

SPORTSCAR



BUILDING SUCCESS

There's just no stopping eight-time
SCCA National Champion
Andrew Aquilante



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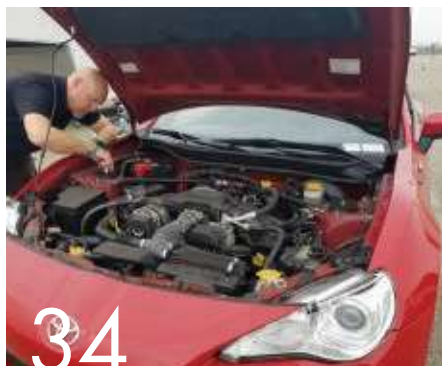
SIMPLY THE BEST
Remembering
racing legend
Dan Gurney



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hits cones but
stays the course

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHY Chris Clark
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“I started driving quarter midgets when I was 8 years old – we had a local quarter midgets track in Phoenixville. We never did that as seriously as people do now.” This wasn’t exactly what I expected to hear when I asked eight-time SCCA National Champion Andrew Aquilante about his early days in motorsports. But while his younger days were less assuming, the reality is,

Andrew was born to do what he does, and he wouldn’t have it any other way. “Right as I was getting to the stage where [my dad and I were] wondering what we were going to do next,” Andrew continues, “some of the guys started spending five grand on quarter midget engines, which blew my dad away because, at the time, an engine for the Firehawk series was about

\$5,000. So we said, that’s cool, we don’t really need to do that.” They left, and for the next few years, Andrew spent the time indoor go-karting. But yes, did you catch that? His dad is Joe Aquilante, owner of Phoenix Performance, and Joe, along with Joe’s brother Tom, had fielded cars in various pro series through the decades.



SWEATING THE DETAILS

For eight-time Runoffs champ Andrew Aquilante, grit and determination are only the start of racing success

WORDS Philip Royle | IMAGES Chris Clark

"I was always around when we were doing the Firehawk series in the mid '90s, and I was watching John Heinrich, Don Knowles, and Stu Hayner, who were driving for my dad at the time," Andrew explains. "I was learning from them, although I wasn't realizing that I was learning at the time."

Andrew's father and uncle have

somewhat started an SCCA empire. "Tom and my dad went to races at Watkins Glen, then got involved with the Sports Car Club of America, and then went racing themselves," Andrew says. "It's only natural that I'd get involved." Tom's family was not immune to the racing bug, either, and his daughters Beth and Amy - Andrews cousins - also road race with the SCCA.

None of this is to say that Andrew's road to racing came without work. On numerous occasions, I've heard other racers refer to Andrew as "the real deal" - a racer, a builder, and a nice guy. It seems it all began just prior to his teenage years. "We bought a salvage title Corvette for the Motorola Cup and I took it apart when I was about 12 years old."

ON THE JOB

(MAIN) Andrew (left) may be an accomplished Club and pro level driver, but he's also one of the ones building and maintaining the racecars. (BOTTOM) Always at Andrew's side is his father, Joe.



Many of Andrew's stories start with "we built a car," and that's because to him, it's what you do. Be it for a client or someone on staff at Phoenix, you build a car, and then you go racing. Consequently, in 2001, he says, "We built a car. I was 13 years old, and I helped build the car that John Heinrich won the Runoffs in, lapping the field in the rain in at Mid-Ohio; and it went from there."

In February 2004, Andrew obtained his competition license - with no less than multi-time SCCA National Champion Don Knowles as his instructor - and he began racing. "All through that time, I was working on cars and helping build racecars," Andrew recalls. "I was fully immersed in it. I attempted to go to college, but that only lasted two and a half years. As my dad and I joke, my degree came in 2008 when we were looking for

something to do above Club Racing with Corvettes, and there was Grand Am's GT class."

But between 2004 and '08 came a steep learning curve. "One of the times we went to Mid-Ohio for a Regional [before the 2004 Runoffs] and we took John Heinrich," he says. "One of my 'aha' moments was I gritted my teeth and followed John around Mid-Ohio. While I was scared for three laps, I managed to hold on - it was an eye-opening experience. I said if his car can do it then my car can because they're the same. I learned a lot about what a car can do."

