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**ash - through the esses**

Through The Esses - Kristian Skavnes – Looking For 24 At 42

06/14/07 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Lime Rock Park recently hosted the fifth race of the 2007 KONI Challenge Series. Running in the ST Class were a pair of new (for this season) Subaru Legacy's entered by the ICY / Phoenix race team. The #111 car, piloted by Chuck Hemmingson and Kristian Skavnes, won the race, giving the team a top spot after just three races with the new cars.



And this win came after they stopped racing the station wagon. More about that later.

We talked with Skavnes this week to learn more about the background of the Subaru effort, and about his racing experiences. Skavnes considers Lime Rock to be his home track as he learned how to drive a race car here and has spent many fast hours ripping through its turns.

“I got started in racing back in 1982. My father sponsored John McKnight who was racing a 1978 Saab 99 Turbo in SCCA Showroom Stock A. My father owned a Saab dealership – and he still does. John actually won the national championship that year, at the runoff in Road Atlanta. Then he got disqualified for boost or something and Don Knowles got the championship instead. This was back around 1978 or so.

“My father later started racing himself and he got me started in it. My first year in racing was in 1982. I ran a showroom stock 5 liter Mustang in SCCA club racing.”

Skavnes was introduced to the sights, sounds, smells and tasks of racing as a young teen.

“In 1978 I was 14 and I was at the track all the time with my Dad– every weekend. I did all the chores that needed to get done, and I got to be familiar with the cars. Before that my dad used to take me to Watkins Glen to see the races. And I went to the races willingly. I used to draw pictures of cars and I had all the Matchbox cars. I was a car freak from the time I was a little kid.”

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Moving up the aging calendar a few years found young Skavnes being given the opportunity to pass up doing the chores and instead do the driving.

“In 1983 dad let me use his Mustang. Paul Hacker was my instructor at Lime Rock and he signed me off for my regional license. I did pretty well with that first season as I ran the Mustang to the NORRDIC regional championship that was held at Pocono.

“I then started racing front wheel drive in a 1980 Saab 99. I remember my first thoughts were I hated how slow the car was and front wheel drive didn't really thrill me either. I ended up in 1985 running a Honda CRX in SCCA nationals where I finished in 3rd place just a bumper's width ahead of Steve Lewis, making it a 1-2-3 finish that year for Honda. That was my first time at the SCCA Runoffs.”

Having established his talent behind the wheel, Skavnes sought out other opportunities to set tires squealing in pursuit of a win, this time in a professional race series.

“I next sort of begged my way into a ride in the Escort Endurance Championship – a pro series in the SCCA. A local guy named Jerry Lustig, who ran Autosport Honda, had a three car team. We agreed I would race with his team at an endurance race in Canada. I flew up to Mosport to run in the 24 hour race there, but when I got to the airport there was no one there to pick me up! I somehow managed to make my way to the track though and get into the car.

“I did a few laps around Mosport, which back then was a pretty crazy place. You had pits in front of and behind a row of pit stalls! I managed to qualify the car on the pole, beating out Scott Sharp in his 300ZX. It was the first time an Acura Legend was ever on the pole.

“The race was going great with us running in second place in the 23rd hour. Then I had a CV joint break going into turn two and it brought the motor right into the driving compartment! That left the car a smoldering mess! If the race had gone 22 hours it would have been a great outcome!

“That was a hot race too. I was sweating and dehydrated. I think I was even peeing blood at that point. It was so draining for me because my teammate would do very short stints and so they kept putting me back in the car. It was at least a hundred degrees in the car and they kept chucking me back in it!”

In 1990 Skavnes drove in the Firehawk Series in a Peugeot for Arlo Cota. He finished 8th that year in the Driver points championship.

“For most of my racing life I mainly stayed in the showroom stock body cars running in the SCCA Nationals and in endurance racing in the Firehawk, Escort, Pro Sport Car and what ever other name they could come up with for an endurance racing series. I think I ran in every different showroom stock car you can imagine. I drove Peugeot's, Volvo's, a bunch of different Saabs, and almost every kind of Honda product. In 1992 I did a 24 hour race in a Saturn and I think we finished fourth. That's when I met Dave Rosenblum.

