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Through The Esses - James Weaver Retires From A Racing Life
- Part 2: A Salute From His Peers

10/24/06 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

“James is a great competitor, fast as hell, very few mistakes. We would have had him drive for us any time; the opportunity just never came up.” – Kevin Doran

We complete our tribute to James Weaver on the announcement of his retirement, here, with a modest collection of facts about his career, and with an assortment of comments – like the one above from DP car builder, and winning team owner and long time Dyson Racing competitor, Kevin Doran - from just a handful of the many people who have appreciated his work over the years. By no means does this compilation constitute the full spectrum of the positive sentiments the thousands who admire James Weaver have expressed. No, this is but a sampling of the measure of fondness and respect so many people have for him as a person, and as a professional sportscar driver.



We tried to contact several others who were close to James on the track or off, but were unable to reach them. We are confident however, that if they had the chance to answer the question, “What is your opinion of James Weaver?” their responses would mirror those you will find in the following paragraphs.

A clear example of the admiration his competitors feel for this remarkable man can be found in this note of appreciation from former Porsche factory driver, and championship winning competitor, David Murry.

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“James Weaver is an icon in the sportscar world of racing drivers. He is one of the few drivers that have managed such a long and consistent career. After knowing of James for quite a number of years - as I was sleeping in my VW trying to start a career driving sportscars - he was doing it at the top level. Years later I raced against James in prototypes in IMSA driving in the actual car he raced the year before.

“In 1998 I was lucky enough to become James' teammate at Le Mans driving the Porsche LMP1 for the factory. I wasn't sure what to expect until I arrived at Circuit de la Sarthe and James took me around the track to clue me in to all the details of how to drive the circuit. I thought he was a great co-driver to help me learn such a difficult and long track since it was my first trip there!

“It will leave a small void in Sportscars as he retires.”

For some, standing on the sidelines, James was the man who could be counted on to make magic happen on a race track. For others, James was a tough fellow competitor who drove hard but always kept himself and others out of trouble.

Trouble, however, sometimes managed to find him, as it did in the first turn of the 1999 USRRC race at Lime Rock Park. What follows is an excerpt from our original race report. It is included in this tribute as it illustrates both his determined competitive style and his ability to find humor in almost any situation.

On the starting grid, James Weaver's car was placed about 15 feet in front of Mimo Schiatarella in the Ferrari. He tried to hold that distance all the way around the pace lap, until the pace car pulled off and the field headed for the green flag. He almost made it except that Mimo wanted to be the first to Big Bend (turn one). And he almost was first until James set his sights on the inside line and made sure Mimo came second. But Mimo wasn't giving way and so you can guess what happened. The two hot rods banged sides with James on the inside going into the corner, and in front coming out. And that was all the close racing James would permit. He took off and immediately put the rest of the field well behind him.

James comment after the race:

“He got a better start than me with the pace car going so slowly so when we got down to the first corner he left the door open for me. I take back everything I ever said about Italian drivers! It was a bit of a rough contact – we had a minor territorial dispute - but it was not too serious. I saw it as a gap that was 99% as wide as the Riley and Scott so I just put in the extra 1%!”

Putting in that extra 1% was a Weaver trademark. His friends and adversaries alike will confirm that. The man knew how to get up to speed and how to keep it up. With 100 wins to his credit, few can deny that a driving stint with his hands on the wheel was often followed by those same hands wrapped tightly around a bottle of champagne which he generously shared en masse with the trapped cadre of soon to be soaking wet photographers surrounding the victory podium.

And it was that same view from the podium that another legend of motorsports enjoyed quite often. He is a very special man, a man who made his mark at speed in venues around the world, at a time when names like Siffert, Rodriguez, Donohue and Andretti were found in the results columns. This great professional racer wanted to add his praise to this litany of effusive respect. He is none other than the esteemed grand master of road racing – and the first to conquer the ills of the incomparable Porsche 917 - England's own Vic Elford.

Elford is one to 'tell it to you straight', a trait we admire and hope to come across often when conducting an interview. We knew that if we asked Vic to share with us his thoughts on James brilliant career, his comments would ring true.

"James has been with the Dyson team for twenty years, which in itself must be some sort of record, and I know he was good in the wet. The few times we have spoken I found him rather like me - down to earth, blunt, and with a total absence of bullshit, in itself an accomplishment these days."

It isn't BS that Weaver spent 20 years in the Dyson Racing organization. Many have said Rob Dyson treats his people like one big extended and happy family. One example of the kind of friendly banter that we often heard when in the Dyson compound during a race weekend, is this exchange between James and long time Dyson Crew Chief Pat Smith (like James, a retired sportscar professional), from many years back:

James Weaver: *"We've nearly won it here every single year but we always seem to screw up in the last 20 minutes don't we?"*

To which Pat Smith replied, *"Don't say 'We'!"*

In recent years, Chris Dyson has assumed the position of race team leader previously held by his father, Rob. He grew up in a family that was deeply involved in racing and decided he was going to become the best professional driver he could be. Under the tutelage of his father, and James Weaver, he has fully blossomed into a competitive racer in his own right. Chris was more than willing to participate in this tribute to a special individual who was both a teacher and a friend to a young man coming of age as a racer.

