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Ryan Hampton Took His Racing Career Sideways

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Back in 2000, young Ryan Hampton was teamed up with west coast beef jerky king – and hard charging racer - Larry Oberto in the Mike Johnson prepared Archangel Nissan-Lola running in the SRP II class of the Grand American Road Racing Championship. The two drivers really hit it off and, with the excellent efforts of the entire Archangel team behind them, they combined to take the season championship. Along the way they collected 6 wins, 2 third place finishes and 3 pole positions.



Oberto later went on to glory in the FIA GT Championship, as well as rides in the American Le Mans Series and in a Daytona Prototype, and he is still involved with road racing today, although not campaigning in a steady ride as was the case in 2000. Hampton, on the other hand, ran the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona with Dennis Spencer's team in the orange and white Kudzu-Mazda for the next three years, finishing on the podium in both 2001 and 2002. He also dabbled in the IRL, taking a flag to flag win at Gateway International Raceway in 2002. And he ran a handful of ALMS races with Team Spencer, including the 2002 Petit Le Mans. After that, Hampton just sort of drifted away – literally – from an active role in road racing.

We hadn't talked with Hampton since the 2003 Daytona weekend so we looked him up and tried to find out why his name wasn't coming up on any entry lists for Grand Am or American Le Mans Series events these last few years. Hampton told us he was looking to come back to the sport but he didn't know how to make a full season fit into his new life as a drifter. Not the kind of drifter who keeps moving around the roads, the kind who keeps moving sideways around a race track.

Drifting is one of those 'new age' sports that is looking to get a foothold on the hearts and minds of car enthusiasts – and armchair thrill seekers – by putting on a loud, squealing, smoking, and sliding show of speed and finesse working brilliantly hand in hand. The whole point is to get around a short course as fast as you can without ever pointing the car straight ahead. While it wreaks havoc on tires, it oozes excitement for the drivers and the fans alike.

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Hampton told us what caused him to veer from the 'straight' life of a race car driver to the 'crooked' ways of a professional drifter.

"I actually got out of road racing and into drifting by accident. While I was an instructor at the Bob Bondurant racing school back in 2001, I had a Japanese student who barely spoke any English. After about driving 10,000 laps you get a bit bored so you start driving the car sideways to keep yourself entertained. This one time he was in the car with me when I covered about half the course with the car in a constant slide. I was drifting but I had no idea that is what it was called.

"I started over steering in the corners and the Japanese guy started freaking out. He kept saying, 'Oh my GOD, you are a drifter!' I said, 'No, no, no, really. I have a home! They don't pay us instructors much but I do have a home.' (Laughing) But he kept saying I was a drifter so I asked him what the heck he was talking about. He said what I was doing is called drifting and that it was a big sport in Japan. I told him he was crazy but he insisted it was really a sport over there.

"I kept in contact with the student and he sent me videos of drifting events in Japan. I watched them and thought it looked like a lot of fun. When they started holding drifting events here in California in 2003 I attended a few of them. I was then approached by Mazda about going drifting on the professional level. A friend of mine was in the Mazda organization and he said they had a few cars they were looking to promote through the sport. The first car I got into for them was a turbocharged Mazda Miata. It was something of a project car. I ran the car in the D1 Grand Prix.

"I guess what the big attraction with drifting is for me, is that you are manipulating so many controls in the car to get the same result. It's like saying there are only so many ways you can brake or downshift or get through a corner. In drifting, there are seven different ways to accomplish the same task. It really is so different from what the kids who do some sliding on the streets are doing. It is so much more technical. You have clutch brake, and fade drift and side braking drift and so much more going on.

"I love the sport. It has been an absolute blast. I would say 50% of racing fans accept it as an actual sport while 50% think it is nothing more than power sliding around in a parking lot. But it is nothing like that at all. Let me tell you it is a different thing to be headed straight for a wall at 90 miles an hour and the car has to be sideways 50 or 60 feet before you get to the corner and then you have to keep the speed up as you slide around the turn. That is the hardest part to get over. Even with having done 225 miles per hour in an Indy car, trust me, this is pretty nerve wracking."

Hampton liked the new opportunity to display his talent, and keep his driving skills sharp, so much so that he decided to pursue the sport full time.

"At the end of 2004, Falken tire approached me and asked me to join their factory team. They had a few cars including a right hand drive Nissan 240SX. They asked if I would like to campaign that car and of course I said 'sure'. I did well in the car and then a friend came to me and asked if I were to build a car for drifting, what would it be. I said I would go with something completely unorthodox, like an old school muscle car. About half way through the season I abandoned the 240SX because, frankly, there was something like 40 of that model car in drifting already. It seemed to me that the judges would only allow in so many of one type of car so we opted to go a completely different route and enter a 1969 Camaro. To say the least it was quite difficult to make it into a competitive drift car!"

Muscle cars are notoriously fast but have never been labeled as graceful. Hampton soon realized his goal to be a different kind of drifter would not be reached without a lot of hard work.

“Muscle cars are real happy going straight, but they are not real happy going sideways. There is kind of a road map out there for building cars like the 240SX, but for the '69 Camaro there was nothing out there to point us in the right direction! It took a long time to develop that car. It is competitive now and I have been running it in the D1 series this year. In fact, this year it became the oldest car to ever qualify in what is known as the top 16. If you qualify there it means you have made the big show.”

It goes without saying that it takes a lot of skill to drive any kind of car to the max in every form of motorsports. The goal is always to be the best, be it the best of all who are on the track or by achieving your personal best. And while many racer wannabes think they can master the art of balancing a car right on the line that separates the fastest from all the rest, Hampton suggests that drifting will prove to you just how thin that line really is.

