



This feature was part of our race weekend coverage at the 2001 Rolex 24 at Daytona

Friends Make the Difference

Gwen Davin's Story Is Intertwined With Good People

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At this year's Rolex 24, it was my good fortune to stumble into the garage area that housed the Gwen Racing Camaro, and meet Mark Montgomery and Gwen Davin. They were at the Rolex - I soon learned - because they had a passion to persevere. And, because they had one hell of a little black book, they were able to participate in the race - sort of.

Through a lost battle waged against the hands of time, Gwen and Mark found themselves at Daytona without their car and without a crew. They did have a car, but it wasn't theirs. It was borrowed. And they had a crew, but they weren't at the track. So, Gwen and Mark cracked open the little black book and started making frantic phone calls.

But their story of the 2001 Rolex goes back a long way, beginning long before the Friday qualifying session. I talked with Gwen Davin about her start in this sometimes-crazy business of car racing. After meeting her and seeing the glow of enthusiasm emanating so brightly from her eyes, I simply had to know all about her and this 'team'.

"My dad was a mechanic and I was raised working on cars, which I absolutely loved. When I was 16, my girlfriend and I used to sneak into the dragstrip on a Saturday night. You know, how much money do you have when your 16? We would wait until the guard left the gate and then we would sneak in. I loved that time. It was my first real taste of racing.

"I was always around a dragstrip somewhere and when I married Ed Davin in 1981, he was very involved in racing. We ran cars together. Ed and I used to run Formula Continentals and the Formula Vees. One car we owned was an '86 EMSON SA6. It was a beautiful car, designed by Gary Anderson. In fact, I got a chance to chat with Gary at Daytona this year.

"We started off where we owned the cars and we worked on them together. I worked on the gearboxes because I had smaller hands than the guys did!

"But when I got hit with the MS, I just couldn't do as much anymore."



Gwen Davin is what most people would call a special person. When hit with what would knock most people out of the game of life, let alone the game of racing cars, she persevered. If she hadn't, I would never have been able to tell this story. And it is a story worth telling. Please stick with it and continue reading.

"I was on the timing stand at Daytona one year, for the 24 hours race. I got off to go to the bathroom and my left side became suddenly paralyzed. I knew I had MS before that, but that was my most severe episode. I lost all use of my left side. There is still permanent damage but I can walk better now and I have more use of my left arm.

"That was the end of my days as a mechanic. I just couldn't handle a wrench anymore."

But she didn't let this problem keep her out of the race. Her spirit shines when she says, "I like to think that I may have MS, but MS doesn't have me!"

And her spirit soars when she can tell of little moments like this one: "We got a wonderful email from Janos Wimpffen the other day. (Janos is currently recuperating from serious spinal surgery.) He said, "Gwen we are going to have to have a race with our walkers!"

Staying In The Sport Through Partnerships

"I had moved to Daytona in 1998, after Ed and I separated. Mark Montgomery and I are partners. Mark and I decided we could both use some help in racing so we came up with Davin-Montgomery Racing and we have been doing our thing ever since. We first raced in Professional Sports Car, then in the USRRC and then the Grand Am. We run a Camaro in the AGT class.

"I can't remember going to a track where I haven't seen him. I can't remember when we didn't race together. Either he was driving a car I was associated with or we were both involved with a car that somebody else owned. In 1997, Ed and I had a World Sports Car and Mark drove for us the entire season. When I came to Daytona, Mark and I teamed up when he said he would like to continue racing and I said I would too. So we got together again.

"We have been with Grand Am in every race they have run. We are real proud of that fact too.

Looking For More Partners

"It is very difficult to make a living in racing without major sponsorship. It is very difficult to make a go of it without the sponsorship. The same is true in NASCAR. We saw Steve Saleen send thousands and thousands of dollars last year and here we were just battling and struggling along with them.

"One of our running jokes was that they spent more on the paint job on their transporter than we had to spend in total all year!

"Our car is up in Jim Comers shop. We plan to run it in the entire 2001 Grand Am season. Money is, of course, a concern. We want to make a professional presentation at each race. We want to do what we can. We want to make a good run at it rather than show up and go at it piece meal.

"We have various sponsors, but we would certainly welcome more! Last year we had a wonderful sponsor in Wayne Press. We teamed with Broadfoot Racing and we ran the entire season. This year we are trying to come up with new sponsorship. Wayne is trying to get his feet wet as a racer himself. He has his license and he will be working with his Porsche group.

"Last year, Broadfoot wasn't able to make all the events so Mark and I continued on in our own effort. At Road America, we were neck and neck in driver points with Steve Saleen. Their car happened to burn to the ground so they had to do handsprings to get back in the race. They knew if they didn't, we would overtake them in the championship. It was really interesting how things played out.

The People In Racing Are Grand

"I think the camaraderie among the AGT participants is just wonderful. We were so thrilled for Kenny Bupp and Doug Mills and Simon Gregg winning the race. It's like a family effort. You spend so many years racing with each other that when one does well, everybody is happy for them. If we need a part we go to them and they know they can come to us.

"We have had the privilege of racing with Rob Dyson for many years. He is very personable and outgoing and whatever you need he is there. We had a similar relationship with the RISI team. If we had a problem they would come over with their 'medical' equipment and go right into the engine to see if they could help us. Those kinds of relationships are just wonderful. That is really why we race.