"James taught me so much that it's really hard to quantify what I learned from him. When I was beginning my racing career, he was always there for advice. He had never forgotten his early days in racing, and he knew that there were always bumps in the road when you are learning the ropes. When we drove together in my rookie prototype season in 2002, James really took me under his wing and opened his "cookbook" for me. It was a great apprenticeship on the fly. He taught me what to look for in the car setup, and he gave me lots of tricks to use on the track. And he always kept racing in perspective, and reminded me to always have a sense of humor about it all."

"The best compliment James ever gave me was calling me his protégé. I'm very lucky. It is an honor just to work with James, let alone having him as both your mentor and your friend."

We asked Chris just what James meant to the entire Dyson Racing Team.

"This is impossible to answer. It's like asking what a family member means to a family! He's grown up just as the team has, together. James was a vital part of the fabric of our team, and he's left a huge legacy behind. He was there for the big steps we made together, and he was a great representative of our family. On the track there was no one better. He was the gold standard for the whole paddock, and we all knew it.

"James can never be replaced, but his work ethic is part and parcel of our team now as we take on our next challenges."

Another man who achieved a great degree of success as part of the Dyson Racing organization – and who brought his fame with him when he joined them in 1997 – is Elliott Forbes-Robinson. EFR, as he is popularly referred to, was inducted into the Motorsports Hall Of Fame of America this year. He has won races at Daytona, Mid-Ohio, Lime Rock, and Barber Motorsports Park among other circuits, and was the 1999 Can-Am Champion. His list of races run and series competed in is long, very long.

EFR too wanted to include his comments in this tribute. We think you will agree they reveal a bit of James' easy going character, and his playful approach to the time spent outside a race car.

"James and I were together on the Dyson team for a bit over five years. I also drove with him and Price Cobb in the Porsche 962 about four years before that. James is a great guy to work with. He was always so much fun to be around. Often, you would never know what the words he uses meant! Between him and Andy Wallace they had their own vocabulary which outsiders just had to kind of go along with. At one race everybody was calling each other by their middle names. I didn't know who they were talking about!

"It was always an interesting program at Dyson! It was great to drive with Andy, and Butch, and Dorsey (Schroeder) and John Paul Jr.. No matter who was on the team it really was a family atmosphere where everybody pitches in and helps each other. I know the guys there did and James did too. It was great to be there working with those guys.

"I wish James the best of luck and I am going to miss him. I got to see him at the Petit Le Mans this year, which was the first time in a while. It was really great to see him again for I always enjoyed his company."

Weaver makes his home in Wiltshire, England with his wife, Sylvie and their daughters Camilla and Jemima. I've read that when he is away from the racetrack he enjoys working in his garden. For sure the speed at which a flower grows must be exactly the kind of contrast needed to still a racing mind. We think he may have more than enough time now to see if he can't get those blooms racing ahead.

And racing ahead was what James was famous for. But to race ahead you must first have someone else to pass. Over several seasons, one of the toughest men James had to get around was Jack Baldwin, who was often behind the wheel of one of the Robinson Racing / 74 Ranch prototypes.

Baldwin is strong enough to have once broken the gear shift lever off his brand new Reynard racer at Sebring, only to continue on, shifting with his palm planted on the stub protruding above the housing. By the time he decided a replacement lever would be a wise choice, he had worn a hole through the center of his glove, and into the palm of his blood-covered hand!

Yes, Jack Baldwin is one determined competitor – just ask the guys who raced against him in Trans Am. And we hope to share with you soon the news that he is returning to the cockpit next season (stay tuned!). He too wanted to share his thoughts on James.

“I think James is one of the biggest talents that I ever had the pleasure of racing. James was not only very fast but had a great style about him as well as that British sense of humor. He is a gentleman in every sense of the word. He was relentless behind the wheel but could be trusted at speed. He raced clean. When he did get by he did it the right way. James Weaver always drove as the top professional he is and he won with honor.”

On the subject of honors, Weaver accomplished quite a bit in his career. Among his triumphs, he helped his teammate Elliot Forbes-Robinson take the overall LMP driving title in the 1999 ALMS season. James collected two podium finishes in 2002. He was partnered with Butch Leitzinger for the first ever LMP675 overall win at Infineon Raceway in 2003. He won again at Mosport – with Leitzinger – in 2004 and at Mid-Ohio in 2005. He earned his 100th career victory at Mosport in 2005. He finished second at the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1985. The list goes on and on.

But one victory that eluded James was the 12 Hours of Sebring. Years ago we interviewed Pat Smith and he told us he always wanted to win that one at least once for Weaver, and for himself.

“I would like to win Sebring before I quit, but more than that, I would like to win James the driver’s championship. He is going to be 42 this year. He is not getting any younger and he is absolutely the best driver out there. People gave Max Papis a lot of credit last year but James is just as fast, and he never crashed. He can set up the car. He builds his own shocks! The guy is incredible!”

