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**Through The Esses –
Matt Connolly - From Bikes To Buildings To Building A GT Team**

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Matt Connolly is an owner/driver in the GT class team in the Grand American Rolex Sports Car Series. His BMW M3 recently got plenty of "air time" when professional driver Joey Hand went off course (with some help) at Mid-Ohio and vaulted over - way over - an earthen embankment. The car sailed along, spinning repeatedly, making for one heck of a highlight clip for television. Fortunately, Hand walked away with everything intact, but the M3 was destroyed and had to be given last rites.

But Matt Connolly Motorsports is not ready to meet the big racer in the sky any time soon. Adversity is something Matt Connolly has met time and again, but has never let stand in his way. Perseverance is what got him into the Rolex series, and he intends to stay.

We had a conversation with Connolly this week, to learn about his background in racing, his transition from Grand Am Cup to the Rolex series, and what he sees as his future in sportscar racing. So hold up on the priest please, for this former A-level Racquetball Champion, motorcycle rider, race car importer, mechanic and racing team go-fer isn't dying, he is thriving.

Connolly's story is an interesting look back at how a determined mind can apply itself to attaining a heart's desire. We are going to let him tell the story from here.

"I grew up in a suburb of Washington, DC. I started racing motorcycles in 1979 when I was 13. All I could afford was a dirt bike so I would put it on a rack on the back of my dad's Chevy Vega and he would drive to the track. Dad is a documentary film producer and has no idea of mechanical things or why people would want to drive fast. But I always wanted to race cars so motorcycles were definitely a second choice. I never got into karts because there was no place to do it. But there were plenty of trails I could ride the bike on in some nearby areas.

"After high school I spent a few years in college trying to find a way to make some money to go racing but that never really happened. One day after getting laid off from a job I decided that was it. I just had to get into a race car, or at least be somewhere near them working in the industry. I was a member of the SCCA and I went to the back of Sports Car Magazine and I called every phone number there that was some sort of vendor or whatever and I asked about a job. I finally found a guy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania who had a race program where you worked for him and, in exchange for money; he let you drive the race car once in a while.

"At the same time I enrolled in the Elf Winfield program. That is an SCCA accredited driver's school run in France. They have an incentive program where if you are good enough, you will get invited back for the finals and from the finals they will pick a winner who gets a full season in the Formula Renault series, eventually leading up to Formula One. Alain Prost is their poster child - he went through this program. The initial entry is paid for like you would for any school, but once you get in your continued participation is based on merit.

"I advanced into the top 20 out of the 150 or so entrants and that is when they put the French kids and everyone else together. Their parents made you very aware that you were going to lose! Whenever you got out of the car the French kid's father would always demand the instructors translate what they told the American kids to them in French. They would bump into you on purpose, things like that. Simply put, they were just rude. (Laughing)

"The good part about it was we went to Monaco for the Grand Prix.

"Anyway, I went to work for the guy in Harrisburg named John Gearhart. I worked on cars, cleaned the transporter, washed his wife's car, cut his grass and basically was his slave for 18 hours a day. I earned credits and after so many credits you earned a test day in a Formula 2000 car, or a Formula Ford, or something like that. Sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel seemed very far away. It was difficult and there was a lot of turnover. A lot of people would do it for three days and say "forget this!" It was tough. I was there for 18 months and I saw 27 people come and go.

"That was in 1988. When I didn't win the Elf Winfield series I stayed on with John and decided I would work for him the entire next year. We worked out a deal where I would get to build a race car and get to run it all year in the SCCA mid-Atlantic road racing series in F2000, along with his other rental drivers. I lived in his shop during this time. There was a shower and a bathroom and you lived in the shop but I didn't care because at that time I was happy to do it.

"John used to go to Europe to buy Reynard Formula Fords and convert them to F2000 and sell them in the US. He had a good business going including importing all the parts to resell. After my being there about 10 months or so, he sent me to Holland to put together a whole package with a guy named Henny Vollenberg, who in the 1990's was one of the last owners of the March F1 team. One of the cars that I got was the car that I raced that year. It was a 1986 Reynard Formula Ford which we converted to F2000.

"John also sent me around England as well to meet all of his vendors and make sure the items were packed up correctly. This gave me a great opportunity to meet a lot of great people, and I made a lot of contacts.

"In 1989 I had the use of the chassis, but was responsible for my own engine, entry fees and tires. I went to a junkyard and bought a Pinto engine and built it into a race engine. I had to buy my own tires so what I used to do was pick through the discarded national tires - used tires left over after SCCA national races - and use them for my car in the regional races. All year I only bought one set of new tires. I won the championship that year by two points.

