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Through The Esses - Edd Davin Plans His Return To A Racing Life

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If you are a fan of prototype sportscar racing, and have been enjoying the sport for the last two decades or so, you probably know the name Edd Davin. If you are one of the new generation of fans drawn into watching this sport by the close racing action found in the Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series, you may soon have the opportunity to become very familiar with the name Edd Davin.



Andrew S. Hartwell / ashautomobilia.com

From his teens onward, Davin raced in SCCA events and then moved into the professional ranks with wheel time in the Formula Continental and Formula Super-Vee series. He later moved into GT racing and ran in IMSA races in the 1980's and early 1990's. He sort-of wrapped up his early career in the late 1990's with time spent driving open-top prototypes in the series from which the Grand-Am Rolex Series was spawned – the short-lived, second generation of the United States Road Racing Championship.

We say sort-of wrapped up his career because he suffered a setback that put him on the sidelines for four years. A setback his doctors told him was destined to put him on the sidelines of life in 10 months time.

Davin recently announced he is bringing a new 'old' team into the Grand-Am Rolex Series this season. He has a powerful new sponsor, a new lease on life, some old friends, and soon, an almost new Crawford race car that he plans to mix into one potent and competitive team. And he has a five year plan to put that team right into podium contention and keep it there.

For the benefit of the newer fans, and for those older ones (like us) who seem to remember less of life's details with each passing year, we asked Davin to recap his history for us, and then tell us more about his future plans.

"I grew up in Atlantic City where I was raised by my grandparents and my aunt. My aunt was a professional baseball player in the women's league during World War II. She was also heavy into cars and she got me working on cars when I was just a little kid. She encouraged my mechanical background.

"Across the street from us was a man who was in the military and who rode his motorcycle back and forth to Fort Dix. One day coming home he had a bad accident. He had a sprint car and a stock car that I had been helping him work on. The accident left him paralyzed and, when I was just 14 years old, he asked me to drive his dirt-track sprint car. That was my first time driving a race car and that really sparked my interest in becoming a racing driver. In fact, that is really what I have been doing my whole life."

Like many a man (and woman) with a big heart for racing, but an empty wallet, Davin had to work his way through his racing life, finding ways to make money to spend on his goal to become a professional racing driver.

"I basically went to school or college. Whenever I had money I would go racing. When I didn't I would go back to school. I eventually got a degree in Mechanical Engineering and a Masters in Aeronautical Engineering. But I would pick up little jobs here and there, pretty much as I have done ever since, just picking up enough money to continue racing.

"I chased around in a bunch of production cars, running in various SCCA classes. I finally came to realize I might be better off in open wheel formula cars. I went to the basic SCCA driving school and later went through Bill Scott's school. That was when I first met Tom Milner. He was working with Scott at the time. I worked my way along in the SCCA and wound up driving in the Super Vee and Formula Atlantic series. All this time I was still living with my grandparents."

Davin found that he had the talent to run with the top drivers. This too convinced him his life would simply have to be spent in the racing game.

"I did pretty well in the SCCA. I won a championship in Formula Continental and won several races. I raced with guys like Bob Lazier, Bobby Rahal, and Howdy Holmes. I have always managed to be competitive in whatever class I drove in. I later moved on to the IMSA GT series and wherever I could land a ride."

Lack of funding hampered Davin throughout his career. Running without a solid foundation of spending cash meant he often had to make do with what someone else had run before; sometimes, way before. One ride came in the form of a converted GTP car. It may not have been as exotic as a Ferrari 333SP, or as up to date a model as what the competition was driving, but it was a prototype and it was on the grid in a top line prototype series.

"In 1997 I ran an Argo chassis that had the roof removed to make it into an open-top prototype. It was originally a closed cockpit car that ran in the GTP days. I ran that in the World Sports Car series and it was 13 years older than any other car in the class! We got it with the roof removed and we made some changes to the nose and the wings and did a lot of work on that car. It was powered by a 12 cylinder BMW engine. We just ran it that one year and then switched over to a Kudzu for 1998. We finished 8th in the championship in 1997, the highest placed non-factory supported race team.

