

By: by Andrew S. Hartwell / Through the Esses

Matt Connolly thinks it is time for a change in the world of Pennsylvania politics and he is aiming to be the force that delivers a new day to an old world. A veteran of the world of sportscar racing – as an owner and a driver – Connolly made the decision to run for the office of State Senator in District 18. There are 50 State Senators in the state and he is looking to nudge at least one incumbent off the track and into the gravel trap.

Email Print Share



“I am tired of complaining about the current state of government....(in Pennsylvania)” Connolly stated. “I figure if I don’t engage myself in the process, then I have no right to complain.”

Connolly has been engaged in racing going all the way back to his youth when he raced dirt bikes at age 13. Always looking for a way into auto racing, he landed a job after college working as a mechanic on a team that paid him by letting him drive - sometimes. He later ran in the Elf Winfield program, an SCCA accredited driver's school run in France. After becoming aware the French prefer to have one of their own be victorious, at almost any cost to the foreigners, he came back to the States and over time, worked his way into a position as a team owner.

Along the way he bought and rebuilt houses, selling at a profit each time. He worked as a mechanic, and he did whatever he had to do to build a life, eventually becoming a team owner and business man.



Using a business model that has served him – and other professional teams – well, he provided – and continues to provide - racing opportunities to others who only need to know how to sign their names to slips of paper with bank account numbers printed on them. His teams have offered rides in BMWs, Pontiacs and Mazda race cars, all in the GT or ST class within the GRAND-AM Road Racing and KONI / Continental Tires Series. Managing to keep his costs low through a combination of invention and conservation, Connolly has been able to run an efficient business. At this juncture, however, the customer base of Andretti wanna-be’s is quite small given the current economic climate.

Despite the tough times at the track, Matt Connolly isn’t running for office to supplement his racing income. The \$80,000 annual salary as a Senator probably wouldn’t pay for more than a few weekends of racing at the professional level. No, he is in this race to try and bring home a sense of reality that sadly has been eroded away over time by the fantasy of fame.

We asked Connolly how his efforts to win voter’s hearts have progressed to date. The election is this November and he has had to log the miles and show the smiles to get his name in the game.

“Things are going well so far. Every career has different issues. In the political world you have to pay your dues. You have to volunteer to work with other candidates and go to all the committee meetings and get to know all the people in the local districts. Most of these are political junkies that truly make things happen. You need their support if you want to run for office.

“The position is part time. You only have to be in the sessions three days a week when it is in session. You get full benefits, a pension for life, a per diem for meals and a car. It is ridiculous. Pennsylvania is the most over-represented state in the union. We have 50 Senators and 203 Representatives and each of them have staffs and all the perks including a salary of \$80,000 a year. It is a perfect example of government waste.”

Connolly had no time to waste when he decided to take the first steps to run for office. He had three weeks to win over enough people willing to say they would support his candidacy.



“In Pennsylvania, you need to collect 500 signatures from people in your party. Did I tell you I was in the ‘surprise party’? Seriously, I am running as a Conservative Republican. I had to knock on 1,200 doors to collect 600 plus signatures. Why 600?, because the opposition will use every trick in the book to have names removed from the list. They look for any excuse such as wrong addresses or misspelled names or illegible signatures. Their goal is to get your total under 500 so you become ineligible to run.

“After beating back that challenge I won the primary, because I was unopposed. Next I had to face the issue of raising money. I didn’t have any so I started doing fundraisers and I would pick up a donation of \$1,000 here or \$250 there. One person gave me a check for \$5. I figured it was going to take a lot of those checks to fund my campaign!”

Making do with less is a Connolly trademark in racing. He has a well-earned reputation for being able to make the difficult less so, and to use the materials available to greatest advantage all the while maintaining lowest costs without sacrificing quality. His ingenuity was first recognized for a tool he invented, “In 30 minutes”, that he developed while working as a mechanic at an Audi dealership. He even obtained a patent on the tool.

“Audi 5000’s had a problem with their exhaust manifolds.” he said, “They would bow and they would slant over on the exhaust side and warp, causing the last stud to pop off the exhaust port. The only way to fix it was to take the manifold off and then, if the stud was flush or inside the cylinder head you would have to pull the head off and put it in a milling machine to extract it. After getting tired of fixing things I decided to design a tool that would allow me to blindly center bore a stud or anything else. The tool worked really well so I got a patent on it.

“The tool could even have been used in the medical field to extract broken pins from people but, it came down to one of those things where you could spend a lifetime trying to get it sold. After I spent the \$10,000 my patent attorney charged me, he then let me in on a secret – only 7% of all patents make it to market and only 3% make any money!

“I never sold the tool even though I sent it to 20 different tool companies to consider buying or licensing it. I couldn’t manufacture it myself so today, I am the owner of a beautiful, but expired patent.”

Connolly's aspirations for improving the political arena are far from expired. He even found a way to take his motorsports experience of doing more with less to turn a small investment into a big profit.

"At one of the picnics today, my daughter set up a lemonade stand to help raise funds for my campaign. Originally we were going to charge 75 cents a glass. By the way, she squeezes the lemons and makes the lemonade the right way. We decided instead to tell our customers to donate whatever amount they wish for their glass of lemonade. Well, we turned 12 Lemons into \$74! One of the guys attending the picnic paid \$20 for his glass! Stuff like that is fun!"



Connolly will still be in the racing game all the while he will be making a valiant effort to change the culture of Pennsylvania politics from the inside. He may have to take a step back from the day-to day operations of his team in order to make his presence felt in the Senate. We have no doubt, however, that the change in his involvement in racing will be nothing compared to the changes he will look to bring about in the world of politics. As any racing competitor of his can tell you, Matt Connolly knows how to get the job done.

"I do not want to be a politician. I want to be a legislator."