"After that I had the bright idea that if John could do what he does, I could too. So I borrowed some money, reconnected with the people I had met in Europe, and bought three European Swift F2000 cars and hooked up with a guy here in Easton Pennsylvania to start a race team. Unfortunately, in 1990 we had the start of an economic downturn and we all know that when a recession hits, racing is the first thing to go. So, the guys I had lined up to race our cars all dropped out one by one, saying they can't commit the funds when they were losing money.

"I decided to sell one car and focus on the parts business. The guys who were able to continue racing were going to need parts. The contacts I made in Europe allowed me to import parts, and I designed parts as well to help these cars run on American tires. That kept me alive through all of 1990 and 1991. Then I got the idea to start a driver's search program where the winner would get to drive a season in one of my cars in the popular Export "A" pro series - that would guarantee a full season deal.

"I contracted with Richard Spenard at the Spenard/David Racing School up in Canada to do all the testing. I decided to put some ads out in Sports Car Magazine and see what happens. It was amazing when checks showed up in the mail! It was a \$1,500 entry fee with a \$300 deposit. It was a mind blowing feeling to have checks from people you don't know show up in your mail!

"It all worked out pretty well, however, that year the Export A F2000 series was cancelled. It was a big series in Canada. This meant we had to find another series to put everybody in and, unfortunately, we chose the Mexican Formula 3 series. It wasn't a disaster but a lot of people didn't feel comfortable with it and it didn't go over well. I had people drop out of the program. We left that series and finished the season out in the USAC F2000 races.

"The winner of our program was a guy named Broc Glover, who was a professional motocross star.

"I was able to make a deal with the owner of the Euro Swift, Frank Bradley, to be the US importer for those cars. I imported some cars and we built the 1993 driver's search program around those cars. The winner of the '93 program was Kris Wilson. He currently runs in Grand Am Cup. (Automatic Racing BMW M3)

"For the '94 driver's search we changed things a bit. For those drivers with experience we awarded the winner \$50,000 to spend on any racing program they wanted. For the younger novices starting out, we awarded an entry into the Bridgestone Racing School series. And instead of having everyone come up to Canada, we loaded up a transporter with a bunch of the Spenard School Camaro's that I had rented from the newly named Bridgestone Race School, and we drove around the country to all different race tracks.

"That year was completely sold out which I was pretty happy with. But I also saw the writing on the wall that told me this was not going to last forever. I had exit questionnaires after every session. I noticed that everyone thinks they are a star or they want to be a star. Sometimes people think they are world-class race drivers but they are incredibly slow. They learn the truth in a real race car and of course, they don't come back. The pool of available new customers was shrinking so I sold the business.

"This was 1994 and I was also racing in F2000 but I was just burned out. I realized I was barely sustaining myself. I had a van and a box trailer and all the F2000 guys with high paying customers were showing up in tractor trailer rigs. I knew I couldn't play in that world. I just did not have the leverage or the money and honestly, I was afraid to take the risk. So I took the money from the sale of the racing business and I bought into real estate.

"I bought an apartment building / home that I lived in and then started buying other buildings that I fixed up myself. I didn't do any racing for several years, instead became an excellent plumber, roofer, electrician and somebody who could hang drywall with the best of them. I learned that if you could be an auto mechanic you could do anything. When you are setting up a differential in a Hewland gearbox on an F2000 car, you've got about 3/10ths of a thousandth of an inch to play with. With drywall, you can be off by an inch and just add more caulk!

"In 1997 I had done well enough in real estate to get back into racing with a buddy of mine. We bought a Formula Atlantic club car and raced that for a few years in SCCA Nationals. I won a number of races and qualified for the Runoffs. I didn't know where I was going to go, but I knew I was never going to find a sponsor in open wheel racing. If it isn't family money or close friend money, it is just not going to happen for you in open wheel, even in IRL or Champ Car.

"We decided to go racing in a production car - a BMW Z3 coupe. My buddy suggested it but I was insulted. I said "I've done 3 g's in a corner pal, so don't try to put me in some standard car!" But then he said the magic words, "I'll buy the car and pay for everything", so I said, "I'm in!"

"He leased the car in his wife's name. We put a 1,000 miles on it and then gutted it. We made all the payments until the end when we were able to sell it - it was more valuable as a race car than a street car - and pay off the balance of the lease!

"We ran that car in the Motorola Cup series. Our team was called VillaConn for Al Villamil and Matt Connolly. We had a lot of fun. We had the Sebring race won until we broke a shock bolt.

"In 2001 we upped the ante. My partner bought a semi and we got two more cars. I bought one at a car auction with money from a loan. And we got a third car by building one from a tub and junk yard parts. We called that car Frankenstein because it was truly evil to drive to build! But we won four races and were on the podium nine times.

