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The Memory Of 'Hatch' Fuels Chili Pepper Racing

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Dr. James Osborn is an Orthopedic Surgeon in Tennessee and his wife Amy Jo is an accomplished professional photographer. Together they head up the Chili Pepper Racing team that competes in the SPEED World Challenge series.



This dynamic and professional couple participates in auto racing

to not only win against other cars, but to also win the race to cure pediatric cancers. Having recently experienced - in the most personal way - the devastating effects of cancer, they have made it their mission to raise monies to fund research into the diagnosis, treatment and development of a cure for pediatric cancer, and to fund organizations that offer support for others who, like the Osborn's, have lost loved ones to cancer.

This effort is one more incredible chapter within a history of racing that has worked primarily to benefit others; a history that the Osborn's have written over the last few years. They are absolute proof that racers have big hearts.

"We have been racing money for charities for several seasons now. Actually, that is the main focus of our racing effort, to raise money for them at no cost to them."

Jim Osborn started out in professional racing late in life, after having spent his college years running in autocross and SCCA events. It was when he and a fellow doctor ran similar red BMW's in SCCA races that the name Chili Pepper first came to be applied.

"I was racing a red BMW with another doctor and people used to laugh and make fun of us calling us red hot chili peppers. The name seemed perfect because, if you look at the name Chili Pepper Racing, the initials are CPR, which stands for Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation. It made sense to keep the name when we formed a pro team.

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“Basically I started out running autocross and local sportscar events back in the 70’s and early 80s while I was in college. I went to the BMW track days and progressed on up to the BMWCCA races. From there I went into SCCA racing and later on into professional racing in the SPEED World Challenge series.”

Osborn has the hands of a surgeon and the heart of a racer. As his professional medical training came to an end, he decided it was time for his professional racing “training” to begin.

“When I finished all my medical training, and I was still single, my brother said, ‘you are turning 40 years old so if you are going to do this now is the time.’ For my 40th birthday I rented a seat (in a BMW) from Jeff McMillin for the 2002 World Challenge season. It was a pretty crazy year. The series is very competitive and there are a lot of top line drivers. There are also some who don’t mind rubbing fenders if they know they are not going to be running near the front. At least that is how it was then but it has calmed down quite a bit in the years since. It was a very exciting year and I fell in love with the series.

“I had planned to run with Jeff again the following year but Jeff decided not to run in 2003 so I bought the car from him (a BMW E46) and in about 3 weeks time we went from nothing to being a full team, and I went from being a driver to being a team owner and driver.

“That same year Tim Dobson ran a second car with us. He owned the car but he teamed up with us and we painted the cars in a similar color and markings.

“In 2004 we were on our own with a single car, and then in 2005 we teamed up with some guys from VAC Motorsports in Pennsylvania. Their driver was Eric Curran. They had some trouble with the car that season and wound up only making the first three races and decided they wouldn’t be bringing the car back for the rest of the season.

“That year we ran about 70 to 80% of the races. Sometimes I have to forego a few races to take care of my patients. But I have to say that we were definitely the most committed small team in the series.”

Commitment is something Osborn is practiced in, both as a surgeon operating on his patients and as a driver and team owner expertly using his hands to guide him through race traffic. And this doctor has never stopped learning.

“Over the years we have learned so much. Every year we have improved. We started out from an amateur background and we have grown by leaps and bounds. My brother, John, stepped up and became our crew chief. And when you are a one car team in a series like World Challenge it’s hard to get information like you could with, say, a three car team, where you can try different suspension adjustments and use the one that works best. We learned slowly but we have always gone out there to be competitive.”

Surgeons don’t compete for patients, but racers do compete for wins, and this doctor is operating in one very competitive venue.

“In this series you not only have some top line drivers you also have top line teams to go with it. Every year we think we are ready to go – and of course, we are – but each year everyone else has stepped up their game too.

“During the 2005 season we had a joint venture with the Autosports Development guys who built the Pontiac GTO’s. We raced two cars with Stu Hayner in one and me in the other, although I probably ran three quarters of the season in the BMW. We went back to the BMW for 2006 but we upgraded the body to a 2006 model. In the fall of that year, Amy Jo and I learned we were going to become parents for the first time, in August.

“For 2007 we started looking for alternatives to the aging BMW and we decided to build a new turbo-diesel VW Jetta. We went with that car because the series is a place for a good variety of cars. Another reason is that running the diesel allowed us to keep our engine building in-house and have exclusive information and technology. Randy Pobst is a good friend of mine and he and I had talked about building a diesel for the 25 hours of Thunderhill race. Once I started looking into it and finding out about the technology available for diesels, we knew this would be the right way to go. Diesels also yield a lot of power out of simple modifications and our engine expenses were running near to \$50,000 a year with the BMW. All of these factors helped us to select the VW.

“We are the first production based diesel car to run in a pro series in the United States. We were going to run it at Road Atlanta last year but we ran out of time so Sebring will be its first race.

“Considering we are developing a brand new car this season, I would be very happy to finish in the top 10. That would be a tremendous start for this car when we know we are running against factory supported cars like the Acura, Audi and Mazda. We are up against some pretty tough competition.”

In 2003, as Osborn became known as ‘the racing doctor’, Southern Living Magazine sent a journalist and photographer to interview him at the 2003 petit lemans for an article they published in the summer of 2004. That photographer was Amy Jo Young. The two found they had an immediate attraction to one another and in February of 2006, they became Mr. and Mrs. Osborn.