"Usually I had to make do with equipment that may not have been as good as the competition. But I would always look to make changes or modify the car, especially the wings and suspension pieces. I always felt that I could take a car that may not have been the latest and

greatest model out there – maybe a car that was four or five years old – and change it around to make it as good as the latest model. I would look at the suspension, for example, and think about how I could make it more adjustable or change the caster or camber and so on. It was the same with wings. I have made enough wings in the past to build a 747 jet!

“We also ran the Can Am series in one of its many iterations, when they were breaking off from IMSA. This is when the ‘new’ United States Road Racing Championship was running. Of course, that later became the Grand American Road Racing Association and the Rolex Sportscar Series.”

And Davin’s plans today are focused on getting a new Pontiac-Crawford Daytona Prototype into the Grand-Am series sometime between now and April. For several years though, it seemed his next race would be run among the clouds above.

“For months now we have been chasing sponsors. I have been on a mission to get back into a race car. I was forced to take a hiatus due to medical issues. Most companies shied away from me because I had a serious bout with cancer. The doctors had given me just 10 months to live. They wouldn’t even operate on me because they didn’t want to put me through all the agony and pain when I had only months to live. They did a lot of tests and then finally decided they would give surgery a try. Well I tricked them and continued to live!

“They wound up taking out my left kidney and one of my ribs. They also removed four tumors, one the size of a softball, one the size of a golf ball and two smaller ones. Well, that kind of put me back a bit. When you start chasing sponsors you have to prove to them that you are capable of driving a race car. This was from about 2001 to 2005 and during that four year period I wasn’t driving, but I was still involved somewhat in racing. I was helping other folks with design work and coaching and so on.

“Today I am 100% and feeling great. I am probably better off right now than I was when I was a teenager. I am six feet and a half inch tall and I weigh 155 pounds. I ride my bicycle 10 miles a day. I exercise for over an hour every morning. Physically I am probably in better shape now than I was as a teenager. My son and I can go at it right now and I know I can lick him!”

While Davin feels he can now take on any comer, he intends to put that renewed vigor into racing against, and beating, some of the toughest competition he will ever have faced on a race track. And now that he has a primary sponsor to back him, he intends to reward their support with a focused approach to racing within a series he feels best addresses his and his sponsors interests. That sponsor is the Nitro Beverage Company.

“Nitro Beverages took a foray into the Craftsman Truck Series last year. I’m not sure if they were pleased or not with that arrangement but I convinced them we could give them better coverage. If we take a \$3 million dollar budget, and look at IRL, or NASCAR, or ALMS or Grand-Am or other series, and ask where we can get the best use of that money, and not just race but be competitive, the rules in Grand-Am make it possible for anybody to succeed. If you put enough care into the car, and set it up and drive it properly, you have every bit of a chance to be competitive or win as everyone else in the series. That may not be the case in other series. That’s why we chose Grand-Am, because of the rules structure. Nobody can say they have the trick car of the week. It also has a good television contract and they are working under a sound business plan.

“When Grand-Am first started it wasn’t so important to them to get fans in the seats. It was more important to get a quality product to put in front of the fans. That is what brings the fans and the television audience. Just look at the sponsors who are in the Grand-Am right now. That business plan they developed has provided the groundwork for this series to build on.

“When we approached Nitro they said, ‘OK, you put out the business plan and tell us how we can make our business grow and you will have a deal’. We did just that and right before the Rolex 24, Lowell Moore, the CEO of Nitro Beverage and one of the partners in this, Deion Sanders, the football player, said they thought we had the kind of program they wanted to see.

“They are planning to give this effort 100% support. I am already talking with their distributors and retailers. They are developing point of sale materials and static displays of the race car. They are going to do television commercials. They already have some ideas about a commercial with Deion Sanders, perhaps for March. They are going to market the heck out of their beverage line. They have a Sanders signature drink they call ‘PrimeTime’. They also have a standard and a sugar-free Nitro beverage. They are really going to push their products. They currently sell in seven states and it is my job to help them bring that product to the national market, as well as Canada and Mexico and Europe.”

Vast exposure for the sponsor will mean that a vast investment in time and a commitment to excellence must be put forward by Davin and his race team. Davin outlined for us who the key players would be and he gave us some insight into the team’s current status and his approach for putting a competitive entry in the field.

