

Chris Bingham Experiences The Other Kind Of Luck

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Chris Bingham and Ron Johnson have pooled their talents this season to make sure the world's 'first impression' of the new Saleen S7R is a good one. They were the first-ever winners in the new Steve Saleen creation, taking a victory in the GTS class in Grand Am at Miami's Homestead circuit. They are the dominant team in the class, and the future for the car - and Chris Bingham - is looking good. This is quite a turnaround from a short time ago when the only thing luck brought him was the detritus of misfortune delivered by bad luck.



Prior to joining the successful Saleen operation, Bingham paid his dues in a non-competitive Riley & Scott, running for Hybrid Racing in Grand Am. *"It is nice to be in a car that is competitive and is leading it's division rather than the old Riley & Scott I was in. It was Chassis 001, the very first R&S made. It was the kind of car where you are on the track but never in the race. In the ALMS we couldn't compete with even the other privateers, never mind the factory BMW's and Panoz cars."*

"We ended up selling the car because we could never run with the front-runners and I am a guy who likes to run up front. "

Bingham has been successful, but not always lucky, since he first started out in the sport of motorized madness. *"I started out in karts and I entered the Jim Russell racing school when I was 19. I got invited to the runoffs back in 1991 and wound up winning against 80 other students. In winning you get your full next season for free. I finished as the runner up in the season. I worked my way from there trying to get into Indy Lights but it's hard to move right into that from Formula Mazda.*

"I did a bunch of SCCA stuff; Porsche Club stuff and then I finally had my first opportunity in Indy Lights with Mark White. We had two sponsors come aboard and by the third race at Nazareth we started getting points. Things became tragic soon thereafter when one of our sponsors was killed in a streetcar crash. Another sponsor was indicted for embezzling money! It was terrible. My luck has been terrible with me too often being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I raced with Alex Job at Daytona in 1998 and ran an RSR at Sebring the following year. Hybrid Racing signed me for the ALMS in 1999. We did the full season with Ross Bentley as my teammate. We had a great year but we ran low on funding so we had to let Ross go in order to find a funded driver to keep things moving and help us finish the year. I learned a lot from Ross

"I did my rookie test in IRL last year and I had a signed contract to run IRL this season. It was contingent upon the team getting another major sponsor. But everything kind of fell apart at the last minute. The plan was to do both series but....

But bad luck took command again. But good fortune is where you find it and a big old GT sportscar is one great place to look for it. *"I drove a Porsche RSR before I drove the Saleen so I was a little used to a closed cockpit car, but the SRP car is much more nimble. It is a quicker car in terms of acceleration and it has much more downforce. The motor is smaller but it is higher revving and you get more power down early on. But the GTS car has torque! You get a lot of power off the corners."*

Bingham has family ties to the sport of auto racing and exotic automobiles for the street. *"My father was a partner in an Indy car team back in 1986. He got involved in hydroplanes for a few years. He was always involved in racing on the amateur level and he is now actively involved in vintage racing. He owns and drives a Lotus 23, which was originally run by Stirling Moss. He is a very competitive and active racer."*

"He owns an exotic car dealership up in Seattle and we were in negotiations with Steve Saleen to become a dealer for the S7 street cars. We normally sell Mercedes, Jaguars, Porsches and so on but we were talking about bringing this car in. It so happened that while I was walking around at Daytona this year, looking to see what rides might be available, we got to talking to the powers that be at Saleen and we talked up the dealership issues and possibly running the race car in Grand Am. We came up with a package and here we are.

"We were originally going to run out of California but we decided to run out of our own shop up in Seattle. The Grand Am is more of a privateer series and we wanted to run as a privateer team with semi-factory help so here we are.

"They couldn't produce enough cars to actually have both customer teams and a factory team so the decision was made to purchase our car and have Saleen just kind of help us out while we actually ran the team. Ron Johnson joined us and we have been doing well. We are talking about buying a second car for next season. We would run them in Grand Am and at least one of them in the endurance races at Le Mans, the Petit Le Mans, Daytona, Sebring and so on. We are still working on sponsorship deals and if they come together, that would be our plan for 2002.

"We are going to run the Saleen program a few years and try to develop the car. We have benchmarks for this car by comparing it to last years Mustang. Winning the pole is very satisfying but if you can't finish the race it doesn't matter. What is really difficult is that we have no spare parts for the car so we know we can't crash. Without spare bodywork you can't push the car and that makes it more difficult. There just isn't enough stuff available yet to run as hard as we think the car can be run."

Bingham has his hands on the wheel of the Saleen but his eyes and mind tend to wander to the ovals and open wheeled cars. *"Sportscars and the Grand Am series are my priority right now. I would love to do IRL but I intend to finish this season. Hopefully we will have the opportunity to run a few IRL events later on in the year."*

Maybe so, but for now, Bingham needs to get himself familiar with a little racetrack carved out of a gravel pit in Connecticut. A track that has brought triumph and pain to many would be heroes of auto racing. In other words, a place that Bingham can relate to. *"This is my first time at Lime Rock Park. I'm not sure I like the rain we are having today but I'm from Seattle so I'm used to it!"*

And anyway, isn't every life supposed to include some rain?

