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## **Watch For Butch At The Beach**

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When the American Le Mans Series prototypes take to the narrow streets of Long Beach for the first time in April, the sleek and sophisticated prototypes of the LMP1 and LMP2 class will surely leave a lasting impression in the minds of those who hang on the fences to catch all the action. Honestly, how many people would fail to notice a bright yellow Porsche whipping by them, just a few feet away, and traveling at speeds more than double the posted limits? No, the prototypes that race in the ALMS are not cars you can easily ignore. And many of them are being driven by people you simply have to admire for the talent and experience they bring to every drive in a race car.

Among the prototypes competing that weekend will be a pair of blue and white Porsche RS Spyders belonging to Dyson Racing. The cars are new this season and Long Beach will be just the third time the team will have put them into the heat of battle against several other equally appealing prototypes. Dyson Racing, however, is not a new team as Rob Dyson, the owner of the team and the father of the man who currently runs the racing operation, Chris Dyson, has fielded sportscars in professional events for over 20 plus years.

2007 marks the return of the Dyson's to the Porsche marque, after logging several seasons with a Lola chassis, and many prior seasons with a Riley & Scott MKIII, and after running a Porsche 962 in the old IMSA series. And many of those seasons produced outstanding results for Dyson Racing. In most cases the driving lineup included Rob and Chris Dyson, Andy Wallace, Elliott Forbes-Robinson, James Weaver and Butch Leitzinger. There were others along the way, Dorsey Schroeder and John Paul Jr. for example, who also made a contribution that led to increasing the contents of the trophy shelf in the Dyson race shops located in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Among the Dyson regulars – all of whom have credentials that place them high on the list of sportscar racing's top talent - one man has quietly gone about the business of driving fast and getting results. Starting his 12<sup>th</sup> year with Dyson Racing in 2007, 38 year old Butch Leitzinger (pronounced light-singer) isn't one to be found tooting his own horn or putting himself in the spotlight. No, this seasoned veteran of sportscar races from Lime Rock to Le Mans has let his on track performance speak for him, and his record speaks volumes about his talent.

Born in 1969 in Homestead, Pennsylvania, Leitzinger grew up in a household that included a mother who was a talented artist with a paint brush, and a father who was a talented artist with a race car. Bob and Sandra Leitzinger raised young Butch in an atmosphere that aspiring young racers today would love to have for themselves.

From an early age he was always around racing.

"For as long as I can remember, I have always wanted to race cars. My first memory is of sitting on a blanket at Nelson Ledges, watching my Dad race. I was three years old at the time. My father raced cars for many years. I grew up at the track, working on his crew."

We wondered what sort of work young Butch Leitzinger performed in service to his families racing efforts. He 'came clean' for us when he said, "I started with sweeping up the shop, which pretty much

exploited all of my ability! But what I liked doing the most was working on the fabrication of body panels. I could never weld worth a darn so I worked on an area of the car where I could be a bit creative. I have never been able to make coffee worth a darn either so after my one attempt at it I was never asked again!"

Working on the crew was just the start for young Butch. He wanted to participate as a driver. How badly did he want to drive? Bad enough to grab a shovel and some tools and apply those skills he learned as a crew member to the task of building a race car.

"I literally dug one of my dads old cars out of the snow bank out behind the race shop and got it ready for driving school. That is how the first two years of my racing career started, by fixing up his castaways. I got experience that way and then my brother, Chuck Kurtz, and I started co-driving with him in the longer races. Chuck and I co-drove in the old FireHawk series, which became the Motorola Cup. Our first professional race was with our father. My first Daytona race was when I was 18 years old."

Leitzinger soon showed he had the right talent and temperament for racing. He made such an impression during his formative years behind the wheel that he soon found his experience would take him from the family atmosphere he was weaned on to the rank of factory driver for a major manufacturer.

"Our racing was a family affair until my dad picked up the Nissan factory sponsorship in '89. Then it all became a lot more serious. Because we had been driving with him already, we became 'factory drivers' overnight. When my father and David Loring were teammates, they brought in a third car to get more manufacturers points, and I got to drive that. That led to a full season in '92 and then to the (IMSA) championship in '93. Then I got to drive the factory Nissan GTS car and we won Daytona with that. I fell into a lot of really great drives just by being in the right place."

Few today would argue that the 'right place' for Butch Leitzinger is behind the wheel of a race car. A quick review of his racing resume will tell you his talent has always been in demand.

Leitzinger's list of accomplishments includes winning the 24 Hours of Daytona three times (in 1994, 1997 and 1999 – all with Dyson Racing). Taking the World Sportscar Championship twice (in 1997 and again in 1998), and collecting both a Can-Am championship and an IMSA GTU championship.

Leitzinger has also driven in the Trans-Am series, winning three times in the 2002 season driving a Tommy Bahama sponsored Corvette.

