

## Jack Baldwin – A Racing Life

© Andrew S. Hartwell

(02/26/03)

Jack Baldwin is the kind of tall, trim and broad-shouldered mountain of a man who could easily step into a leading role in a Hollywood western. This Tampa, Florida native sure carries himself like a tall Texan. And it is this same kind of strong and confident appearance that he projects outside of a racecar that shows up every time he is inside one and heading for the front of the pack. But at heart, he is just a good man who has made a lot of fans along the way.



And like a rugged cowboy, he got his hands dirty by working hard. He did not have the money to saddle up a pony of choice. He earned his place on the racetrack by perseverance and determination, and by working jobs in areas ranging from construction to clothing. And this strong and determined American broke into this sport at the bottom. So there was no place for him to go but up.

The man's racing resume begins in 1970 and includes winning the 1972 Formula Ford championship – in a car that sometimes ran with several different brands of tires at each wheel - and the 1992 Trans-Am Championship in the Hot Wheels Camaro. He also took the crown as IMSA GTU Champion in 1984 and 1985, driving a Mazda RXC-7, and he was invited to participate in the International Race Of Champions (IROC) series in 1993 and 1994. For the last several years he has been teamed up with George Robinson in the 74 Ranch Resorts Riley & Scott MKIII and later, the IIIC, running in Grand Am. He has won 30 races, including wins at Daytona and Sebring.

This man knows how to win. And 33 years after it all began, he is still in the game at the young age of 52, teaching future winners how to control a racecar. This is what the Porsche website has to say about Jack Baldwin, an instructor for The Porsche Driving Experience, *“Jack’s achievements in teaching are almost as impressive as his presence. An engaging, down-to-earth instructor with an uncanny ability to explain the driving process, Jack has been an instructor at the Brumos Porsche University Driving School with Hurley Haywood.”* (source: <http://www.porschedriving.com/drivers.html>)

We caught up with Jack at the new Barber Motorsports Park in Alabama where he was teaching the latest crop of wannabe-winners how to take the turns at speed. We asked him to go back over the last 33 years and tell us how he got started and then to bring us ‘up to speed’ on his plans for the next 33 years.

### From Cortina To Formula Ford

“I was racing a Cortina that my brother owned but the first real racecar for me was a Formula Ford. A buddy of mine from college got a car that was taken as collateral on a loan someone didn't pay back. He called me and said, “Hey, I got a racecar. You want to race it?” And I said “Sure!” I didn't even know what it was but he said to come up to Gainesville (Florida), we'll get a couple of hundred bucks and go up to Washington to pick it up. So I went up there, went into the warehouse where it was stored, and that's when I found out it was a Formula Ford.

Formula Fords tend to be on the small side and we wondered if fit was a problem for him.

“Not really because, it was a March and I later drove Titans and a Lola and I fit in all of them. I’m bigger now than I was then. I was still the same height but I was lighter back then. And those cars were so much fun to drive! They were light. They didn’t have ground effects. You could slide them all over the place.

Baldwin got in at the start of IMSA and he recalls what it was like back then for a poor boy with fast aspirations and a slow income.

“I went to one of the very first IMSA races they had at VIR (Virginia International Raceway). John Bishop, Hurley Haywood, Peter Gregg, they were all there. Formula Ford was the support race for the original IMSA series. This was the beginning of IMSA. I was around for that.

### **Rounding Up Tires**

“I was there with my teammate Bill Harris. Now, we had no money. We were just there trying to see what we could do, trying to be a racecar driver. When I first started driving the Formula Fords we were on what they called Firestone No-Dots. They had tread; they were racing tires but... Then, a guy by the name of Lee Goth from Goodyear came up to us and said, “We’re looking for a team from the Southeast.”

“Wow! He was talking to us! Now, you have to remember that, Bill and I were trying to look like a real team – even though we had no resources to draw on. We both had FORD vans and I had a black one and he had a white one. I called him before we went down to VIR and I told him he had to paint his black. He asked why and I said because I don’t have any money to paint mine white and we have to look like a team!

“I never owned a racecar in my life. At VIR, I was in a Titan, owned by Jack Miller. We were standing side by side and I told Bill, “When I come in from practice, let’s put the car up on a jack stand and make us look real cool.”

“Well, Goth comes over and says they want a team to help them run some of their new tires, and are you interested? Hello! Tires? Are you kidding me? I used to have to go around the paddock asking for other guy’s throwaways! Hell, if it had tread on it, it went on my car. I even have a picture of me in a car at the SCCA runoffs with three different brand tires on my car. Seriously!

“The rule was pretty simple; if it was black and held air, I raced on it.

