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Through The Esses - Mark Wilkins: In A Gold Rush For Champagne In 2008

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Mark Wilkins has finished on the podium twice in the GT class at the Rolex 24 At Daytona. He ran the race three times with his father, Greg Wilkins, driving a Porsche GT3 Cup car. At the start of the 2007 season, Wilkins moved into a brand new – yet somewhat old – gold and black Lexus-Riley Daytona Prototype and thus began his first year in the highly competitive DP class.



The car was purchased from Chip Ganassi Racing and, ironically, this new DP effort kicked off with the first DP chassis to ever come out of the Riley shops. Painted up with primary sponsor Exchange Traded Gold colors, the black and gold car immediately set a new standard for what makes an attractive race car. And in that first race the AIM Autosport entry, sponsored by Exchange Traded Gold, Barrick Gold Corporation, RBC Financial Group and Telus' Mike Network, did what many others failed to do in multiple attempts; they made it all the way through to the end and pulled down a fifth place finish. For that race, David Empringham joined Wilkins and the Frisselle brothers, Burt and Brian.

Wilkins hails from Toronto, Canada. He grew up with his dad involved in racing and when he hit the age of 12, he got into karts and then moved up to open wheel racing in Formula Fords, F-2000 mounts and Star Mazda. This season he made the move all the way up into professional sportscar racing and, if his dreams come true, he will log race miles in the Daytona Prototype class for many years to come.

We began our conversation with Mark Wilkins by asking him for some background on AIM Autosport and his involvement with them.

“I have run with AIM pretty much for my entire professional career. AIM Autosport is run by Andrew Bordin, Keith Willis and Ian Willis and they have been in open wheel racing since 1995. Sportscar endurance racing was a new experience for the team this year. This was our first year in the Grand-Am series, running the Lexus-Riley Daytona Prototype. All the guys on our team had racing experience, but had never worked on a DP program before.

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And we were rushing to get everything ready. In the November tests we just made it. We didn't even have the car painted until just before the Rolex 24 hour race. It was a wild start!

"My father and I have been a major part of the AIM Autosport organization for several years. My dad was my primary backer for my open wheel career. It was my dad's personal financial involvement that kept me going. For 2007 Exchange Traded Gold became our team's sponsor. For 2008 we are working some additional sponsorship opportunities. Our goal is long term stable funding for the team.

"Two years ago we started working on the DP program. Our goal was to enter a series that we thought would be commercially viable and one in which we could be successful. We felt open wheel racing in North America simply wasn't that strong so it was Grand-Am for us.

"We bought the Riley from Chip Ganassi. We have the first one ever made, chassis number 001. And despite its age, we are confident our chassis had no disadvantage to any Riley chassis made after it.

"For our first season in a DP, we felt we were very happy with what we were able to accomplish, given the number of competitive cars. And most of the top teams, like Gainsco, SunTrust and Chip Ganassi had been running their cars for a few years. It was tough to just jump right in and do well at it. But, we finished fifth at our first race, the Rolex 24 At Daytona. Just to finish that race is a huge accomplishment!"

Over the course of the rest of the season, the #61 AIM Autosport Lexus-Riley would go on to garner 6 top ten finishes, just missing a seventh in the final race at Miller Motorsports Park. Contact with another car just a few minutes from the end of the 1000K race dropped them back to 11th at the finish.

For 2008, Wilkins is looking for a season filled with single-digit finishes.

"This season has been a tremendous joy for me. The team did a fantastic job and overcame a lot of adversity. I honestly think we surprised a lot of people. We had a couple of events where we ran really close to the front. We struggled at a few races but for the most part we continued to improve over the course of the year. And I attribute a lot of that to my teammates, Burt and Brian Frisselle. They had a lot of experience in the DP's and they helped me to get up to speed quickly. They also brought a lot of knowledge that we really needed to further our program.

"We are coming back next year and we are committed to the program. Our goal was to learn a lot the first year and then raise our expectations considerably higher for the second. We want to run up at the front and consistently challenge for race wins next year. For me, it's about trying to make a career out of it. We need to show well for that to happen.

"Right now, we are working on putting our 2008 program together. We are looking to see who my co-driver will be and we are working on our engine program. (An announcement is expected shortly.) We are sticking with the same chassis and we plan to do some testing. The car is heading back to the Riley shop soon as we are fifth in line to get it upgraded to the new 2008 bodywork. We are sticking with Riley because we think that package is still going to be very competitive even with the new manufacturers coming next year, and because they have been very good to us.

“And we will continue our relationship with AIM Autosport. They are a team-driven organization. We’ve been with them for a long time because of their professionalism and because Ian Willis is a great engineer. The racing is not only competitive it is a lot of fun!”

For 2008, new bodywork designs will be permitted in the series. And several of the original seven DP manufacturers/constructors have sold or transferred their Grand-Am license to other builders. To date, this includes Fabcar (Sold to Cheever), Doran (to Dallara) and Multimatic (to Lola). Wilkins sees many challenges ahead for his favorite team.

“Next year will find a lot of changes coming to the series with new bodywork for existing cars, new cars from Dallara, Lola, and Cheever-Fabcar, and everyone switching to Pirelli tires. We are still waiting to get a firm schedule for 2008, but we have been told it will be made public on October 1st. But, despite the uncertainty ahead, I would say to the other teams out there that, in 2008 you best watch out for the small Canadian team, because we are coming on and we think we have what it takes to run with the front cars. We intend to run for the championship.”

While all of us await word from the Edmondson camp on where this series will run in 2008, and ponder the chances of the #61 entry now that their first year of learning has gone by, we can go back in time a bit further and consider how Mark Wilkins ever got started driving race cars in the first place.

“I started in racing primarily because of my dad’s involvement. He took a driving school in 1991, when I was still very young. Once he did the Bridgestone Racing School he liked it so much he went out and bought a Camaro that he ran in a bunch of regional races. Kenny Wilden worked with my dad to help him improve his driving skills and they partnered and raced together and moved up through several series. All this time I was there, in the pits, and being at the races just sort of became a part of my daily routine growing up.

“I got into karts when I was 12. I ran there for about three years, but I never completed a full season as my dad was really busy so we didn’t run as many races as we could have. In 1999, I had my chance to go to a racing school; the Jim Russell school at Mont- Tremblant. It went well and I was invited back for the runoffs. I made it to the semi-finals but they said I needed a little more experience. I later did the Bridgestone School and ran in their Formula 2000 series and finished third in the standings.

“As for the near future, I see myself as being right where I am in racing. Open wheel racing got me started but I always wanted to get into sportscar racing. I really enjoy the long race format. We are really hoping that the Grand-Am model, and the ties they have to NASCAR, will pay off and help the series to grow. I see myself in Grand-Am for the next three to four years if possible. Certainly if there are opportunities to go to ARCA and similar series we would want to look at that but I see myself in Grand-Am for a few years at least.”

If the competition proves to possess more talent, or more racing luck, than that possessed by young mister Wilkins, he fully intends to pursue another career avenue that will keep him in the automotive world.

“If I wasn’t racing I would still be working in the automotive industry. I just finished college and 2008 will be the first season where I am not splitting my time between college and racing. My full focus will be entirely on the racing program. And if the racing just doesn’t work I will probably enter the auto industry and do something on the management side there. I have always enjoyed cars, be it street cars or race cars so if it is not in racing it will still be with cars for sure.”

We will keep our radar tuned to Mark Wilkins in 2008. Perhaps that stunning paint scheme on the #61 Lexus-Riley will have a chance to be displayed in victory lane. After all, the thought of gold and champagne coming together in celebration wouldn't be too difficult to imagine now, would it?



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