When car maker Bentley wanted to return to Le Mans in 2001, after a 70 year absence from a race they had won several times leading up to their final run in 1930, they chose Leitzinger to co-drive their beautiful #8 Bentley EXP Speed 8 LM-GTP car, along with Englishman Andy Wallace and Belgian Eric van de Poele. The trio managed to bring the green machine home third overall and first in class in 2001 and fourth overall in 2002. And just before they appeared on the victory podium in 2001 they changed out of their modern driving suits into uniforms similar to those worn at Bentley's last appearance in this race. It was a touching salute to the manufacturer and a most enjoyable moment for the fans. It was also one of the only times he let himself step outside his quiet demeanor in full view of thousands of people.

Leitzinger has raced at Le Mans several other times piloting such dynamic mounts as a Panoz Esperante GTR-1 (1997 and 1998), a Ferrari 360 (2003), a Cadillac LMP prototype (2000), and a Panoz LMP -1 Roadster prototype (1999). Quite an impressive resume for an unassuming man who never imagined he would ever see his name on a single Le Mans entry list.

"I never really thought it would be possible for me to race at Le Mans. I dreamed it but I figured that was pretty much unobtainable. (When I started racing) there weren't that many Americans going over there so I figured the chance that one of them would be me were pretty slim. I always watched the Indy 500 and the Daytona 500 but I never really saw them as more than a fantasy. It is like watching a tennis star and saying I'd like to be able to do that, but it didn't really relate to me. I just thought I would drive sports cars as my Dad did. I thought my experiences would be a lot like my dads."

Being a professional sportscar driver, with a heady record of success, it might be easy to assume that Leitzinger places himself above those fans who only wish they could be as good. But such an assumption would be grossly erroneous for this is a man who fully appreciates the fans perspective. He has never lost sight of the young boy he was once; a boy who too sought autographs from his early heroes, just as young people seek his autograph today.

"I think if sportscar drivers are more approachable by the fans it is because the fans seem to have much more of a genuine rapport with the drivers. I don't think they idolize us so much as they simply respect us. They are more like casual friends. I hope they feel they can come up to us and just talk with us. Coming from a family that grew up in racing, and being around all the drivers who were really nice to me and took the time to answer my stupid questions, makes you appreciate the fans perspective. Just taking a little of your time to answer questions can really make their experience at the track that much better.

"Until I was 12 or 13 I used to collect the driver's autographs. I'd get them to sign a scrap piece of paper or whatever I had. When David Loring drove with my Dad, I pulled out a photo I had of him in a Formula Ford that he autographed for me years before. I completely wanted to be a driver and I idolized everyone who could drive a car well. It is really neat to be on the other end of that now."

And Leitzinger makes sure it is a 'neat' experience for the fans by taking time to talk with them and pose for pictures. He has signed countless hero cards and shirts and hats and just about any item a fan has asked him to sign. He demonstrates time and again that he appreciates the people who appreciate him for what he has done in his racing career.

"It is especially nice whenever you have kids come through. Remembering how I felt when I was their age it is wonderful to see the light in their eyes and their reactions when they meet someone they have probably seen on TV. I love to see them drinking everything in and I love being able to let them get up close to the car and share that experience with them."

Having come from a background in racing that was centered on family; Leitzinger has a warm place in his heart too for the Dyson racing family that he has been an 'adopted' member of for so many years.

"I think the reason I like being with Dyson Racing so much is because, when I was racing with my family's team, it was a bunch of people who had been together for a long time. It was the same people every weekend, not a lot of hiring and firing going on, and so we grew to become good friends. That is what it is like with the Dyson team too, with some of the guys having been together for 20 years. It is a really nice atmosphere."

On the Dyson Racing website ([www.dysonracing.com](http://www.dysonracing.com)) appears this comment that we think illustrates the affection Leitzinger feels for the patriarch of the Dyson family.

"Rob Dyson is great to drive for. He is a racer who understands the commitment the drivers put into the effort, and he always gives you the tools to win. Plus, he is an interesting and intelligent person – I have yet to find a subject that he is not conversant on."

Rob Dyson too harbors much affection for his friend and long time driver. He once told us, "He is good with the car and with the guys. He is a real pro too. When it is his turn to go, he gets in and

goes better than anybody. People don't recognize how good he is. He is one of the best sports car drivers in the world. He is simply one of the best. But he is quiet. He doesn't blow his own horn."

Early in Leitzinger's career, former Dyson Crew Chief – now retired – Pat Smith expressed his affection for Leitzinger when he jokingly said, "Butch has a good sense of humor. He always laughs at my jokes so he can't be all bad! He wants to do well and he is willing to do what ever is necessary. Butch drives everything to his ability which is one thing Al Holbert always said about Derek Bell; he will drive whatever you put him in to the best of his abilities."

Smith is obviously a man with an eye for talent. And Dyson obviously holds a special place in his heart for this extraordinary talent wrapped in the body of an outwardly ordinary and unassuming man. He is a man who is both approachable and without question amongst the elite in the world of professional sportscar racing. Of course, we have to tell you that because he won't.

And he couldn't tell us what his wishes for the future are, because he already feels his time in racing has been more rewarding than one man could ever expect.

"I have lived such a charmed life so far, getting more than I deserve. I have had such a wonderful time doing what I want to do. If I could just keep doing this I would be more than happy. If any extras come along I would be happy to pick them up but I would hate to ask for too much more."

