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Rob Whitener's Racing Ambitions Are Out Of The Bag

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Rob Whitener knows a lot about industrial-use plastic bags. Want to pack some bulk items? Call him. Want to go racing? Call him for that too. And if you do sign on with his ROAR Racing Team, you won't be driving a car that looks like something you brought home from the supermarket - you will be driving a Mazda RX8 in the KONI Challenge Series Street Tuner class.



Groceries are optional.

We talked with Whitener just before he left for the Homestead Miami Speedway round of the 2007 KONI Challenge season. This former serviceman, successful businessman and lead-footed aficionado of life's more rapid pursuits came into the racing game at an advanced age. He is acutely aware of that fact and is reminded of it every time he goes to a race.

"Over time I started to transition from being a driver to being a team owner. When you look at it, I am 250 pounds and 49 years old competing with guys that are 130 pounds and 20 years old. There is a certain amount of realism involved!"

Servicemen know about realism and Whitener performed his military service primarily in Germany. While stationed there his six years went fast but his cars went even faster. Well, one didn't.

"When I was in the service, stationed in Germany, I got used to driving at high speeds on the autobahn. I had taken a Mercury Monarch over there with me. Because I was on what was called a company tour, an extended tour of duty, they would let you bring your car and your family over there too. This was around 1979. Anyway, I couldn't get that Mercury to go over 95 miles per hour and so I said I have to get something faster. In 1982 I went out and bought a new BMW 320. I got it with US specs so I could take it back to the states with me.

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“It ran a lot better than the Monarch but even with a top speed of about 120 I was still getting outrun on the autobahn by bigger cars. I was passing more cars but not enough for me. There is nothing more frustrating in Germany than being in a fast car and finding there is someone who looks like they are 10 miles behind you flashing their lights at you and the next time you look in your mirror they are on your rear end screaming at you to get over!”

‘Getting over’ wasn’t something Whitener enjoyed doing and so he set about getting himself in the position to be the ‘flasher’ rather than the ‘flashed’. And this has nothing to do with raincoats.

“In 1984 I bought a second BMW, this time a 525i. Now I was doing much better, tooling up and down the autobahn at about 150 miles per hour. At that point it was only the real big Mercedes and cars with bigger engines that were getting past me. Now it was me who was getting to do all the flashing!”

Running in the fast lane soon became routine, so much so that Whitener had to be reminded he was a man with a family and perhaps, a bit of restraint would be prudent at times.

“One day, my wife Ravelle was with me in the car, and we had our twin sons Robert and Adam in the back seat. She looked over at the speedometer and said, “Would you slow down? You are going 140 miles an hour with the kids in the back seat!” I hadn’t even noticed it because I had gotten so used to the speed. Over there the roads are great and the cars are built to handle the speed.”

Ah but those fast days came to an end and, as is the case with most servicemen returning to the states, he too found he needed to make adjustments to his new civilian lifestyle. One thing Whitener quickly discovered is that most traffic policemen do not ‘speak German’. He knows, because he was introduced to many of them.

“When I got out of the service I shipped both BMW’s back home. It didn’t take me too long to rack up a few American speeding tickets! Having just come back from being in the service only helps with the police for a little while so after about six months the cops are just not as forgiving which is how I started my speeding ticket collection.”

Realizing that there had to be better ways to wring out his fast ambitions, Whitener decided it was coming time for him to look for ways to put the pedal down without having to stop and explain why.

“I was always interested in sportscar racing but I was busy getting my career going and my sons were growing up so I had no time for it. I was in the plastic bag industry – we made bags that held food products for institutional use (think big bags of French fries being delivered to McDonalds). I was working for someone else and then decided to start my own business in 1998. In 2003 a competitor decided they wanted the business more than I did so they bought it from me and asked me to stay on and run the operation for them. That basically was how I was able to fund my start in sportscars.

“I always loved sportscars but one day I fell in love with a Maserati I saw in a magazine ad. I thought it would be neat to own one of them one day. A few years back, my wife and I were out riding when we came upon a Maserati dealership and went inside to take a look. We found a Spyder we both liked and bought it. This put me back on the road to high speed driving.

“Around this time my sons Robert and Adam were 19. I felt their driver education course in high school had left a lot to be desired – and after seeing so many people having accidents over the years – I decided to enroll them in a driving school. We went to the Extreme Measures School here in Charlotte, North Carolina. I signed myself up for the class too! We all went to the school together.

“I drove the Maserati and my sons had their Trailblazers. We all had a great time and that really rekindled my desire to drive cars from a high performance standpoint. I talked to the instructors there and they said if I were really interested in going to the next level I should take a high performance driving class where you actually drive on race tracks.

“I then hooked up with several car clubs - BMW, Porsche, Ferrari and NASA – so I could participate in their driving schools. I joined them all! I started doing their weekend driving events and decided to get a Maserati coupe to use in the schools. There is a lot of thrill and exhilaration being out there learning how to drive the cars the way they were meant to be driven. And even though they are not timed events and not competitions, there is a sensation of driving at high speeds with other people on the track at the same time.”

To take his quest to go fast to the next level, Whitener knew he would have to move into a form of motorsports that encouraged aggressive driving – with an emphasis placed on car control, momentum and balance. In short, he had to learn to be a race car driver.

“As I progressed and got better as a driver, one of my instructors said I should consider racing. By this time I was getting kind of bored with the strict passing rules and other things that go on with the kinds of events I had been running in. I was in my late 40’s when the racing bug bit me. BMW and NASA have competition schools so I got my competition license from both those organizations. My first races were sprint races with them.

“I’ll never forget the feeling I had at Road Atlanta when I was at the back of the pack, and there were 60 cars in front of me, and as we came down the top of the hill onto the front straight I realized that I was really in a race! And I found someone to race with at the back of the pack. We passed each other time and again and it was a blast!”

