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## John Pew – From Sailing On The Sea To Speeding In A DP

06/04/07 © Andrew S. Hartwell

Recently a press release came to us announcing that a man named John Pew would be joining the Michael Shank Racing (MSR) Daytona Prototype team in Grand-Am. Pew ran in the Laguna Seca round of the Rolex SportsCar Series co-driving the #6 MSR Lexus-Riley with Ian James. They managed a 7th place finish in Pew's first ever drive in a Daytona Prototype.



Photo: www.johnpewracing.com



Andrew S. Hartwell / ashautomobilia.com

Our interest piqued by this new name on the entry lists; we decided to contact Pew and try to learn about him and his background in racing. During our conversation it became clear that this gentleman driver has lived a most unordinary life, with a good portion of his adulthood spent riding the waves of the Earth's oceans.

And he raised his family on the water as well.

We will come back to that shortly. First, let Pew tell us how he got started in road racing.

"It was not that long ago, around 1999 / 2000, that I got started in racing. I was into sailing and sail boat building and my family – my wife and two sons - and I did a lot of sailing around the world. We got land bound again when my older son Travis was about 16. I figured I would have to teach him how to drive and the best way to do that was to have him learn how to drive a race car. So we both took the Skip Barber racing school at Lime Rock. This was about 2000.

"I got hooked on it! I sold my sailboat and I have been involved in racing almost full time ever since! Travis raced a little bit but he became too involved with college and decided not to continue on."

But the elder Pew did carry on, in open wheel racing, and convinced himself he was probably as good a race car driver as he was a sailboat captain.

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"I met a lot of really good people at Skip Barber. Many are still friends. I started racing in the Skip Barber Southern Series in the winter and then joined the Masters Series for the summer. They also had a series called the Challenge Series which was for people who didn't want to race the pros and I did that for two years. The Challenge Series used the Barber Dodge Pro car off-season. It was for people who wanted to race that car but not do the Barber Dodge Pro Series. That wetted my appetite to go beyond Skip Barber and so we raced a BMW M3 in the SCCA Kumho 12 hour race. That was a good experience and from there we signed on with Mike Baughman for the Rolex.

"I ran with Mike after Mark Patterson and I came out of Skip Barber and we were looking for something else to do. We did the Rolex 24 with Mike, in his Corvette, which was the first 24 hour race for both Mark and I. We had a great time – Mike is a great guy - and so we raced with him again at Watkins Glen the following year. We ran in the Corvette and in his Firebird in the Grand-Am Cup."

Pew had his taste of sportscar racing now, but he wasn't yet quite finished with his open wheel experiences. Unfortunately, those experiences went from the high of a championship to the low of a serious injury.

"As soon as the Star Mazda cars came out, I got into that series. Compared to the Barber Dodge Pro car the Mazda was a much easier car to drive. And it was a faster car. The first two years in Star Mazda were really great. I ran against guys like Graham Rahal and Rafael Matos and Marco Andretti. The 2005 season was my best. They had a competition within the competition called the Masters Series, for guys who were over 45. I won that series and was really happy about it. At that time the series was very competitive. There were some very good guys in that series.

"The following year, 2006, I started to develop a shoulder injury. My rotator cuff was rubbing on a bone spur and it kept wearing away. Then I was in a big crash in Montreal. There were 16 cars involved in the first lap. My car got launched in the air and speared the tire wall and bounced backwards up in the air and spun around with people driving underneath me. I was hit three times and that sort of finished off my shoulder.

"I didn't know what the real problem was so I had it checked and it turned out my shoulder was torn up real bad. I thought it was just old age. I had an operation but it is a very difficult recovery. The technology for the operation is pretty good today but the problem was my shoulder was torn up for so long. I am not yet the way I was before the operation but I'm good enough to drive a race car. I was always in shape and working out has always been something of a hobby for me."

For some, sailing on open waters is just a hobby. But for Pew, it has long been a way of living a life meters beyond the boundaries of the ordinary. He got his sea legs the long way, by moving out of a world of selling business furniture into a lifetime of wise investing that afforded him the opportunity to live a good part of his adult life out on the ocean.

