



Spencer Moves To The Other Side – Without Leaving Mazda

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We have had an absolutely delightful day here at Daytona, with a steady breeze blowing through the morning and afternoon, and temperatures never getting much warmer than in the high 60's. Add in some good old sunshine – and a good old racing team – and you have the right mix for what Mazda-be considered a great time to return to the Rolex 24 hours of Daytona.

We say Mazda-be because the team that has long championed the Mazda brand in sportscar racing – both the modern and vintage varieties – Team Spencer Motorsports, has returned to this historic speedway to once again attempt to put an orange-colored Mazda-powered racecar on a path to a podium. They did it before a few years back (2002) with their Mazda-Kudzu, a time when a prototype looked like a prototype used to look. Roofless.



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We caught up with Dennis Spencer, the head of TSM, to get the scoop on why he decided to get back into the Grand Am series, running – of all things – a GT car, the Mazda RX-8.

“This has always been one of our favorite races. We love things that are long, painful, and hard. One of the things on my list of things to check off in life was to run this race with my son, Scot. The rotaries were taken out of the Rolex prototypes class we had no options. No that the 3-rotor is allowed in the GT cars – although we wish they were allowed in the DP cars – to get it off my list we decided that this is what we would do.”

Spencer and son are not going it alone this weekend. Fans who know the history of Mazda in sportscar racing will recognize the names of the people who have helped put this team back on the track.

“We took those people who are the most special and influential to Scot in his vintage racing, especially Nancy Mandeville, (wife of Roger Mandeville) and Gary Drummond, who has been a long time friend and partner. It is the same with Roger. They are absolutely the most

talented people and we share a lot of rotary experiences. So the fun thing was, we decided to build this car while surrounding ourselves with the people we love. No manufactures obligations. No sponsor obligations. No driver obligations and nothing political about it. The worst that could happen is we have a year to get ready for next year.”

Next year? What about the rest of the season?

“This race is it. Right now our plan is: this is the race that is special to anybody who has ever been involved in endurance racing. This is a race we have had multiple podiums on. Many people race a lifetime here and never finish. We have been blessed with great equipment, great people and great mentors like Jim Downing. And it is one of those things that you miss. It’s like a great dessert that you keep coming back for more of.”

Well we know all about going back for more great desserts! And we know that a taste is often never enough. So what is Team Spencer looking for this weekend? A little taste, or the whole thing?

“A good result for us would be to take the green flag.”

And the chase to that flag will find Spencer sitting on the wrong side of the car. Well, not the wrong side for a Mazda RX-8, but the other side from where he is used to sitting. (Then again, who cares what side of the dessert table you are on, as long as you can reach the good stuff!)

“This will be the first time I have ever driven a race car from the left side of the car. My life has been in prototypes. And if you look at our Camel Light vintage GTP cars, the open top prototypes (like the short lived “Mazola” - a combination Lola chassis and Mazda motor the TSM campaigned in a few ALMS races several years back) everything is backwards now. They moved the apexes to the wrong side of the car!”



Our conversation was talking place amidst a flurry of activity by team members who were making necessary adjustments – and awaiting a shortened and rebalanced driveshaft. A move necessitated by a series of circumstances best left unsaid. The people moving all around us were all veteran Mazda-iacs, who knew just what it takes to make a rotary go-round.

“Our starting driver is Roger Mandeville. Roger has the most experience and the highest level of cool. It’s been a long time since we were in a race with 70 cars. We remember those days and what it is like, but again, it’s been awhile.

“Roger and his men built this car as a last minute deal. Roger will start it and then hand off to Rich Grupp. Rich has made me look good many times. Next will be Gary Drummond who

has been with Roger as long as I can ever remember. And then you have Scot and then myself. We've loaded up the seats with five drivers and that way, if we old guys decide we want to take a nap, we can!"

(We reminded old man Spencer to bring the car into the pits first. It would be the preferred tack to take. He agreed, and said he might just pick up a bottle of Geritol for insurance.)

"This weekend, there are a lot of old familiar faces here. And every time you do something like this it awakens the senses. I have been missing this since the day after we last ran our prototype here, because it was no longer allowed. I also miss Sebring and the Petit Le Mans because those are the races that meant something special."

Something special is what the #63 Mazda RX-8 painted up in bright sponsor less orange is. It was built from the ground up for a Mazda team, by a Mazda specialist.

"Roger Mandeville built the chassis in his Mandeville Autotech shops. The motor, which is really cool, was built by Rich (Grupp). All these years Rich has proven himself to be one of the best fabricators and drivers I ever got my hands on. Building a motor is something that is kind of nerve wracking. If it doesn't run, it's easy to point a finger. Rich built our practice motor and our race motor. That to me is as special to me as being able to run this race with my son Scot. People don't understand the quiet genius that is working inside his head!"

We have spent many hours talking to Dennis Spencer over the years. We know first hand that he loves a challenge and rises to one every time. We have seen him work closely with people to help them develop themselves in the same way he looks to his team collectively to develop their race cars. This may be a one-time race weekend for Team Spencer Motorsports, but Spencer prefers to look at it as one more opportunity to help his little community of friends, peers and teammates reach their full potential. Or at least insure they enjoy the experience.

"In our time in racing, we haven't been building cars, we have been building people. And you do that one at a time. And that is what this weekend is for us."