“Dave asked me to come over and drive with his team running in the Firehawk series in 1993. My co-driver then was Robby Buhl, the ex-Indy car driver. We won six Firehawk races in our Saturn SC that year. Sebring was the final race in the series and I was racing against Randy Pobst for the championship. I had him covered in that race, with a lap lead in hand. We were under a full course caution late in the race when Dorsey Schroeder lost his brakes and T-boned me at about 30 miles an hour! It was a hard enough hit to break the throttle cable completely off

and the motor just revved as high as it would go and then blew. I ended up third in the point's championship that year."

'On Track' magazine once included Skavnes in a 'Rising Star' article. His name appeared with some other young guy who would later go on to fame and fortune in NASCAR: a certain Jeff Gordon. Alas, the fortunes in racing can go much faster than they can come and the next few years would find Skavnes bouncing around among several different rides.

In 1995 Skavnes was asked to drive for the Honda of America Racing Team. He logged six wins with co-drivers Michael Galati and Bill Auberlen. Kristian also captured his first Driver championship that season, in The IMSA Firehawk Series. His prospects for Jeff Gordon-level fame looked good.

"I thought my racing career was going to take off at that point. I had dreams of racing in the British touring car series. But instead I found myself without a ride for 1996. I wound up running several different races here and there.

"In 1997 I received a call from Dave Rosenblum asking me to run a SPEED World Challenge race at Lime Rock Park. I got the pole position and I went on to win what was a dominant victory. This was in my first ever Speed World Challenge race!

"The next year I raced my fathers Showroom Stock B Acura in SCCA, and I finished in 7th place at the Runoffs.

"In 1999 I got back into the Speed World Challenge Series driving the DC sport Acura for Taz Harvey. Mosport bit me again though. As I was exiting turn one the right front upper ball joint broke, sending me into the wall with the car bursting into flames. A week's time, and untold man hours later, I put the same car on the front row at Lime Rock and pulled down a 3rd place finish."

For the next few years Skavnes drove a Honda S2000 in the SCCA T2 class, winning the Northeast division championship. He received the 2003 Richland County Sportsmanship Award for helping a fellow competitor repair his car in time to make the race. Skavnes told us that award will always be a special one for him.

In 2004 Skavnes and Rosenblum again joined forces and this time the union would position Skavnes for the sort of recognition that could yet be his ticket to a sustainable professional racing career.

"In 2004 Dave bought a Subaru for Chuck Hemmingson to drive in the Touring 2 category. I was walking through the paddock at the runoffs and I bumped into him and James Hon, the Director of Motorsport for Subaru. Dave asked me what I was doing next year and I jokingly said, 'I'm driving for you next year!' Surprisingly, he said they were putting together a Subaru factory team for 2005 and he asked me to become part of it!"

The team became known as ICY / Phoenix Racing. Skavnes explained the origins of the name.

"The team is called ICY / Phoenix Racing because ICY stands for Inner City Youth, a program that helps inner city kids from Philadelphia. As long as the kids carry good grades Dave brings them along to the races to see a bit of the world outside the slums of Philly. Phoenix comes from Phoenix Performance, a company that builds race cars out of a race shop in Erie, Pennsylvania and is owned by Joe Aquilante.

ICY / Phoenix entered the Subaru's in SCCA races and Skavnes was teamed with Hemmingson. The pair pulled down a win and second place in the 2005 runoffs. And that year Skavnes received the Mark Donohue Award from the Road Racing Driver's Club. The award is presented to drivers who best represent the spirit of professional sportsmanship. Fittingly, Mark's son, David Donohue, presented Skavnes with the award. David and Kristian had been teammates early on in Skavnes career.

In 2006 the ICY / Phoenix team moved into the professional ranks, this time with an automobile that didn't quite fit the mold of a conventional race car.

"In 2006 we decided to enter the KONI Challenge, which was still called Grand-Am Cup at the time. We put together a Subaru wagon for a three race deal. We started at Lime Rock, which is really my home track, and we ran well right out of the box. Yes, it was a Subaru station wagon and we took a lot of ribbing about that. But when we went out and set the quickest times in practice that sort of shut everybody up!"

They raced a station wagon! We just had to ask if Skavnes took the groceries out of the car first.

"Yes. And the dog and the kids too! It was pretty funny because we had a bumper sticker on the back that read, 'You Just Got Passed By A Station Wagon!' It was great!"

All kidding aside, the cars performance did not go unnoticed by the competition, or by the brass at Subaru.