The next step was to find the right car to race. He needed something that would test his driving ability and – if possible – take some of the strain off of his wallet’s workload.

“By the time I ran my first real race, I had already moved to a Mazda RX8. I was going through a set of tires and a set of brakes every weekend with the Maserati. Someone suggested I try the Mazda because it was a great handling car and it doesn’t have a lot of horsepower. I got to a point in my progression where I came to realize that the driving aids in the high horsepower cars were preventing me from being a better driver. I was told that if I wanted to be a better driver I would have to learn how to drive a momentum car fast.

“I couldn’t fit in the Mazda Miata because I am a big guy. I needed something a little bit bigger and the RX 8 was a better choice. I started doing time trials and such in that first car and then I bought an RX 8 that had already been run in the 2005 Grand-Am Cup season. This was June of 2005. At that point I was planning on moving into Grand-Am but I didn’t feel I had enough experience to get my license so I continued to do the club events and rent out the second car for the 2005 season. I didn’t drive that year but being a team owner just made the racing bug bite that much harder.

"In October I bought another RX 8 off the showroom floor and converted it into a race car. When we got into the 2006 season I had successfully managed to get my Grand-Am drivers license and my first on-track experience was at the Daytona test days. I had huge butterflies in my stomach! Not only was it my first race but it was at Daytona! There are a bunch of people who will tell you how exciting it is to run their first race at that track. One of our drivers said it was like a dream come true."

Whitener got up to speed real fast on one of the hard realities of trying to maintain control of a speeding projectile surrounded by other 'rocketeers' – many of whom were, like Whitener, still just getting their in-flight training.

"Test days went great. When we came back for the race, during one of the practice sessions, I was following a car into the bus stop and he started sliding. I made a rookie mistake and my evasive action slid me sideways into the tire wall and messed up the whole side of the car. Luckily the engine fired up and I was able to drive the car back to the pits where the team spent the rest of the afternoon banging out the dents so my co-driver could take it out to qualify. I was too sore to take it back out. We wound up starting 42nd.

"My co-driver started the race and ran the first half. I got in the last part of it. I was still real sore and I had a hard time just getting into the car. I really didn't like those hard left hand turns too much! I managed to get through it though and we finished 18th in our first race. Interestingly enough - and they got this on TV and in photos - the GS class leader that took the checkered flag happened to be passing me at the time! I wasn't going to tell anyone that flag was for him and not me!"

(Sorry Rob, the secret's out now.)

The balance of the team's first year in Grand-Am Cup afforded them the 'opportunity' to learn even more of the hard stuff that comes with the racing game.

"We ran most of the 2006 season but we were a new team and we had some motor problems due to overheating. We had to miss a few races because of it. Once we got the problem solved we got back into the series and I ran a few more races, but our cars were plagued with problems. We lost motors, we had accidents. If we started three cars we finished two. If we started two cars we finished one. At Daytona this year, we started two cars and we finished two cars. One of those cars was running in 11th until that last caution when another competitor hit us under yellow. That messed up the control arms and the alignment of that end of the car. We worked as quickly as we could to repair the damage but by the time we got the car back out there we had lost nine or ten spots. We ended up finishing 20th."

Whitener's disdain for being passed – dating back to those miles driven on the autobahn – led him to set some difficult yet attainable goals for his team going forward.

"For 2007, our goals are to rack up lots of top 5 finishes and maybe a win or two along the way. We have one car sponsored by Winterhaven Farm and The Toliver House Restaurant and the other car is sponsored by Discovery Parts. Joe Scarbrough and Andy Brumbaugh drive the #63 car and Chip Van Vurst is the primary driver in the #62 car. We have drivers for both but if there is ever a vacant seat I am always prepared to take it!

"I think Grand-Am is a great series. My long term plans are to follow in Speed Source's steps somewhat. They are a very professional team, well organized and with full time people. Although I do have some full time people working for me, ROAR Racing is not my full time job

like it is for Sylvain Tremblay (owner of Speed Source). They will always have a leg up on us. And who wants to follow someone else? This is racing! You go into this to win!"

At this point we asked about the origin of the ROAR Racing name.

"ROAR is an acronym for Robert, Adam and Ravelle. Ravelle is a graphic artist and she did the logo and came up with the paint scheme for the cars."

At 49 years of age, Whitener is content to be a part of the racing scene, even if he is not looking through the windshield of a race car.

"I certainly love the racing but I also love being the team owner too, and just being at the events and getting things organized and getting the cars ready. It is almost as exciting as driving to find somebody who can do well in our cars. Don't get me wrong, I still love driving and do so at every opportunity on off weekends. I have gone full circle and do most of my driving now back with the clubs that got me started."

"I do this because of the excitement and the competition. Even though we are operating the team like a business, I do it because it is so enjoyable. I still work in plastics. I still have a full time day job and when I get off work I go to the shop and we work on the cars until all hours of the night. We just love getting the cars ready to race and arriving at the track with cars we have prepared to the best of our ability, for great drivers to drive."

And Rob Whitener knows this sport was created for all the lead-foots like him who needed a place to go fast without concern for punitive measures being imposed by an uncaring authority figure. There are no speed limits on a race track, and when you go faster than everyone else 'on the road', you get a check someone else has made payable to you, rather than having to write a check made payable to the local court.

"Actually, one of the primary reasons I convinced my wife to let me go racing was that I said the track events were going to be cheaper than all those speeding tickets! However, while the racing does go a long way to fill my need for speed, it hasn't completely eliminated my encounters with law enforcement! Tragically, I know too many policemen by their first name."

Now it's time for the fans to know the names Rob Whitener and ROAR Racing.