“I was sideways a lot in those cars. I did a lot of drifting through corners. It was pretty exciting!

“Anyway, the Goodyear tires were slicks. They were the first slicks from Goodyear and when I put them on the car I was way out in front real fast. Bruce McGinnis was a guy I raced against a lot back then. Bruce was way behind me in no time. But the slicks weren’t made for that car and the suspension got into the sidewall and I had a big blowout. I didn’t win even though I had a 45-second lead.

### **Giving Europe A Try**

“For the next 15 years (from 1972 on) there was 15 years of famine. I went to Europe for a few weeks but, because I was an American, I didn’t get what you could call the best deal, do you know what I mean? Back then, they had a Formula Ford Championship with the top 3 cars from all 18 participating countries invited to race. Each country ran elimination races to pick their 3

representatives. Here in the states, they ran it at the old Mid-America track in Missouri. I won the race, Bruce was second, and a guy named Ron Dikes was third.

“That whole European experience was just bad. Even the American Importer who was there was bad. So, when I got back from there I was not interested in racing in Europe.

### **Winning In The USA - With Blood On His Hands**

“I was interviewed after that Championship race at Mid America and they asked me what I wanted to do and I said I wanted to be a Grand National Stock Car driver. (Back then, the Winston Cup Series was known as Grand National). I never had a vision of being in Formula One. To me, Europe was just so far away.

“You have to understand that I had no help from anybody. No one saying ‘Let me help you out with a gallon of gas’, nothing. My parents weren’t supporting me. So it was really hard for me. So I had to work where I could earn the most money. So I took a job as an ironworker.

“The guy that owned my car was the superintendent on the big jobs in Atlanta. I did that for a year because it was high pay and no responsibility. I put my money into my car and I worked on it every night after work. On Friday, I’d go to the bank, take out my money, load up the car and drive to the racetrack.

“I was the guy who fixed the car, drove it to the track, unloaded it, raced it, loaded it and towed it back home. A buddy of mine, Jody Darlington, would often come with me to help me out but, I didn’t have any money to pay him, he was just there to help me out.

“I ran Formula Fords in 70, 71, 72 and in 74. I won the SCCA divisional title each year and I won the special invitational race in 72. I never won the SCCA Runoffs but I won this special race. It was considered bigger than the runoffs because, what they did was they invited all the current and past champions to race together. They had the top drivers from around the country, all the top guns. And they held it at Mid America because it was in the middle of the country, about 70 miles west of St. Louis.

“I remember that I was working on the Colony Square job site in Atlanta. I went to the bank and took out every dime that I had – except \$25 I needed to leave in the bank to keep the account open. I put the money in my pocket, loaded the car and got ready to go all by myself. A friend called me just before I left and said he’d like to come with me. So, we jumped in the van, headed off to Missouri and I won it all.

“I was the first racer to get to the track and the second guy there was Bruce McGinnis. And it was a great race. I was just determined! And I got some good advice too. There was a local guy there and he said, “You know you will go faster if you go through turn two flat out”, so the next day that’s what I did and he came up to me later and said he was only kidding!

“When I was out there qualifying the car, the shifter knob broke off as I’m going through turn two. I’m driving along with this ball in my hand and I don’t know what the hell to do with it. Back then, you did a lot of high speed drifting and running sideways. You were ‘brave’. I was so pissed that the thing broke that I threw the ball out and jammed my hand down on the shifter post. The post stuck in my hand and by the time I finished running the car was filled with blood all over the seat and the cockpit. It was a real mess but I got the pole and we went on to win the race.

## **Taking A Different Wheel To The Track – And Scaring The Cops**

“After the invitational race, I did get a few calls but, since I had no money, nothing came together. After spending several years of trying to get a sponsor during hard economic times, I decided to take a job as the first-ever instructor at Road Atlanta. They set up what was called The Georgia State Highway Patrol Pursuit and High Speed Driving School. They had a contract with the state to train all the state troopers. And we were the pioneers for this kind of training.

“It was me, Dave Sawyer, the guy who built the track, and his partner Earl Walker. I was their only employee. I still have the original handbook! I was 22 years old and I thought I was in heaven! Man, I had a JOB at a racetrack!

“We instructed 490 troopers, 50 a week, running from Monday through Thursday. We had 10 cars. 5 FORD Galaxies and 5 Plymouths. They were trooper cars. Every Monday I would be in the classroom. I would walk in with my curly hair and my beard and say “Good morning gentleman!” Man, the old veteran patrol guys would look at me and say “Oh my god, what have we got here?”