"When the factories are involved, they play their cards a little more closely to the vest. Grand Am is just different (from the ALMS). It is more family oriented. The entire organization is. You can call Roger Edmondson or David Watson and just have a conversation with them like we are now. They are very open and very user-friendly. It is just so refreshing.

"Grand Am is clearly more affordable. With other sanctioning bodies we have found things much more political. Some of them have made rules changes along the way but you don't have any of that with Grand Am. They publicize the rules, that's what you go by and they are applied fairly. They are there to help you any way they can.

When Rolex Time Runs Out, Friends Run In

"We sent our Camaro up to Jim Comer's shop in North Carolina to get it prepared for the Rolex. But Jim was so involved with setting up his Corvette that he got a little behind schedule with our car. One thing led to another and they were only able to get the one car ready. We said don't worry about breaking your neck to get our car ready and then he graciously offered us the use of his '84 Camaro, which was race ready.

Comers gesture of assistance is something Gwen and Mark have come to know as the way of the people in the sport. They can recount many instances where someone has lent a hand in a time of need. That was certainly the case last year.

"We have had all sorts of assistance at the race track! Last year, when we were running third in class in the Rolex, we got down to about 6:00 AM and the engine let go. We were so far ahead that it took the next car 30 minutes to catch us! We had about 40 people from several different teams come to our aid. They all tried to help us cobble the car back into running shape so we could get back out on the track and finish the last 13 laps.

"We finally made it back out on to the track. But the car started looking like one of those mosquito - fogging machines with all the steam coming out the back! And it was just clunking along. Well the Grand Am folks just sort of politely said would you please just come in and let the other cars continue to race! When we pulled into the pit lane, the people in the first four pits stood up and applauded! That just felt so good!

And once again in 2001, Gwen and Mark witnessed the goodness of people when they found themselves in the unique position of being racers without a crew!

"We had never laid eyes on the '84 Camaro until Daytona. Jim Comer thought he had it all lined up to have a crew come down. We thought we were set. When we got to the track on Friday morning we found the car on the trailer but when we looked, we didn't see anybody else around! We had no crew!

"Mark and I looked at each other and we said, OK, get on the phone! We can't stand around here and wait for a crew! So we started calling around to everybody we knew and one by one our friends just said 'we'll be there!'

"Jim Comer had one of his guys just load up a truck with all the parts they could find and drive it down to us overnight. We didn't have anything! We had shipped all of our stuff up to Jim's shop along with our car. We didn't have a way to put fuel in it, we didn't have a way to change the tires, we had nothing!

"We qualified the car by the skin of our teeth. Mark got in the car and just drove his heart out! The tires were 5 or 6 years old but we had no way to change them! One thing I can say about Mark is that, in all the years I have been associated with him he has never failed to qualify a car I have been associated with. He always gets the lap times we need.

"We started the race on the same tires we qualified with and they went off sooner than we hoped they would. Mark came in and gave the car over to Sim Penton, telling him the car was all over the place. Sim got in and ran about 11 laps when one of the tires blew. He hit the wall hard and tore up the entire right side of the car and took the rear end off. Fortunately, he was fine, only hurting his knee.

"We took a look at the car in the garage and said there is no way we can fix it. But our hastily assembled crew said we want to try to finish this race just because of all of the obstacles we had to overcome to get here. So we pulled ourselves up by the bootstraps and went to work. Now, this is only the second hour of the race, and we have people from everywhere working on the car. And if anything could go wrong it did!

"We had someone drive away in our golf cart! Someone else took off with my walker. You know how people can just hop in the cart and drive off; well that's what they did! Of course, our garage was at one end of the paddock and our pit was at the other end so we used up a lot of shoe leather without that cart!

"Our guys had no sleep and they were in there the whole time trying to get the car put back together. They worked on the car for 12 hours, and we used every spare part we had! When Mark finally got in the car, in the rain, he reported that the car was changing lanes all by itself!

"I watched him coming out of NASCAR turn four and I could see his helmet banging against the inside of the car! The car would just go BOOM! and jump lanes! The car was a mess.

"Mark tells of a story that applies here. When he first started racing he drove a big block Corvette that would change lanes like that. He said he didn't know any different. He thought that is what all racecars did at Daytona! He was able to call on that experience to get him through. I really don't know how he did it.

"In the last laps of the race, Mark was running 2:11's, on rain tires, in the dry, with the car changing lanes on him! How in the world he did that I will never know!

"We finished 71st! We have done better but let me tell you the guys were thrilled. We were so happy to qualify and to finish the race but everything in the middle is just a blur! Everybody came out in one piece!"

Quite an amazing tale about two amazing racers who have a lot of "friends in the business".

"We love racing and feel very blessed to have had the privilege to do this. We have met so many nice people and we cherish the relationships we have built up over the years. That is why we continue to race and we would like to give back whatever we can to the sport."

Seeing two determined people with an infectious spirit to persevere against all odds, like Gwen Davin and Mark Montgomery have done, raises the bar for everyone else who ever wanted to call it quits when things went wrong. The next time you attend a Grand Am event, I suggest you visit their garage and let them know you have read this story and that you appreciate their continued participation in the sport. I know I do. They have inspired me.