Coming back to his formative years for a moment, we asked Leitzinger to tell us what it was like to grow up with two talented parents. His dad has stayed active in racing working with the Crawford team in the Grand-Am series. His mom passed away several years ago from heart problems. Her memory was honored at a special showing of her art at the International Motor Racing Research Center at Watkins Glen, New York. She was an extremely talented artist and she is a special person that will always be lovingly remembered by her son.

"From the perspective of a kid who wanted to be a race car driver she was the ultimate mom you could have. We had a nice backyard and she was an avid gardener. She planted trees and had a nicely landscaped yard and yet she would let my brother and I go out there and race our go-karts and tear up every little patch of vegetation out there! A couple of times she even went out there with a stopwatch and timed us so my brother and I could have some competition.

"She was even more of a fan of racing than my dad was. My parents had a very comfortable life and they could have had a beautiful home on the ocean or something like that but instead they put their money into racing. They were quite happy to do that for it was a dual passion for both of them. In my early racing career, when my dad couldn't come to my races, she would still come to support me.

"There aren't all that many ways that sons and mothers can connect. Fathers and sons can talk about baseball and sports and the like but in our family, everyone sitting around the table could talk about racing. And mom was probably more in the know than all of us. It was really unique to have a mom like her. I miss her deeply."

Today, Butch Leitzinger lives with his wife, Kirsten, and their 22 month old daughter, Annamae, in a Pennsylvania farm house built in the 1800's, and located within the Amish country in Pennsylvania. You would be hard pressed to find anything resembling a race track in this neck of the woods. This quiet place away from racing is the ideal location to relax with several horses and open, empty fields filling the spaces that on race weekends would be filled with people and cars going in every direction, all trying to accomplish something.

No, Butch Leitzinger comes home after each race weekend knowing that he has already accomplished quite a bit. Maybe this weekend in Long Beach will find him heading home with yet another accomplishment – a win in the LMP2 class – behind him. And we feel confident many a fan

will also head home after that weekend feeling they were witness to another stellar exhibition of driving prowess by a man who may not put on airs, but certainly puts on a show.

## **SIDEBARS**

### **Butch Leitzinger on the new Porsche RS Spyders**

For the 2007 ALMS season, Dyson Racing switched from a Lola chassis to a pair of Porsche RS Spyders – the same car the Penske Racing team ran last year and is running again this season. The LMP2 class promises to be a competitive one and Rob Dyson is nothing else if not a competitive racer.

Butch Leitzinger is extremely enthusiastic about the first impression the new cars made on him and on the rest of the Dyson team.

“We tested the car at Willow Springs Raceway, which is not one of my favorite places, but even with the condition of the place I have to say the new cars are simply amazing! That really opened our eyes about what we have been racing against!

“Porsche has been around for so long they know what it takes to build a race car. And the whole car is built by them whereas another manufacturer designs a chassis to accept several different engines. Lola did a wonderful job but when a constructor puts a pen to paper they don’t really know what engine is going to go in the back. It’s the same with electronic systems and the like as every buyer will have their preferences on the equipment they want to run with. Every Porsche comes with the same systems and all the bugs are already worked out when you get the car.

“Our cars came from the factory and went right out onto the track and ran and ran and ran. We didn’t have to do a single first lap and then come into the pits and spend the next two hours debugging whatever electronic problems come up. Nothing against Lola or any other constructor you understand. It’s just that they don’t have any control over any of that stuff while Porsche does.

“It is almost like going to a car dealer and picking up a new car for the street. We were testing at Willow Springs for two days and the only problem we had was when an engineer accidentally shorted out a wire by pressing in the wrong place. It is just amazing how well the car runs. The crew guys love it because normally they have to stay at the track until midnight and then get up at five the next morning to take care of everything that is going on with the car. With this car they have been able to actually leave the track at a reasonable hour and go back to the hotel to have a proper meal.

“The cars have given the team an incredible boost in confidence. And the people at Porsche are wonderful to work with. Watching them from the other pit stall over the years you think they are stand offish but they have been fantastic to work with. They are an open book and they are extremely knowledgeable about the car. They will help us out with anything we need.”

### **On the Long Beach circuit and the fans**

“I’ve raced at Long Beach twice before. Once in the Trans-Am in 2002 and last year with Grand-Am. When a street circuit is done right I really enjoy them. Sometimes they are drawn up on horrible streets that have king-sized crests. But Long Beach is probably the best street circuit out there. It has a really good layout and it is wide. It still can swallow up a car pretty quickly but I think it is the best street layout that I have ever driven.



“On top of the circuit there is a fantastic crowd there! Southern California is probably the best market, along with New England, for racing because they have so many car people there. People have a real interest in cars and in racing. When we used to race in Del Mar it was much the same.

“A Long Beach event can attract 300,000 people. And it is not that people come for the particular series that is running, they come because they are interested in all aspects of the sport of racing. They are also a really informed audience. The fans ask really up to date and intelligent questions. It is just so nice to race in front of people who you know are really enjoying it.”