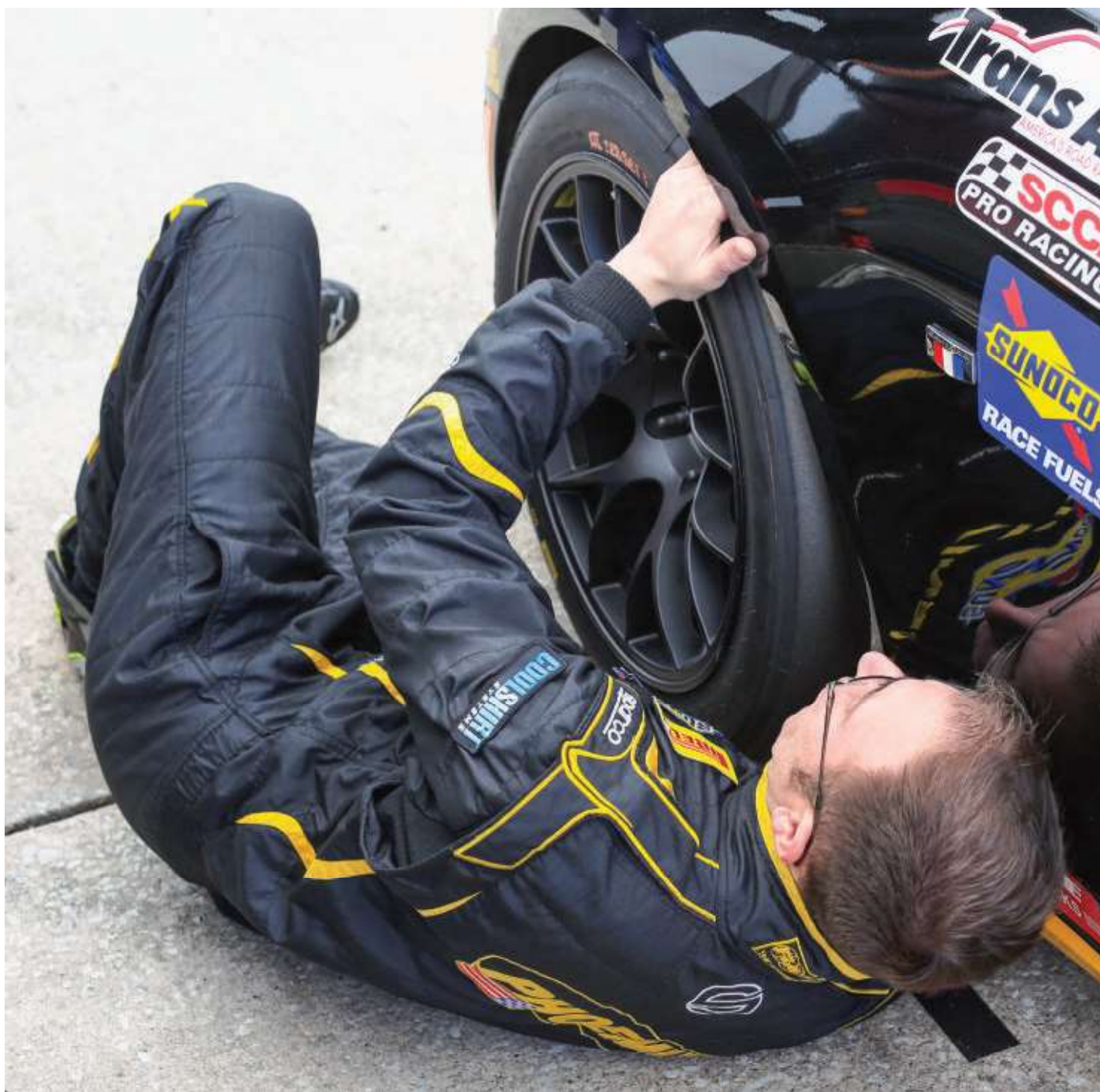
At the National just prior to his Runoffs debut, Andrew put his newfound speed to the test. "I think I qualified fourth behind John, Freddy Baker, and David Roush," he says with fond recollection in his voice. "I ran 18 of 20 laps just behind those three while they were scrapping



"I was fully immersed in it. I attempted to go to college, but that only lasted two and a half years"
ANDREW AQUILANTE

it out. Then Roush went to pass John and spun, and it kind of knocked John off the road. That left Freddy Baker up in front of me. I thought I'd finish second, and that was cool, but one lap later I'm in his trunk, passing him going down the back straight on the final lap. At that point, the dog had just caught the bus, and I had no clue what to do - I'd won the race!"