"That year (2001) we raced in Grand Am Cup. We won the championship in ST, and I was lucky enough to win the team's first race at Road America. We won several races that season with our three team cars. In 2002 we also ran three cars but Team Lexus beat us for the championship.

"In 2003 Villacon was no more as my partner and I decided to go our separate ways. So there I was, left with my car payment book and my pickup truck and flat trailer. Jason Potter and I ran the Z3 that season with a best finish of second at Mont Tremblant. At the end of the season I realized the Z3 was not the car to have anymore so I found a wrecked BMW 330 and built that into a race car.

"I ran that car in 2004 with a couple of different co-drivers. We had a lot of growing pains and it turned out the car had some structural problems and it was never fast, but we learned a lot. And since I didn't own a rig of my own, we rented space in another team's transporter. We had to fill the race car with all our tools and parts. We could only bring eight tires and we had no pit cart and had to use their fueling rig. No one could have confused me for Roger Penske, except maybe for the hairline!

"In 2005 I was able to buy a pretty decent rig and a Ford F550 and a big 48 foot trailer. Our first car got wrecked at Daytona but I was already building a second car. This second car now became our first car. We had 5 weeks from Daytona to the next race at Fontana so I went on EBay and bought a 2001 330 from some guy in Atlanta. It had 98,000 miles on it. The guy drove it up to the airport in Philadelphia where I gave him a cashier's check and a plane ticket home.

"I trailered the car back to my house where my crew chief John Vincent and I set about making it a race car. We gutted it, rebuilt the motor, did the wiring and everything, and had it ready to go three weeks later. At that point, Tom Milner Sr. called me and asked me if I had a seat open for his son, Tom Milner Jr.

"Tom qualified the car fourth at Fontana. In the race he tangled with another car and went a couple of laps down. By the time we ran Laguna, Tom Sr. said 'any parts you need, and any support you need, you just let me know'. We put BMW Motorsports parts on the car and went testing at Summit Point and realized that this was now one fast race car.

"Our next race was at Watkins Glen and Tom started in fourth, gave me the car in third and my pit crew got me out in first. We ended up tangling with another car and finished fourth. At the next race at Mosport we were leading but broke a suspension piece and finished something like seventh. We were leading at Barber but ran out of gas with two laps to go. It was just one of those seasons.

"Tom Sr. then offered me a test drive in one of his PTG BMW M3s. Of course, no one would turn that down! I was fairly quick in it and so he made a deal with me to keep his son in the ST Cup car with me for the rest of the season and in exchange he let me run with Billy Johnson in his GT car at VIR. We broke a differential and spent 45 minutes in the pits so it was interesting but uneventful.

"We talked about 2006 and me buying some cars from him. I had been dealing with SunTrust bank and came to realize that if I wanted to I could make the big step up to Rolex racing. I said, I am 39 and I don't want to be in Cup forever, and Tom was giving me the opportunity to buy cars that won half of the races the year before, so I did it. I bought two cars, the tractor trailer, and the big rig. All that stuff.

"I have to thank David Pijot at SunTrust for having that great financing program for guys like me who have the qualifications to go racing on a professional level.

"So here we are and I have had 35 different drivers in my cars this season. At one point I realized I had to get someone quick who is a total pro in the car and that is where Joey Hand came in. He set fastest lap in the qualifying race in the rain at VIR. He was on the pole at Mid-Ohio and was leading the race with 2 laps to go and then came the unfortunate accident which completely destroyed that car.

"At Barber I bought one of the SigalSport cars (thanks to SunTrust again) - which was another old PTG BMW car -so that is our two car team today."

Connolly's trip to the top certainly had its share of trials and trepidations but through it all, he has persevered and he feels one more choice he made was the absolute right one for him and the attainment of his goals.

"I can't think of a better series to race in than the Grand American series. For me, there was no other series to run in. First, you have 20 cars just in your class. In the ALMS you have 20 cars spread over four classes. Plus it costs an absolute fortune to run there. I like the way Grand Am has controlled costs and I love the spec tire and spec fuel rules. I can't imagine a better series to race in."

When we pointed out that Team Sahlens had just announced they would be fielding two new Corvettes in the GT class next season, we asked Connolly who would be spending more time looking in their mirrors, his drivers or theirs.

"We tape up our rear view mirrors. They are only cleared for tech and after that we tape them up because we are so darn fast!"

And besides, who wants to look back? Certainly not Matt Connolly, for he has always looked ahead and his forward vision has taken him right into top level professional GT racing. And who knows? Tomorrow could find him making another move up, this time into the Daytona Prototypes class.