Incredible is also a good choice of words when you look back over the length of James’ 30 plus year career. Back in the 1970’s – James formative years in racing - he was teamed up with a man who would later come to be one of his most potent competitors. That man is Belgian Didier Theys, who later would go on to drive a Ferrari 333SP for Fredy Lienhard and Kevin Doran, running so very many races against Weaver’s Dyson Racing R&S MKIII.

Theys is an extremely accomplished driver, with some significantly big wins on his resume. He was very happy to share his thoughts with us for this tribute to his former roommate and rival.

"Perhaps not many people know this but James and I raced together in Formula Fords in 1978. We were housemates for a while too. We also raced in Formula 3 together. We have known each other for a very long time! When I came to the US, he was already with Rob Dyson. From about 1995 on we raced against each other in the prototypes.

"James was very fast and very aggressive but he was always a very sporting driver. He never did anything bad like hitting you or pushing you to win a race. He was very honest on the race track. Off the track he was a very funny man with a real English sense of humor. You couldn't tell sometimes if he was joking or not!

"I guess it is just James turn to retire. I will probably be next! I guess he has reached the point where it is time to turn the page and try something else. I wish him all the best in his new life. He is a great guy and was a big asset to sportscar racing. He will be missed."

Andy Lally is one of today's most accomplished young drivers. He is the 2004 and 2006 Grand Am Rolex GT Series Champion and he took home wins in the old SRP II class, including the 2001 series championship for the class. Lally too had nothing but praise and admiration to express for James Weaver.

"James was one of my first sports car heroes, and that was before I ever met him. As I got to know him a little bit - and see his work ethic and attitude toward the sport - it was motivation for me to try and shape my approach to racing in a similar way."

Another contemporary driver of significant stature, attained through his successful involvement in several sportscar series, is Darren Law. He too echoed the feelings expressed by others when he contributed the following comments.

"I was so surprised that James announced his retirement. He was really someone I looked up to. I remember watching him race when I was younger and still in go karts. He is one of my heroes for the sports car racing industry.

"He was always clean to race with on track but such a hard racer. As you continue through the years in this sport you come to know who you can trust to race with and who you look out for on track. I never thought twice when I was around him on the track because there was never an issue.

"Even though he is one of the older drivers he is still one of the fastest guys out there. I admire that and hope I can have his pace as I continue in this sport. I will also miss his commentary in the drives meetings. They can get pretty boring at times and there is always someone adding their 2 cents worth on a particular subject but 90% of the time when James had something to say not only did it make sense but it was always funny

and broke up the atmosphere in the meetings. I found myself hoping he would comment on several subjects during our meetings both for his knowledge and because it was a guarantee that we would all start laughing.

“He is a great guy and I hope he stays involved in the sport in some way for years to come.”

And the praise and thanks have poured out from the fans too. A visit to several forum boards on the internet found several threads about his retirement. Here is just a sampling of the comments people have been posting.

“One of the best things about James was that he contributed to the sport of endurance racing not only on the track but also off the track. A true class guy and a nice person. Oh, did I mention funny as hell?” - dmeluzio22

“I certainly have enjoyed watching James for 20+ years. I am hoping that maybe he is just retiring from the Dyson's. I am hoping he is going to unretire and pick up a ride in an Audi or Porsche.” – skidrow

“I for one will truly miss him and the charisma he brought to the sportscar world. He possessed so much talent and adaptability as sportscars changed throughout the years showing more speed and skill than drivers half his age.” – rotary

“He is truly a nice guy. Taking time out to sign anything and pose for pictures. A true gentleman.” – TRAVIS45

“Farewell James!!!! It's been a pleasure watching him through the years, one of the most honorable drivers in any paddock. Enjoy your years out of the cockpit as much as we have enjoyed the years with you in it!” - jayxer

And, perhaps, this final message board quote says it all about the genuine affection, respect and admiration James Weaver inspired in so many of his peers and fans.

“(James Weaver is) truly a special man who demonstrated integrity, skill, and good humor for his entire career. Thank you, James. – racer27X

And we close this tribute with our own comment by saying James Weaver is a remarkable talent on several levels. He could set up a car, race it at the limit, bring it home in one piece, and then take the time to tell anyone who asked how his day at work went. He is admired by many, embraced in spirit by many more, and simply one of the greatest ever in the annals of sportscar racing. And when you look at a partial roster of some of the great names that came before – names like Andretti, Gurney, Gregory, Haywood, Shelby, Hall, McLaren, Hulme and Brabham – you can agree that the name James Weaver will now appear right alongside theirs whenever a future generation talks about the history of this sport.

James, we wish you all the best of life ahead, for you gave us all the best of your racing life. And, as the preceding comments attest, you made a difference in the lives of many

Thank you.

“James Weaver – A Racing Life” photo album can be found at:

http://www.theracesite.com/index.cfm?template=pa&pa_id=2115