"I grew up in Michigan and spent the first 17 years of my life there. We moved to Connecticut after that. My family was involved in an office furniture business which I was into when I was younger but I really didn't care too much for as I got older. I got into boats and investing and what not and really got into building and sailing boats. My wife and I have probably sailed over 100,000 miles of ocean together. We brought up our two kids on a boat.

“My first son was born in Hawaii. We were sailing in the South Pacific at the time. A year later we moved back to Florida and made a base there for a while. That is what we would do. I would start working on investments again and making more money. Then, seven years later our second son was born. When he was a month old we took off in a boat again and crossed the Pacific to New Zealand.

“The longest time we spent out on the water was 24 days. But we would be traveling around the world for a few years. We would stop and live in various places along the way. We stayed in New Zealand for four years and got involved in a boat building project there. Once that boat was finished we all sailed it up to Kodiak, Alaska.

“We didn’t always live on the boat when we were sailing. If we were in a place for an extended period we would usually rent a house. It was a great experience for the kids but Travis got too old to be with his mom and dad so we came back to Florida. We live in North Palm Beach now and we have another house in Vancouver Island – a place we discovered when we were out sailing the world.”

Securely in port for now, Pew told us how he came to work out a full season ride with MSR, where the team’s sister car is being piloted by Oswaldo Negri and Mark Patterson, two old friends of his.

“I know Oswaldo Negri very well. He was the test driver for Barber Dodge and was also my coach when I did Star Mazda. I owe him a lot. And Mark Patterson and I did a lot of things together and we’ve know each other since our Skip Barber days. They approached me and asked me if I would like to run in the second DP car. When the opportunity came up it was just perfect. I had driven a DP once before, but only for a few laps at Homestead (in the #3 car).

“I am going to do the rest of the season with MSR. Ian James will be my co-driver and he is someone I really like. And Mike Shank is a straight shooter with a great team of hard working guys. I really like this team.”

From sail boats to open wheel cars to a Daytona Prototype. That is quite a variety of mobility options for one to transition through. We asked him for his thoughts on driving the DP, the only one of the three options he had not yet logged any quality time with.

“It takes a little getting used to coming from the Star Mazda and open wheel cars. The braking is different but I am getting used to it. Driving the DP is closer to driving the Corvette. It has a lot more horsepower and torque, plus the sequential shifter is really nice. The car is probably easier to drive.

“But for me to drive at Oswaldo Negri’s speed is pretty hard to do! I’m 51 so my racing career is probably fairly limited. But I do think I am done with open wheel cars. After last year in Star Mazda there were just too many crashes. The cars are fun to drive but I think I am going to stick with sportscars. I’d love to stick with the DP as I really like this series. It is really competitive.”

The #6 car is owned by Henri Zogaib, who has decided to let go of the wheel this season. We wondered if Pew had ambitions of becoming a car owner as well. He told us his goals were somewhat more low-key but he wouldn’t rule the possibility out.

“I don’t think I’ll have my own team. Unless you want to sponsor me! It would be great to have a car that would be run by Mike. If I can figure out a way to do that I would. But my goal is always the personal challenge of doing my best. That is the reason I race. I am always trying to do it

better and the best that I can. Starting this late in life I am not going to be like Oswald and those young guys who start racing in karts at nine years old. I will do the best I can and I would like to be able to say I am competitive with the other guys out there who are my age.

“I am definitely in the gentlemen driver class. At Laguna Seca we finished 7th and I'm very happy about that. I got some seat time and started to feel more comfortable in the car.”

And this weekend Pew will get his second chance at driving the Lexus-Riley with Ian James in the Sahlen's Six Hours of The Glen. If this veteran navigator / ship's Captain / world traveler can make it across 100,000 miles of ocean we think a mere six hours of racing should be no sweat. Then again, some of the other cars and drivers in this series can be just as intimidating as a stormy, rolling sea. It may not be smooth sailing ahead, but we think Captain John Pew will chart a course that leads to a good view of the checkered flag.