“You know, those guys couldn’t drive at all. What we did was we took them out of the classroom that first morning and took them out on the track. We did one lap with each guy and boy did we get their attention! We would come out of pit road (the old pit road, on the hill) at full speed and not back off going into turn one. And these cars could haul butt and hit 130 on the backstretch. And they slid a lot!

“I did that for two years and then got back into the Formula Fords for a while. I finally gave up on trying to find a sponsor and I made up a 3-year plan to earn enough money to become my own sponsor. I decided to get into the T-shirt business at 27 years old.

## **Baldwin The Businessman**

“There was a T-shirt company in Atlanta called the T-Shirtery. I became involved with them and we were huge in the Rock and Roll tour shirt business. My accounts included Aerosmith, AC/DC, KISS, Boston and Ted Nugent. I knew the Aerosmith guys real well. We made the shirts that they sold at the concerts. We didn’t actually sell them.

“Then I opened up a retail store in Atlanta that we called the T-Shirtery Company Store. It was located across the street from the Peaches record store, which was the largest record store in the country at that time. And we were the largest T-shirt store in the United States. I had all the concert tour shirts – for everybody. You could walk into my store and ask for a Paul McCartney WINGS tour shirt and I had it. We could get them printed up anytime we wanted in any quantity so we had every shirt in that store that you could think of. The Rolling Stones, Chicago, Fleetwood Mac, everybody!

“I made a living at it but, the more successful I became in the business the more it took me away from racing. After three years I realized that it wasn’t going to get me where I wanted to go. So I sold my share in the business and got out.

“I just wanted to go back to racing. Even though I had come up with a lot of good ideas that helped to make the business succeed, I was just getting fed up with it all. And then one day Joe Varde called me. Now a few months back, I had told him he should go make a pitch to Chrysler to race their cars. Well, he called me and said why don’t you come with me to Mid Ohio. And when I asked him why he said, “Because I got the factory deal!”

"He came by and picked me up and off we went to Mid-Ohio! From there I went on to become his team manager for the Dodge Charger program in the IMSA R&S Series. I drove some of the time and worked real hard. I remember leaving the shop in Tampa at about 5:00 in the morning - after working on the car all night - and going back to my parent's house. I was taking a shower when my dad stopped by and asked me where I was going. I said "Sears Point". He said, "When are you going?" I said, "Now."

"Myself and a kid I had with me got in the truck and drove it non-stop from Florida to California. I told him that the truck was not to stop for any reason! We literally showed up at Sears Point a half-hour before Joe had to get it out on the track. We pulled up, took down the ramps, backed the car off, and Joe got in it and went out on the track!

"If we had stopped along the way, we would never have made it!

### **He Finally Gets A Break**

"I got my break when Ira Young took me on board in the Malibu Grand Prix Mazda. He let me drive his racecar and I went on to win 2 IMSA GTU Championships back to back. From there I went on to race for Chevrolet and Peerless Automotive Engineering driving the Levi Garrett GTO Camaro in the IMSA Camel GT Series.

Then I went on to drive for Buzz McCall and American Equipment Racing driving the famous Hot Wheels Camaro. I won the 1992 Trans Am championship in that car. My teammates were Scott Sharp and Scott Pruett. My job was to mentor Scott Sharp and try to help him develop as a professional. He certainly had the talent and was fast, but he was young and impatient and needed a bit of direction to help him succeed. Of course, Scott Pruett came from Indy car and he was coming back to Trans AM to be my teammate. He was an established professional and a real asset to the team. Those were great years.



After Trans Am I ran the IROC series for two years. It was wonderful to get the invitation to run with some of the best names in the business. I ran against Dale Earnhardt, Davey Allison, Ricky Rudd, Mark Martin, Dale Jarrett, Harry Gant, Terry Labonte, Al Unser Jr., Jeff Brabham and Arie Luyendyk among others. Racing IROC door to door handle with that whole group at places Like Daytona and Talladega was awesome! Beating Earnhardt for second place at Talladega in a photo finish was the absolute high point for me. After the race, Dale comes over to my car and sticks his head in my window and he had the biggest smile on! He said "That was great racing with you! That was a lot of fun!"

"Man, I really enjoyed those two years! To just have that opportunity was outstanding!

" I became Director of Motorsports for Royal Oak charcoal and we built a Grand National team running a Chevrolet for one season, with Mike McLaughlin behind the wheel. WE were doing some testing at Talladega and I ran into my old friend Joe Varde. I told him I wanted to drive and he suggested I call George Robinson.

"George bought a GTS Aurora Oldsmobile from Irv Hoerr and was going to race it. I called him at the 74 ranch and he said he was going to call me! We met at Daytona and we won the 1997 12

Hours of Sebring in the Hot Wheels 74 Ranch Aurora. It was George and Irv and I and that was a great race! We were the American car up against the Porsches. The crowd was cheering us on and it was fun.

