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Through The Esses - James Gué Is Looking For A French Connection

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The Mid-Ohio circuit was the next stop on the KONI Challenge tour when we caught up with James Gué (Goo-A). He had just arrived there, having driven over 600 miles from his home in Georgia. He made the trip to once again run in the #37 JBS Motorsports Mustang Cobra GT in the GS Class. His co-driver is Bret Seafuse (the □B and the S' in JBS Motorsports, with Bret's father, Jim being the □J') and coming into this, the seventh race of the season, the pair was solidly in fourth place in the driver standings. Coincidentally, fourth is also the highest finishing position they have achieved this year. They finished in that spot at both Miami and Iowa.

Gué, at age 25, has logged a lot of racing miles in the last 16 years, starting with karts at the age of 9. He graduated from backyard races, run against his brother Robert, to full fledged karting competitions that led to a two year stay in Italy after graduating from High School. He eventually returned to the states and gave open wheel racing a shot, running in a few Formula Ford and Formula Mazda races. His racing resume would soon expand with stints behind the wheel of a Daytona Prototype and in open-top prototypes in the early years of Grand-Am and in the American Le Mans Series. And last year, Gué even made it to the Le Mans 24 Hours race. That is, he made it to the race, but not into the race. But we will come back to that in a moment.

Gué was born into a family that lived and breathed sportscar racing. His father, Michael Gué, has run a number of different race cars under the Essex Racing banner for over 25 years. James Gué practically grew up at racetracks across North America. It probably wouldn't surprise anyone were blood tests to reveal his blood type is 5W-30.

Gué got hooked on the rush of rushing early on and today he is constantly on the hunt for a quality ride, preferably in a prototype running in the ALMS and with a shot at putting him on the starting grid for the 24 Hours of Le Mans. But he isn't narrowing his focus on just a prototype



ride. He is quite satisfied to have a season long commitment with JBS in the KONI Challenge. Like most ambitious and talented young racers though, he feels you can never have your hands on too many wheels in one season. The more cars you can get to drive, the more you can enjoy the rush of racing. It's the competition that he hankers for the most.

"My racing schedule this season is to do the full season in the KONI Challenge. To date I have also done four races in Grand-AM GT, running with the Stevenson Corvette at Daytona and Watkins Glen, and with the Racer's Edge Pontiac at VIR and Laguna Seca.

"I'd like to run in the ALMS again in a prototype. The level of competition has definitely gone up quite a bit since I last ran there. Unfortunately all the factory efforts with Porsche and Honda make it tough to get in."

□Getting in' is the difficulty every aspiring racer faces when they decide they want to pursue their passion for speed on a professional level. Finding sponsorship, making the right contacts, and of course, performing while behind the wheel, all play a role in determining a driver's future. Gué wants his name to be on the list of as many competitive teams as possible and to that end he is determined to make the most of every opportunity, be it in a series with large fields, or one where technology reigns supreme.

"I have a few possibilities in GT racing that might pan out for the rest of this year. I enjoy the competition in Grand-Am with the large fields. They don't get the car counts in the ALMS but the level of sophistication with the cars is much higher. But when you come down to it I enjoy both series for different reasons. Both types of cars excite me. I just really like the atmosphere and the international flavor of the ALMS."

Perhaps we should take a minute here to go back in time and let Gué tell us in his own words how he became a man who hunts sponsors and race teams for a living, using only his driving skills as his □weapons'.

"I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, but my family moved to Georgia when I was two so I have lived here my whole life, except for the two years that I lived in Italy.

"My dad was involved with sportscar racing for a long time. In one form or another he has had a team in racing for over 25 years now. He ran in everything from IMSA to Grand-Am and ALMS. Ever since I can remember I was always at the race track just tagging along.

"When I was about 5 or 6 my brother and I were given a go kart that we raced around the yard until we beat it to death. It was just a natural progression for us to then get into kart racing. We bought a real race kart when I was 9.

"My brother, who is a few years older than me, and I raced together for several years. Then, just as he was at the crossroads where he had finished High School and was just about to start college, he had an accident and broke his collarbone and had a few other injuries. He did not enjoy the time he had to spend in the hospital and after that he just decided to pursue a career in engineering instead of as a race car driver. He is currently an engineer for the Walker Racing Champ Car team.

"The day I turned 17 I jumped on a plane and went over to Italy by myself. I didn't speak a word of Italian. I went into the deep end of the karting world. I had done some international races in the states and Canada. I did well in a race in Charlotte and the team asked me if I would like to

go over and compete in the European World Championship. I was sponsored in part by the team and partially by my parents.

"The experience was probably the most beneficial thing for me in terms of my growth as a person and as far as furthering my career. There were 120 entries for every race and every fifteen spots on the grid were separated by a tenth of a second. You had to qualify to earn a spot as there were just 30 cars on the grid. 90 karts had to go home.

"This was the first time I ever lived away from home. At 17 I couldn't have a car in Italy so that made getting around a bit difficult. But after a year I did get a car and by then I had picked up a bit of the language. Second to racing, the thing I miss the most about Italy is the food! "

Gué's time in the international karting arena found him racing alongside some of today's biggest names in the sport. But the man he most admires was just a wee bit too old for karting when Gué was chasing the checkered flag an inch above the asphalt.