“I have a small shop today, but contractors are building us a new 15,000 square foot shop here in the Virginia Beach, Virginia area. We don’t have the car in our possession right now. I talked to Max Crawford about how long it would take to get a new car but we decided to go looking for an existing car. Right now we are talking to a few people. We are in the price stage of the conversation. We think we are just a few weeks away from owning a car.

“We plan to run with Pontiac power. After talking with Max about it we decided to go with basically the same package he runs with in the Howard Motorsports / Crawford car. We also have worked out a deal with Fikse wheels and we may use the new style wheels that they had at Daytona. We are going to basically mimic what Crawford has done with his team.

“The team consists of Wayne Thompson, who used to work with Ricky Rudd in NASCAR. Wayne and I first worked together in 1997. Wayne will be the crew chief. My son Scott is up in Indianapolis right now working on an Indy Car program. He will be working on the car as our lead mechanic. Joanne Pruett – my wife – is going to do our PR work. Tom Hraynyk is going to be our tech man. We have two other positions to fill. We need one for shock work and data acquisition, and we need one more mechanic.”

Grand-Am is allowing the current constructors to submit new body designs for the 2008 season. We have heard some potential buyers of Daytona Prototypes have taken a ‘wait and see’ attitude – to the detriment of the builders – rather than place an order for a current model car. Davin has taken a more aggressive tack, putting the value of on-track experience ahead of concerns about potential design improvements.

“We aren’t concerned about using an existing car when the body styles could be changed for 2008. I feel like we can go with an existing car and update the equipment as we have to. It is more important to us to get out on the track and do some testing than it is to sit back and wait to

see what the next car looks like. Our approach is to get out there and see how we do and then think about changes we might need to make later on. “

Davin has set an ambitious schedule for this new program.

“We are hoping to be up and running by the Miami race this season. We feel like we have about two months of work to do to get ready for that race. That is really what we have marked on the calendar as our goal.

“As for co-drivers, we haven’t made any decisions yet. I’ve been talking to people I know and respect in racing. I also want to talk to a few that I have met casually, but know about. I hope to find someone who fits with my driving style. I am actually trying to convince one man – someone who has been in the sport for years and is well known to the fans – to come and drive with me. I consider him to be one of the finest people in the sport of racing. He is someone I would trust with my life. But I don’t know if I can win him over.”

Whoever Davin signs on as his co-driver will be part of what is expected to be a five year program in a series that promises continued growth.

“I have a five year plan for this program. I would like, at some point, to fold in a young driver who hasn’t had a break to get into a top car. I would like to bring them along to take over the driving duties. I mean, I am looking to race forever! But, I do have one of two ways I want to die; I want to be sitting in a race car and just slump over with a heart attack. The other way is to get shot by a jealous husband, when I am 99 years old!

“I do know for sure that I plan to drive for five more years. Beyond that, I expect there will be some young driver with the skills, ability and right mindset that I can help out. But first we have to get this thing established and get out on the track. We are not going into this just to fill the grid. It has to be a competitive program both on the race track and in terms of satisfying our partners. A good first season would be to finish in the top 10 and run each race competitively. By the end of the year we would like to have a podium finish.”

At an age when many would be thinking about winding down a career, Davin finds he is instead getting all wound up.

“I am more excited about this than I can verbalize. I have changed in the last few years. I used to have to control everything. I was a real bad control freak. My life experiences have taught me that I not only have to accomplish things, I have to appreciate having accomplished them. Each and every thing I do now has much more meaning than it used to. I appreciate everything that happens now. For example, I not only appreciate that I bolted something together, I appreciate how it was able to go together at all. Most of the folks around me tell me I am a lot easier to get along with than I ever was before.”

New and old fans alike can rest assured that Edd Davin plans to carry on his passion to drive in a top line race series, with a competitive car and team. He says he is in great shape, and has a long way to go to reach the age of 99, so he expects to be an active participant in the Grand-Am series for some time to come.

“I’ve raced since I was 14. I’ve gone from where racing is all I know how to do to where racing is all I want to do. It’s what I made my living from before, and now it is what I live for.”

And we welcome him back. Let's see if he can't make a name for himself one more time. Edd Davin, it's time to meet your new fans; and vice versa.