"The rules changed after that and the Aurora was not going to be competitive, so George decided at that time to step up and buy a Riley & Scott. We started racing it in 1999 and it was a great car. We started with a Chevy engine and later switched to a Judd motor.

"Man, driving night practice at Sebring in that car was awesome! It was the best to be out there running nose to nose with a bunch of very fast headlights!

"You know, George and I met years before when he first started racing in IMSA. I walked over to him and I said, "Hey! If you see me coming, get the hell out of my way!" And he said, "OK, I will!"

"We became great friends and I can't say enough about what a great guy he is. I feel the sport is fortunate to have him in it. Sportscar racing was built on the backs of the independent owners who have contributed so much to its history. George is one of those people.

"There are a lot of reasons why he just isn't in the mood to go racing. A big part of it is the economy and then there is the issue of how the rules changed and how he was treated in the transition. So he is just sitting it out this season to consider his choices.

It's really too bad that, after taking 5 years to develop the team we ended up with, led by Jimmy Fraser, because of circumstances outside of our control that we aren't racing this year. Because of the position George was put in, the team had to disband. I sincerely hope, as we all do, that George will return to sportscar racing.

### **This Cowboy Is Looking For A New Saddle**

"I am not retired! Because George decided to sit out the season, we ran our last race in November of last year. Did you see the poster called "End of an era"? It's a great shot of all the prototypes lined up at the last Grand Am race. Anyway, I had an offer for a ride at Daytona if I wanted it but I had talked to Speed Channel and they wanted me to make a commitment for a whole year. I signed on to cover the Rolex Series and Grand Am Cup.

"I thought this is a good year to do that. It is an area I have an interest in and wouldn't mind developing. And, under the circumstances and the way the sport is right now, I thought, take it. Go ahead. So now I'm a car analyst for Speed Channel and I continue working as one of the lead instructors for the Porsche Driving Experience. I work with my friends Hurley, Doc Bundy and David Murry.

"The Porsche Driving Experience has just been growing by leaps and bounds. It is the best driving program in the country. It is for anyone who wants to experience the fun of driving a Porsche 911 to the best of their ability. We just moved to the new Barber Motorsports Park in Birmingham, Alabama. And it is definitely the nicest racetrack in North America, and probably, in the world!

"The park is a place every fan needs to come to! It will blow you away! It is like nothing you have ever seen. Let me put it like this, if Ritz-Carlton were to build a racetrack and a country club this is how they would do it! There are sculptures all over the property. There are over a million tulip bulbs planted around the grounds. There is a 140,000 square foot museum. The bathrooms are all beautiful with tile floors. There is new sod and the place is landscaped like Disneyland! You drive

in here and you can't believe it is a racetrack. I've heard that they spent around \$60 million on this place! And they want it to be the best track in the world. And it is so upscale you can't believe it!

### **Humble Roots, Happy Memories, Future Trails**

"All I ever wanted to do was to be a racecar driver. I had a dream, and I had a passion. I basically set out to fulfill my dream. I'm just one more guy who had no money, and no help, who hung in there. I can tell you all the stories and all about the struggle that almost became a curse. It was just my absolute passion.

"I didn't know why I wanted to do it, I just did! When you look back, it has been pretty good for me. I've won 30 races and four championships, run IROC twice and just had a great run. And I can tell you stories about everybody!

"My life is racing and I love everything about it especially all the people and the friends and fans I've made through the years. I'm still as excited as I ever was when I'm at the track. I haven't lost the fire inside. I love to race.

"I am working on a program for next year, but think about it, it's a weak economy and the direction for sportscar racing is still a bit cloudy. I'm for the Daytona prototypes and I would like to see them succeed. I can get past the comments on how they look but I do feel they need more power. Hopefully that will evolve over time.

"I know that Grand Am has a solid plan and they are committed to making it work. I wish them all the best, and I expect to show my support throughout the season. I want to see the concept work. I think the concept is good for racing.

"I use my free time to race dirt bikes! And I ride with my 11-year-old daughter Erica. My 14 year old, Allison, is a gymnast and a serious one too! I also race hare-scrambles and enduros! I drive a 300 gas-gas. I love it! I figure, at my age, I don't want to grow up because then I'll be old! I feel good! I don't have any aches and pains. I feel great! In fact, if the phone rings I'll be ready! I am always looking forward to my next race!"

If only sportscar racing was as strong and vigorous as Jack Baldwin! Who knows? Maybe Hollywood will yet call on him to make the movie that tells the story of the cowboy that gets the gold and drives all the cattle into one pen!

