I did land rides in the past, they were never guaranteed. There was always the issue of sponsorship or the team running out of money and so on. I know that there is no question with Johnny. I love the way he does business and I trust him. Working with him is just such a different environment than what I have been used to.

“He doesn’t put pressure on me to not crash the car or do this or that. He just tells me to go out there and do my best. The guys on the team are so much behind me. They work so hard on the car and you can see they are supporting me. I’ve never been on a team like that before.”

And Cicero believes that this could be the season that moves him up the racing ladder and into the spotlight as a talented driver. He is looking forward to a run at the GT class championship for 2007.

“Once we get some testing under our belt we should do really well. We are so close to getting the best out of this car.

“I would like to build a good reputation here in the United States. Johnny told me he wants to put me in a spot where I can show people that I am quick. So I see the next few years as building years for me. While I did once have ideas of running in Formula One, I think it is too political and I am not into that. I just want to drive and show people how well I can do.

“I really need to win some races and most importantly, a championship. All my prior years were kind of chopped up affairs. I need to use this opportunity Johnny has given me to show what I am capable of.

“I also feel that having Marc Bunting – a two time champion – as a co-driver is just fantastic. We get along really well and we enjoy talking. That is something that just doesn’t happen in Europe. The drivers don’t even talk to members of the team! You are viewed as just being there to do a job.

“I have found that sportscar racing is a much friendlier atmosphere. People are gentlemen and we talk with everyone, even our competitors and people on other teams. I’m just getting used to that now and I like it.

“The last couple of years have forced me to grow up pretty quick. But I think everything happens for a reason. The guy who helped me with PR stuff in Europe asked me once if I ever surfed. He said life is like the ocean in that sometimes you are at the bottom of a wave and sometimes you are on top. And no matter how many times you are at the bottom another wave will come along and you will be right back on top. Right now, I am riding on the top of the wave and I don’t ever want to fall off!”

Somehow we doubt that Johnny Stevenson would let his young charge slip back into the ocean. In fact, we think the Cicero-Bunting-Stevenson Corvette combination will turn more than a few heads this season. Dominic Cicero would like to think his contributions to the team’s efforts will play a part in garnering that attention. We have an idea that they will.