In August of 2006, the couple had their first child.

“We named him Austin Hatcher Osborn because Hatcher was my mother’s maiden name. We called him ‘Hatch’.

From the very beginning, Chili Pepper Racing had always helped collect funds for charities. It was as much a part of their game plan as was getting their car to the front of the pack. Late last year their efforts would be taken in a new direction; one that no one could have foreseen.

“Hatch passed away in October, from a rare form of cancer. He was just eight weeks old.

“Each year we hold a big charity event at Road Atlanta. The track helps us and we bring in a bunch of kids with cancer from the Lighthouse Family Retreat. We put on a big affair with about 300 guests where they can ride in pace cars and enjoy great food. On Sunday after the Petit we have a celebrity charity motorcycle ride co-hosted by Randy Pobst with the money raised going to the lighthouse family retreat, all as part of the Petit Le Mans weekend events. Last year, Suzuki USA helped us raffle off a 2007 GSX-R750 and we plan to do the same this year.. We just had one big, wonderful weekend where we raised \$34,000 in total.

“We came home the next day, Monday, and we found that our son was acting a little fussy. As the week progressed he became more and more fussy, so Amy Jo took him to the doctor. They thought he had an upset stomach. That Saturday night I was feeding him around 1:00 AM and I noticed his one eye was deviated. I thought he was just tired and a little cold, but the next morning his eye still looked that way so we took him into the hospital.

“They ran a bunch of tests but nothing significant came up. The next morning they ran an MRI and it showed that he had four brain tumors. Being a doctor, I was running around taking care of whatever he needed but when I saw that MRI, I felt like someone had just kicked me in the balls. I told Amy Jo and we both just broke down and cried.

“They airlifted him via a helicopter to a hospital in Atlanta. He went by himself and we had to drive down there to be with him. The founder of the Lighthouse Family Retreat, Melinda Mayton, met him at the hospital and held him for us until we could get there.

“Hatch’s condition quickly got worse.

“They found that the tumors had gotten bigger and there were now tumors throughout his spine and throughout his nervous system. There was nothing anyone could do. He had a rare form of cancer called Atypical Rhabdoid/Teratoid Tumors.

“We brought Hatch home on Thursday, four days after the Petit Le Mans. The very next Thursday, he passed away in our arms.

“We formed the Austin Hatcher foundation to raise money in a better way than we had been doing it. The foundation’s mission is to raise money to support the diagnosis, treatment and cure of pediatric cancers, and to provide support to the families. We set the organization up as a 501-C to raise funds. One of the New York Yankees players is going to be the national spokesperson for the foundation and we will look to promote the foundation across the nation.

“The business office is here in Ooltewah, Tennessee and the foundation is run by a board that consists of a lawyer, an accountant, a pediatrician, a nurse, two pediatric oncologists, Amy Jo, and me. The foundation is board run. As the founders we will help direct the board but it is the board that makes the decisions on where the money will go to meet the goals of the mission statement.

“The Lighthouse Family Retreat would be an example of the kind of places we would look to support. They take families that are undergoing cancer treatment down to the beach, and to do other activities that help them get through their ordeal. Part of the funds will go to supporting those agencies that have networks set up that families can use to talk to one another about their experiences, or towards working to set up such networks so people can talk to one another about what they are going through.

“And of course the big thing is to fund research into the early diagnosis as well as help fund research and treatment of pediatric cancers. Our ultimate goal is to fund research that will lead to a cure for pediatric cancers.

“Hatch died in October of 2006 and we formed the foundation in December. The foundation is actually galloping along really well. The mission statement is there and the board is established and soon people will be able to make donations on line at our website www.hatcherfoundation.org

“At Sebring we expect to be able to accept donations from the fans. In the past we weren’t able to do that. We would always stop by local hospitals near races we attended and hand out tickets to the race and visit with the kids and that sort of thing, but we could never seek donations for you had to be registered in that particular state. Now, as a 501C we can help out in any area we go to.”

Chili Pepper Racing is as serious about winning on the track as they are about beating cancer in children. The Osborn’s intend to continue the fight on both fronts, with the support of their extended family – the community of racers and fans at large.

“I take our racing every bit as seriously as I take being a doctor. This is not a hobby. racing is a real intense profession that I really enjoy. It keeps me focused and is a diversion from the other part of my life. It can be intense on the medical side and racing lets me kind of wash some of that away and actually rest. We have always done the racing as a family and the people we associate with are like our family. The racing community really is just like a big family

“Last year was a tough year for us. We were excited about all the things that were coming for us, especially Austin. The outpouring of support we received from the fans and the people in racing meant more to Amy Jo and me than I can adequately express. I think it is important to take every opportunity to tell them how much we thank them for their support.”

It is said that the wrong things happen sometimes for the right reasons. Jim and Amy Jo Osborn seek some solace in the idea that ‘Hatch’ had a purpose for coming into their lives, even though it wasn’t the one they had hoped for.

“As a result of Hatch’s passing, we will be able to touch people’s lives in ways that we would not have been able to do. In some ways you have to say that he has given his life to help other people.”

If you too would like to help, please visit the Austin Hatcher Foundation website at www.hatcherfoundation.org