"11 of the current Formula One drivers were racing in the series at one time or another. People like Rosberg, Alonso, Hamilton, Briscoe and others. I did better against these guys when we raced in the states. Most of them were in their second or third year in karting just as I was starting out in my first year.

"I respect them all but the one man in racing whom I most admire and respect is James Weaver. Obviously his on track performance was amazing but the way he handled himself off the track was just fantastic. I never had the opportunity to race with him but I did race with Chris and Rob Dyson at the Rolex 24 in a Crawford DP. James wasn't involved in the DP side of Dyson Racing though."

In the racing game - as in virtually all forms of business and entertainment - contacts and family connections can position aspiring drivers, future vice-presidents and soon-to-be entertainment superstars closer to the first steps on the path to their success. Anyone born into such a situation inherently enjoys an edge that can lead to an opportunity. But getting through the front door will not keep you inside if you lack the skills needed to support your career aspirations. Gué wanted to tell us his feelings on the 'lucky kid' perception he feels some people may have about his growing up as Michael Gué's son.

"I think one misconception to being the son of someone who was in racing a long time is that people sometimes think, 'Oh your dad owns a racing team so you are a shoo-in'. But in reality there have been very few times when I have run with my dad's team, and if I did, it was usually because someone else paid for me to be in the seat. In some respects, of course, I do have it a bit easier than others because of the number of contacts I can pull from. But at the same time I still have to take the same tough road other drivers have to take. My dad isn't paying for me to go racing.

"At the end of the day it comes down to sponsorship and performance. What can you bring to the team?

"I have to say one of the biggest supporters I have had in my professional sportscar racing career is John Macaluso, because he let me drive his prototypes. That opportunity put me in the spotlight and that is one of the biggest single challenges we drivers all face. We have to go fast once we get in the car, but getting in is difficult.

"John was an acquaintance of my dads. I raced with John's Miracle Motorsports team in the ALMS. In 2002 I got to test his Riley & Scott MKIII and then I had the chance to race it later in the year at the Six Hours of the Glen. I ran with John and Buddy Rice. That was my first race with John and we stayed in touch afterwards.

"I would love to go back to Le Mans. John gave me the opportunity to go over there with the team. I was able to run in pre-qualifying but it ended up that I didn't quite fit in with the driver lineup there for the race. And John decided he wanted to get into the race so I didn't get to actually be in the race but it is definitely one of my top goals to run there in a top flight prototype.

"Larry Holt at Multimatic was also instrumental in helping my career by having me participate in the Ford factory Mustang effort. All the drives I have gotten with the Ford teams in Grand-Am Cup / KONI Challenge are a direct result of the time I spent racing with his team.

"In 2005 I had something of a factory deal, racing with Ford when they brought out the FR500C in the Grand-Am Cup. I did a lot of the development on that car and ran with Multimatic that season, partnered with Gunnar Jeanette. Scott Maxwell and David Empringham were in a sister car as Multimatic ran a two-car team that year.

"We had some good results, winning one race and finishing often in the top five. We ended up winning the team championship and our teammates ended up winning the driver's championship."

The 2005 season with Multimatic was in marked contrast to his prior season when a long term deal went south. You could say he □Rand' into trouble.

"In the beginning of 2004 I started out the season with a long term contract with Rand Racing. We started at Sebring where we finished second in their Lola BK40. The Miracle Motorsports team won that race. Shortly after that, Rand folded up his racing team and simply went away.

"A short time later that season I partnered up with Ian James at Miracle. Unfortunately, at the end of the year, because I ran the one race with Rand where I finished second, we were always four points apart in the standings. Ian went on to win the championship and I finished second, rather than finishing tied with him.

"In 2006 I ran all but one of the Grand-Am Cup races. I missed Trois Rivieres. I split the season between Blackforest Motorsports and JBS. I also ran the 12 Hours at Sebring with Miracle. And up until John too sold off the team and got out of racing, I did a few one-off races here and there."

Many drivers today will quickly answer "NASCAR" when asked where they would like to be racing. Predictable enough an answer we suppose, when you consider middle field finishers in that series often are paid more than the top three finishers in a single sportscar race combined. Not to mention the endorsement opportunities that come with being a □famous NASCAR driver'. But Gué had a small taste of that form of racing and, while he wouldn't mind taking a bigger bite a second time around, his palate is quite satiated with sportscar fare.

"I would never rule out NASCAR but my only taste of oval racing was when I participated in the Roush Racing "Gong Show". Out of 1,100 applications they selected 25 people. They made a TV show out of it as over a few weeks time we did some interviews and on track tests. They whittled it down to a final winner who received a ride in the truck series.

"Oval racing was different and I enjoyed it, but it wasn't a life changing experience that made me want to concentrate on getting a NASCAR ride. But if an opportunity came along I would certainly take it!"

James Gué comes across to us as a level headed young man with a penchant for going fast and a dream to go fastest on the world of racing's largest stage, the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

"I think I am pretty down to earth. I have a normal workout routine. No strange hobbies or anything like that."

We wondered if Gué had someone special in his life that supported his aspirations.

"I do have a girlfriend but she lives in Florida and I live in Georgia, but she is pretty understanding about my racing, most of the time. Who knows, maybe the separations explain why we have been together for a year and a half!"

That may very well be the case, but we suspect anyone wanting to be a part of James Gué's life will have to learn how to share him with the world of racing and, quite probably, will also have to develop an appreciation for French food - at least for one week in June each year.