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Through The Esses - Corvette Coming To GT2 In 2008 – Part 1 – Bill Riley

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Recently Bill Riley and Lou Gigliotti announced they would be working together to bring a brand new Chevrolet Corvette into the American Le Mans Series (ALMS) GT2 class in 2008. The new car is currently under construction at the Riley Technologies shop in Mooresville, North Carolina with the



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design team being led by Bill's father, Bob Riley. Gigliotti's LG Motorsports team will be the first to campaign the car, beginning with the season opening Sebring 12 Hours in March.

Sportscar fans – and Corvette fans in particular – are understandably excited about the prospect of seeing their favorite marque take on the Porsche, Ferrari and Panoz cars that have been running in that class for several years. Series C.E.O. Scott Atherton summed up those feelings of anticipation when he said, "Our fans are going to relish seeing the Corvette name join the GT2 category and going up against the best in the world. GT2 has shown itself to be a fiercely competitive class, and with Riley bringing this Corvette into the field, it will only become more so."

Riley Technologies has a well established 'track record' in building race winning sportscars. Besides their legendary Trans-Am cars, the two most recent success stories to come out of their fertile designer minds are the World Sports Car R&S MKIII and the MKXI Daytona Prototype. The former having taken on the Ferrari 333SP time and again in the hands of such capable teams as Dyson Racing, Intersport, and as a factory entry. And the DP chassis – Riley sold 34 of them – has been the consistently fastest chassis in the Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series, with Riley taking the manufacturers championship four straight years in a row. Those cars achieved success with the Sun Trust, Chip Ganassi, Gainsco and other teams, over the last four years.

We spoke with Bill Riley about those past successes, and we learned more about the new GT2 car and what his company is hoping to gain from building what they want to become a 'world car', suitable for entry into the FIA GT series in Europe.

"GT2 requires the use of a production chassis and the Corvette has a real nice chassis that lends itself real well to becoming a race car. This car is a bit different for me as we usually build cars from scratch, rather than start with a production chassis. It is a bit of a new experience for us. It does create some new challenges. There is just a different set of items to go through."

We asked why he didn't choose to build a GT1 class Corvette to compete with the GM Goodwrench team in the ALMS. His answer was right out of an Economics 101 text book.

"To go up against Pratt & Miller (builders of the GM cars) would not be an easy task. It's tough for a privateer without a pretty serious budget to go up against them. We have been trying to find another market to get into, be it open wheel or another sportscar and the GT2 just fits our company right now. And the thing about our GT2 car is that GM has given it their blessing which makes it a lot easier to get the car homologated.

"I have been involved with GM off and on for a number of years now. (Riley helped Pratt & Miller develop and sort the then-new Corvette GT1 cars back in 2000.) It is amazing to me how far Corvette has come in the last 10 years. It is a really nicely done car. The Corvette engineers, while I don't really know them personally at all, you can tell they are racers. They are really going after it. It is really a nice piece."

Riley expects the new car will be well received both in North America and overseas. He is pleased that a veteran professional and established Corvette racer like Lou Gigliotti is going to be the first one to race his newest product. And he intends to provide all the support he can to get that team up to speed in the ultra-competitive ALMS GT2 class.

"Lou's team will be the first to run our car. We haven't secured a second team but we do have a lot of people talking to us about it. Lou's will be an independent and not a Riley factory team, but since he is our first customer we will be giving him a lot of attention, especially at Sebring. We will be very involved with his team there.

"I've never really worked with Lou before, even though I have known him a long time. I know I will enjoy working with him because he seems to be a very competitive individual who, at the same time, likes to have fun. That makes it a really neat setting to work hard in. I'm also looking forward to working with him as a driver and in cultivating his team up to the GT2 level.

"Also, in a way this will mark our return to the ALMS. The last time we competed heavily in that series - and later at Le Mans - was in 2003. It is also a way for our company to get back into European racing. This weekend, instead of going to Laguna Seca I'll be going to Zolder for the FIA race. We have a few potential customers there. The GT2 car gives us an opportunity to get a Riley product back into the European market.

"Ideally we would like to sell between five and ten GT2 cars. We are hoping it will be popular in Europe because of the exchange rates. Here in the US our sticker price will be around \$471,000. In Europe, that works out to something like the mid to lower three hundred thousand Euros.

"My father is working real hard on directing the design of the new Corvette and we have a real strong design crew working on it. We want to get some of the top teams out there to also

convert to our GT2 car. Maybe some teams that were on the fence about which class to run in might consider our car to be their best choice. We would like to repeat the approach we took with the DP car and with the R&S MKIII when Rob Dyson campaigned it so well in the beginning. With some strong teams running the car we expect the development of the car will move ahead rapidly.”

As we noted, the Daytona Prototype MKXI has been a tremendous success, with 34 cars manufactured and sold to date. For 2008, a redesigned body style will be available and already Riley has sold several upgrade body kits to existing DP MKXI owners.

“We sold 34 of the current model MKXI cars. We have already sold about 8 or 9 upgrade body kits for the new design and one all new chassis is currently under construction. There is no real disadvantage to having a current chassis with the new body kit versus having everything new. But some people want all new parts throughout.

Given the lukewarm reception to the overall aesthetics of the original Daytona Prototypes – thanks in great measure to the ‘greenhouse’ look of the driver compartment and its raised roof line - we asked if one might be tempted to say the new 2008 design could be considered beautiful in comparison. Riley wasn’t getting his leg caught in that trap.

“(Laughs) I don’t think that is going to happen! You are trying to bait me with that question! It is different from the existing car, and we think it is an improvement, but regardless, you will definitely know it is a Riley.”

Riley Technologies is certainly busy this off-season, with several works in process underway. Visitors to the new Riley shop have looked with bewilderment at the activity taking place and especially around the construction of the new cars.

“People have been looking at us as if we are crazy because we bought a couple of new 2008 Corvettes from a dealer and took them to the shop and stripped them. Both of them had just 25 miles on them!”

Riley described the new shop - located in the heart of NASCAR country - as being better suited to the high level of varied construction activities taking place right now.

“We moved to our new shop in North Carolina last September. The facility is a little smaller than what we had in Indianapolis, but we got rid of our composite shop, and our old shop was sort of cut up into a bunch of smaller rooms. Our new shop is a bit more of an open floor plan so we have more room to work in.

“We did some NASCAR Busch races earlier in the year but we are in something of a transition period with all of that. We are just waiting to see what happens in that area to decide which way we want to go on that.

“Right now we have the Riley-Mathews Daytona Prototype team, the 2008 DP bodies and one new chassis under construction, the Grand-Am Mazda and BMW (an M6 – for Automatic Racing) GT cars, Silver Crown cars, Busch Cars, Cup Cars and the new Corvettes in our shop.”

We are not surprised by the effort Riley Technologies is putting into the new design and construction of what will likely become the next successful chapter in their history. In part two of this column we will be talking with Lou Gigliotti about his new venture into the GT2 class. We

will hear what his goals are for his first full season run in the ALMS, and how it feels to enter the battle with Riley Technologies supplying the firepower.