"Subaru of America was pretty stoked about the cars performance. We finished in the top ten in all three races and we finished second in the last race at Barber Motorsports Park. Subaru then got excited about putting together a pair of Legacy SPEC-B Sedans for our team to run in the KONI Challenge for 2007. Two cars were built from the ground up by ICY/ Phoenix and they were beautifully done. Subaru funded the program. Chuck and I run in the #111 car and in the #141 car we have Davy Jones and Dave Rosenblum. We've run three races so far this season.

"In the first race at Homestead we finished sixth. The heat played against our turbochargers and we lost a lot of boost. And the cars got really beat up down there, with a lot of contact between cars during the race. But we did have the pole for that, our first ever race in the new Legacy. Our second race was at Laguna Seca where we qualified the car 5th and we were winning the race when I got a flat tire. The pit stop pushed us back to 11th at the end. But Davy Jones in the #141 car turned a new track record and he and Dave finished 4th in the race. It was a good weekend for the team.

"At Lime Rock – our third race - we pulled down a win. Chuck qualified the car 5th and I went in to finish the race. That's how we have been working it. He qualifies and starts the race, I finish it. By this time we had showed the competition what we were about and then the other teams starting saying we were sandbagging. They were really busting our stones! But we really aren't faster than the other cars so much as that I know Lime Rock so well. My confidence level going into that race was really high. I knew all the little secrets about that track."

The team hadn't planned on a full schedule for this season, as time is a luxury Skavnes told us that he and the ICY / Phoenix team just don't have available.

“We are doing a very limited schedule this season. We don’t have the time to test and try different set ups. We are going to miss both Watkins Glen and Mosport.”

Having been involved in road racing for over 25 years, we wondered if Skavnes had given any thought to retiring from the life of a racing driver.

“Sometimes I do get tired of it all and think it’s time to hang it up. I have three kids, age 10, 11 and 17. Life can be stressful. My wife is often going in one direction and I’m going in another and sometimes you want to just hang it up. But my racing has really taken off now.

“In the past I have gone on hiatus several times. There were years when I just stayed active enough to keep my license alive. I did other things with my time but right now I have the opportunity to run with Subaru and I have my own car – a T3 – in SCCA club racing. And I also got invited to drive an American GT car for Jerry Lustig. He asked me to drive his Corvette at Watkins Glen. My racing is keeping me pretty busy right now.”

When he wasn’t racing in sportscars, Skavnes could often be found pedaling his way to the top; literally moving his feet and legs rapidly up and down around the sprocket of a mountain bike.

“I love to go mountain bike racing. I’ve run in 24 hour races and a few national races up and down the east coast. I did that for a few years until I got to the point where I was busted up pretty good and had to get back into a race car to get some steel wrapped around me instead of between my legs! The bars are better on the outside of me!”

At this stage in his career, Skavnes harbors no desire to be the next Formula One champion, or NASCAR idol. But he does have a lofty goal for himself, one he would like to achieve before he does take off his helmet for the last time.

“My ambition is to run in the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona. I am looking for a ride, ideally in a Porsche because of the reliability factor. But I find that the harder I try to make plans nothing happens!”

But a lot has happened in his career and, unlike so many others who wanted to have lengthy careers in racing but couldn’t make it happen for whatever reason, Skavnes has enjoyed the ride. Almost all of them, in fact.

“I feel I have accomplished a lot in my racing career and I have been very happy. The guys I have raced for have all taken care of me. I’ve been fortunate in that I haven’t spent a lot of money in racing and I got into a lot of great cars. I know I am lucky because there are a lot of really talented drivers out there who aren’t racing at all.”

Skavnes immediate future includes the Subaru KONI Challenge drive, the AGT ride, his SCCA racing, and a new position as instructor with a company that trains people to perform security duties for high profile clients.

“Right now I am involved with a company called TechOps International. They take care of training people to provide security and protection for executives and dignitaries around the world. I’ve been signed on to help train people in tactical driving and high speed escape maneuvers. It is a new venture, and a new experience for me, and I am very excited about it.”

Even at an age when a career change might be considered a smart move for a racing driver, Skavnes still feels the excitement of racing in his blood.

“I’m 42 years old and I still love going along for the ride! And did I mention I was looking for a seat in a Porsche in the next Rolex 24 at Daytona?”

We suspect Skavnes is hoping someone from The Racer’s Group, or Synergy Racing, or Tafel Racing is reading this. Surely someone running in the Rolex 24 could use a veteran like Skavnes to help them win a watch. Skavnes has certainly put in the time.



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