“Recently we had a special exhibition event for charity. They brought out a bunch of NASCAR drivers like Robby Gordon, Kasey Kahne, Greg Biffle, and a couple of guys from the Busch Series. We brought out a couple of our drift cars and said, ‘OK guys, go out there and have fun.’ Most of them came back and said they knew this wasn’t going to be easy but they actually found it to be quite difficult. Some of them got the hang of it pretty well, but there were a few who just couldn’t get it at all even with a lot of practice.

“Kasey Kahne did very well in the drift car. Certain NASCAR drivers, who will remain nameless, never got it. They couldn’t pick it up even with five hours of practice. But I think Kahne was a sprint car driver in the past and that had to help. Robby Gordon also did very well, as did Greg Biffle.

“(SPEED World Challenge driver) Pierre Kleinubing competed in three of the pro events this year and he loved it. His Real Time Acura team built a car for him to run in just two events. He had so much fun in those two that he went out and found himself another ride so he could continue to race in both drifting and the SPEED World Challenge series. When he has no schedule conflicts he runs in drifting events. And he will tell you that the experience is great training for road racing too.

“My drifting experience actually saved my butt in an open wheel car once. I ran in an IRL Infiniti Pro Series race in Texas and actually drifted at 189 miles per hour - which was quite exciting! My drifting skills saved the car. I was sideways in the banking and rode it out for half the turn. All the spotters in the stands said, ‘How the hell did you do that?’ I told them the drifting experience really does pay dividends! I wouldn’t want to do that again for fun! But all the moves I did in the car were what I do in a drifting competition.”

Hampton is hoping that the sport of drifting will reach a level of broad acceptance as a ‘real’ form of motorsports. He is doing more than just putting on a good show in a car enveloped in blue tire smoke. He has started a business that sells the sport as a hip and happening kind of lifestyle.

“I’m kept busy working part time with Bondurant, doing the full season of drifting, and running my own business. Along with a few partners I am involved in a new company called Drift Alliance. We are a kind of lifestyle thing. We took the drifting thing and kind of turned it into a kind of skateboard mentality. We made a DVD of our drifting experiences last year and it

captures some of the wild things that went on during the season. We are also going to be making some parts for drifter cars including brakes, handles, pulleys, parts for Nissans, and more. And our DVD deal is with Warner Brothers so that is going pretty good.

“This year I’ve noticed the crowds at the drifting events are starting to be a bit older. Ultimately drifting is really just entertainment. We have a lot of big names coming into the sport with Ford, Dodge, Pontiac and Nissan all fielding cars. And sponsors are coming in like Red Bull and even Sears is in it sponsoring my teammate. I’m curious to see if in the next five years it will really catch on or if it is just a fad. Snowboarding and monster trucks caught on so maybe drifting will too.

“But I’d like to get back into road racing again. But if I could get a full season ride it would be real tough to pull me away from a full season of drifting. I would like instead to run some of the longer races like the 24 hours at Daytona and so on. I still enjoy road racing – I enjoy all forms of driving! The good news is there isn’t a drifting schedule conflict with the 24 hours. I love road racing and it is probably one of the most enjoyable activities you can do in a car.”

Hampton remembers the great times he had in road racing.

“That 2000 season was a lot of fun. Larry Oberto was a great teammate and Mike Johnson was an outstanding team manager. To tell you the truth that season was one of the most enjoyable years I have ever had in motorsports. Of course, it is always nice to win a championship. I don’t know if that makes the flavor that much sweeter although I bet it does. But the year was awesome. Mike ran a professional effort and ran a smart team in terms of strategy.

“In 2003 I ran the Rolex 24 hours with Team Spencer for the third time. I met Dennis through our Archangel team competing against his Mazda-Kudzu team several years before. He saw the potential there and at the end of the 2000 season he asked me if I would like to join them for some of the longer races next year. I did not have a solid ride lined up so I said I would love to do it.

“The two teams were quite a contrast. Dennis’ team is probably much more like a family. I would say Mike runs a tighter ship but both teams were equally as much fun, just a very different feel. Dennis’s team feels much more like a family. He has actually been a very good mentor for me, even through my drifting career. He actually built my drifting motor. We still talk from time to time, although it has been a few months. I think I should call him and see how he is doing!

“And out of all the teams that I ever raced for they had the biggest ‘never give up’ attitude of any team I have ever seen. If they had to stay up until four in the morning, or change a gearbox three times, they did it. That happened at Daytona one year and when most teams would have packed it up and said ‘we’re done’, they just kept going.”

Hampton is enjoying his life lived sideways to the world and he was glad to know we hadn’t forgotten him. He assured us he was still a fast guy in a car, he just couldn’t keep himself moving straight ahead all the time.

“Well, I’m still here! I haven’t fallen off the edge of the earth. I am heading over to China next week for an exhibition. The Chinese government is flying a bunch of us American’s and our cars over there for a show in their new Olympic stadium as part of their Independence Day celebrations. I guess we are a form of diplomats but who knows? We might all wind up in a Chinese jail! It should be a fun trip.”

Hampton is looking to continue to find fun trips and if some of them bring him around a road racing circuit, he certainly has the 'drive' to go in that direction.

"I might be able to be convinced to go back into road racing full time, but drifting is such a fun thing. It is a fun family of people and it goes right down to the grassroots level. I would encourage road racers to go out and do it. It is an absolute blast!"

