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Mike Fonte's Fountain Flows With Passion

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Passion: a strong liking or desire for or devotion to some activity, object, or concept



When we talk to people in sportscar racing one common thread we find time and again is that the people who commit to the sport do so because they have an uninhibited passion for it. When the bookkeeping is finished, they may find they lost money running a car or a team, or they may be one of the few fortunate spirits who broke even in the end. Whatever the outcome, it seems the passion to participate is what draws them in and who can deny that passion can sometimes overwhelm ones senses?

In the case of Mike Fonte (pronounced fon-tay) the owner of Fountain Motorsports, ("In Italian, Fonte means fountain, and that is why we use the name Fountain Motorsports for our team.") passion is without question the force that compelled him to field three BMW race cars in the ST Class of the Grand-Am KONI Challenge Series this season. And if the accounting methodology suggests that there is a crazy person in charge of the firm, so be it. For this is one person crazy about cars and the sport of road racing.

Fonte owns several businesses in the Rochester area of upstate New York. His motorsports operation is located in Ontario, a nearby small town of about 10,000 people, with Lake Ontario at its northern edge. Ontario is also in what is called the 'snow belt'. The people living in this northernmost part of the state are used to being inundated with huge snowfalls every winter. But the natives are accustomed to the climate and life goes on no matter how much snow may end up falling.

"In Ontario we don't have earthquakes or tornados or hurricanes or floods, but we do get snow; lots of snow. But we have adapted."

Amidst the snow drifts, Fonte's life, with his wife Elisabeth, and three children, Michael (10), Emily (4) and Domenico (7 months) goes on with his time split amongst three full time businesses and, now, one full-time race team.

"In 2006, we hadn't planned on a full season because I have several businesses that I run and we knew there wouldn't be enough time to run the whole season. I own a medical supply business, Fonte Surgical Supply, Inc., which provides products like hospital beds, wheelchairs, lifts and ramps, etc. and "The Uniform Shop" which carries corporate apparel, medical uniforms, scrubs and does custom embroidery and screen printing. Plus, when we learned we were going to be parents again for the third time it was just out of the question to go racing a full season.

Fonte filled us in on his background within the medical field.

"My father was a pharmacist and he opened his store in the Rochester area in 1960. All of us in the family worked there for years. Dad was well known in the area and as the years passed we changed from a corner drug store and began servicing nursing homes, county facilities, adult homes and group homes. We serviced 90% of the nursing homes in Rochester and the surrounding areas. Before my dad retired I decided to start a business with him to do something other than pharmacy. We opened up Fonte Surgical Supply, Inc. 'Your Health Care Solutions' in 1992. Today we have 34 people working between the two businesses.

Perhaps crazy is the wrong word to describe someone who has built successful businesses to a point that allows him to enjoy a hobby that is worlds apart from more mundane (Read: cheaper) pursuits. But that word passion certainly applies in his case.

"I just love cars. I had a buddy coax me into running my Shelby in a Rochester Mustang-Shelby club event at Watkins Glen. I just fell in love with racing in general so I purchased a race prepared 1986 Mustang that the owner used to race in EMRA (Eastern Motor Racing Association) events before he moved up to Motorola Cup. Over the next couple of years I crewed for him at several races and enjoyed the experience.

"I ran the Mustang for several years at track events and race schools at the Glen. My passion continued and I opened up another new business, Fountain Motorsports, Inc. in Ontario New York. One day a customer, Tom Bork, who raced a Mazda in Grand Am, stopped in to have his car tuned on our dyno. We got to talking and decided to team up and run a Mazda in a few events.

"We ran a Mazdaspeed Protege in the Cup series in 2005. We ran three races and I drove in one of them. That was my first race ever. We soon decided the Mazda wasn't going to be competitive, so we looked around for an alternative. We decided that BMW was the way to go. We built one car and also purchased the former Turner #97 car.

“We made it to the first race in 2006 at Daytona and my co-driver, Paul Stoddart, drove our new car that we built – a 330CI coupe –and qualified 13th. Unfortunately he went into the wall at the chicane and that took us out of the race. The car had never been on the track before. We literally rolled it off the transporter and he went out and qualified it 13th. That told us we probably had something going so we ran a total of six races that first season.”

Paul is a professional driver who has raced very successfully in vintage and autocross and is also an instructor for the Porsche club. We met through the race shop and he has been part of the team since we started. He has also helped me to hone some of my driving skills too.

Other huge supporters since we started have been Sam and Bill Schultz. Sam has run with us for 2 years and has co-driven to our two best finishes. Sam and his father, Bill have become an integral part of our team and their Trackmasters track school sponsorship has provided track time to help us test our cars.

Having inhaled the intoxicating fumes that professional racing exudes, Fonte decided it was time to look to grow his race team and position his cars for success. And what better way to take the road to achievement than to hire a capable guide?

“We have three cars this year. We built one more besides the two we ran last season. Guy Cosmo is driving with us for the entire season and we are very happy to have his knowledge and experience working for us.

“One thing I have learned is that Guy is a great person and he is showing me what our cars can do. He is a phenomenal driver and he can take a good car and get it to run like a great car. He qualified 3rd at the VIR 6 hour race. He led a few laps early on before a broken oil line forced an early prolonged pit stop.

“In addition to Guy, I think we have a good team, a good product, and a good team dynamic that will let us grow. Seth Thomas who drives for BimmerWorld in the SPEED World Challenge series is running with us this season too, and he brings a world of experience with BMW's and to our team as well.” Seth has also become an integral part of our team this year. Seth and Sam drove their car as high as 4th in the VIR race before finishing 7th.

With so many experienced teams in the KONI Challenge Series to compete against, relative newcomers like Fonte's Fountain Motorsports group will surely need to rely heavily on the know-how of the professional drivers now in the fold. Fonte has taken an openly optimistic approach to the challenges ahead.

“We are looking to run the whole season. We felt some growing pains this year but we are working through it. We have built the infrastructure necessary to put forth a winning effort at this level. We are doing everything we can to make the cars competitive and we want fast people behind the wheel.

Fonte expects his team will be moving in the right direction, now that so many of the key elements are in place. He doesn't feel a need to actually drive the cars to a successful finish; he is passionate enough about being a driving force behind their success.

“Our core crew is comprised of guys I have known for years. They share my passion for racing. We have a group that works very well together. That is a big advantage when it comes to the traveling and pressure that comes with pro racing.

“I see this as a team effort and I know that I can’t drive a car on top at this point in my career. I don’t have the time to work on perfecting my driving skills. I simply enjoy a little bit of everything that goes on with being the owner of a team. If the race weekends go smooth and are uneventful (read: free of accidents or mechanical woe), the camaraderie between my friends and having a good time is what is most important.

“I’m extremely pleased when my cars come back in one piece. First we need to finish races, to win would be a huge bonus. We are competitive and we want to win like anybody else. I don’t do this for the money; but when it stops being fun I will stop doing it. This is what I do for enjoyment. The guys all know that if this ever becomes a huge hassle like a “real job”, then we will stop doing it and find something else to do.”

“I am a 42 year old guy that likes being involved in racing. I am not a great mechanic, I’m a businessman. But I like to drive and I like to race. It is a passion that is easy to get hooked on. I don’t do much else. I decided I would try to focus my hobby –racing – into a business. And the people at the track in this series are all good people and we all get along really well. I really enjoy spending time at the track.

Being a business man, Fonte is a realist, a grounded individual who understands success doesn’t come to you; you have to go out to meet it. He intends to make the journey, armed with a passion for the game.

“It’s pretty simple. We just have a passion for racing. If all it took was enthusiasm my team would win every weekend!”