

Sports

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2007 A year beyond belief.

Auto racing notes

By Michael Vega, Globe Staff | August 25, 2007

His heart is behind wheel

During the week, R.J. Valentine is a businessman and entrepreneur who owns F1 Boston, a state-of-the-art indoor go-kart facility in Braintree. But on weekends, the 63-year-old Hingham resident fulfills his need for speed as a driver for the TRG race team in the Grand-Am Rolex Sports Car Series, where he has demonstrated the ability to run with those half his age in the GT Class.

"At 63, I don't care what anybody says, the older you get, the faster you look," Valentine said with a laugh.

With one event remaining in this season's 13-race schedule, Valentine and his driving partner, 32-year-old Andy Lally of Dacula, Ga., are tied for second with 340 driver points, trailing German Dirk Werner of Farnbacher Loles Motorsports by 5. TRG is tied for first with Farnbacher Loles for the team championship, which won't be decided until the season-ending Sunchaser 1000K Sept. 15 in Salt Lake City.

"It boils down to the fact that Kevin Buckler has a great team," Valentine said, referring to TRG's director and owner. "I've been racing with him since 2003 . . . You can talk about cars and you can talk about drivers, but Kevin Buckler is the best strategist."

Before anyone dismisses Valentine as a weekend warrior, Buckler will be the first to tell you that couldn't be further from the truth.

"Because someone like R.J. has been smart enough to make his living outside of racing, he hasn't been able to do this professionally, it's not his profession," Buckler said. "But he goes about it just like a professional driver. Other people may do it just for fun or as a hobby, but not R.J., no way. He's the total package as a driver. He's fit, he's committed to it, and he knows how to connect the dots in business."

Valentine's results speak for themselves. Last year, he helped TRG win an unprecedented Triple Crown by capturing the driver, team, and manufacturer championships in the GT Class. This season, he and Lally have a series-leading five victories: at Laguna Seca, Watkins Glen, Mid-Ohio, Iowa, and Montreal. As far as Valentine is concerned, it's been a simple formula.

"Andy is a phenomenon," Valentine said of his partner in the No. 66 TRG Porsche GT3. "The thing is being able to keep it on the lead lap, keep up with traffic, and keep it out of trouble. I don't think I've had a wreck in five years. I just stay out of trouble and just stay up in the hunt and then they put in Andy and he's the closer."

To make certain he keeps up his end of the bargain, Valentine has maintained a rigorous fitness regimen, cycling up to 35 miles a day four times a week and doing weight training the days he's not on his bike.

To stay sharp when he's not on the track, Valentine goes to his Braintree office and trains on a race simulator called Virtual GT, which "gives you all the tracks and it gives you the inherent feel of just about every kind of car you could drive," he said.

So, what if he and Lally were to win the driver and team championships? "My next goal is to win the 24 Hours of Daytona," Valentine said. "I came in second last year and

we were a lap and a half out of first place and we felt like we could almost grab the trophy and it got snatched away because of transmission problems that cropped up. But this year we're going to put a full-court effort on winning the 24 Hours."

But Valentine has been just as busy off the track as on it. He worked behind the scenes with Buckler to help Lally land a two-race Busch Series deal with Wood Brothers/JTG Racing for a pair of road races this season.

Lally made his NASCAR debut Aug. 4 in the NAPA Auto Parts 200 at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in Montreal. He started 13th, ran as high as sixth, "and was running down Robby Gordon," Buckler said, before his transmission blew and he finished 29th.

A week later at Watkins Glen, Lally started 17th "in a race with a lot of Nextel Cup drivers," Buckler said, and finished 10th. "He even ran nose to tail with [Juan Pablo] Montoya. R.J. was involved with me in that and it was a dream come

minutes west of Atlantic City into a multipurpose motorsports complex, where he envisions building a 4 1/2-mile road course, an oval track, a championship kart track, and a hotel, among other things in the hopes of luring sanctioned racing events. "We want to get an ARCA event, a NASCAR Craftsman Truck event, a Busch event," he said. "Who knows? Maybe someday a Cup event."

Valentine shows no signs of slowing down any time soon. "You know what? People say, 'Are you gonna quit?' The thing is, if I could, then what the hell would I be doing?" Valentine said. "I've missed so many barbecues and so many weddings for so long, I mean, I owe a great deal to my wife for being away so much. But racing's what I do. That's what my thing is."

When Jeff Burton's No. 31 Chevrolet Impala SS rolled off its hauler yesterday at Bristol (Tenn.) Motor Speedway, it was devoid of any AT&T logos, which was in compliance with the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals decision to allow NASCAR

to ban the Richard Childress Racing team from having AT&T on the No. 31.

RCR won a preliminary injunction to continue displaying the AT&T logo after its merger with Cingular, but NASCAR sought legal protection for the \$700 million investment of its title sponsor, Nextel Sprint, after it argued Cingular's rebranding as AT&T had not been grandfathered into Nextel's sponsorship agreement with NASCAR.

And so yesterday, Burton's car arrived with only the No. 31 on the side while crew members wore gray RCR shirts instead of uniforms with AT&T logos. Burton showed up wearing an orange driver's suit adorned with only associate sponsors. "I've said all along that reasonable people can come to reasonable solutions and I'm still holding onto that," Burton said. "In order for that to work, people have to be willing to be reasonable. Hopefully, we can get there."

NASCAR rejected proposed paint schemes featuring AT&T's "Go Phone" and the AT&T Mobility motto "More Bars in More Places," prompting AT&T to seek another preliminary injunction citing NASCAR's actions as "unreasonable and vindictive."

"I can't see where it's in the sport's best interests to ask a sponsor that's been part of this thing for years to not be here," said Burton.

Truck-driving man

It looks as if Jacques Villeneuve will be following Montoya's footsteps to NASCAR after all. This week, the former Formula One driver and 1995 Indianapolis 500 winner confirmed rumors he had accepted an invitation from Bill Davis Racing to make his NASCAR debut in a Craftsman Truck Series test Aug. 27 at Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet, Ill.

"We have spent the last few months considering a number of NASCAR options and were in agreement that the truck offers the closest reference point to the Car of Tomorrow," Villeneuve said. "Bill Davis Racing was aware of my interest in NASCAR and approached my management team with a view to allowing me to test within its truck program. I'm glad we're able to work that out, and I'm really looking forward to working with Bill and his staff."



true for him. To me, he's the quintessential professional driver because he knows everything it takes to make a team win and that takes a lot more than just knowing how to drive a car. "He sees this business like a chess master. He sees all the moves."

Valentine's next move? In addition to exploring the possibility of joining Buckler and other investors as partners in a NASCAR team, Valentine has set his sights on developing an 800-acre parcel of land one hour east of Philadelphia and 45