But come that Runoffs, another valuable lesson was to be learned. "I just sucked and I couldn't figure out what was going on," he says. "It turned out, somebody who last used our alignment machine had changed the settings from degrees to inches, or vice versa, so the toe was way too far on both ends of the car. I didn't find that out until right before the race, so I was mired in the back of the pack. That was one of those learning moments where



realize you can't let any stone go unturned. You hate that they're all learning experiences, but without them, you don't learn."

Many lessons later, everything finally came together. "[The Runoffs] was getting old," he admits, referencing the Runoffs

podium near miss in 2005 and the 2006 Runoffs that ended with a flat tire in SSB and a blown motor in T1. "We built a Corvette a couple of times, and [winning the Runoffs] was the goal. I built my own car, a new Corvette, went

for it, was dialed in, and everything clicked."

Part of what makes Phoenix Performance work as a business is manufacturer deals and customer support that keeps the company at the track. Being a racer, Andrew jumped in

whenever he could to go pro racing. "In 2008, I started running in Koni Challenge with Subaru," he says. "At the time, I wasn't involved too much with the build of those cars, but looking back I should have involved myself more. Also, at



DETERMINATION

(LEFT) Leaving no stone unturned is perhaps the reason for Andrew's success. (Counterclockwise from BOTTOM RIGHT) Most recently, Andrew collected a pair of SCCA Runoffs wins at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2017, the first coming during the opening race of the weekend in T1. Later that day, Andrew dominated the GT2 field for another Runoffs title. Andrew's first Runoffs victory came in 2007. That year, the T1 field was tight, but everything clicked and Andrew scored his first SCCA National Championship. Along the way, Andrew has performed admirably in many pro series, as seen here during a Continental Tire race in 2014 at Lime Rock Park.



Rock Corvette



Rock Corvette



LAT / Scott R. LePage



Roberto S. Janes



Rock Corvette

"I built my own car, a new Corvette, went for it, was dialed in, and everything clicked"
ANDREW AQUILANTE

the beginning of 2008, we started building a Corvette for the Rolex GT class, and that kept me pretty occupied. "We debuted the [GT car] at Lime Rock with John Hienricy, and I think we ended up something like 12th out of 20

cars, with a car that took four months to build, and it was the first time we'd built anything that advanced. Back then, most of the Rolex GT cars were tube-frames, like the Pratt & Miller cars, the Mazda RX-8s from Speedsource, the Porsche Cup cars that were

kind of on steroids, so that was cool to finish 12 out of 20 with a brand-new car." On the Subaru side, however, "It was kind of hit or miss," he says, noting the bottom falling out of the economy resulting in a scaling back to one Subaru, then

**SOMETHING NEW**

The weekend we met up with Andrew he was competing in a Camaro in Trans Am's TA4 class. Despite Camaros not being the norm for Phoenix, he still won.

none. But that adventure led to more lessons learned.

Andrew's professional racing tales are fascinating. They're not ones of glamour and glitz; rather, it's of Andrew wrenching, booking hotels and flights, then working countless hours to make it come together. New clients come on board and the process begins again. Case in point, the weekend we caught up with Andrew he was at the 2018 season opener of the SCCA Pro Racing Trans Am Series running TA4 in a brand-new Camaro.

"This year with Trans Am, they've changed around the rules with TA4 trying to bring back the original Trans Am feel of cars to the likes of the Penske Mustang, [but] it takes time," he says. "The TA4 Camaro we're running still has the factory radio in it, although the speakers are out, but it's still connected. There's way too much wiring in there and

"What's my ultimate goal? I don't really know. I like building cars. I like racing cars"
ANDREW AQUILANTE

that makes me nervous because there's more that can go wrong, but that's what you have to do with modern cars."

In the time between his first Runoffs win in 2007 and now, Andrew has claimed four more T1 Runoffs wins and three in GT-2, along with logging countless hours behind the wheel in professional racing series such as Trans Am, IMSA, and World Challenge. So, what's the secret to building, racing, and winning? It's knowledge, he says, coupled with the willingness to experiment.

For instance, he says, "The Mustang S197, the 2011-'14 GTs

and Boss 302s, we learned so much in the competitive environment of pro racing with them and what it took, then transferred that to Club Racing, whether it was T1, T2, or even T3 with the V6 cars. Do a good setup, throw in a good driver, and coach them along."

It all needs to be second nature, too. "You can't be thinking about when you turn in for an apex," he says. "Your eyes just need to be there, and then they move on. You're four moves down the road instead of right then and there. The same can be said about the cars. For example, with the Mustangs, by the end of the 2015 season in World Challenge we were changing spring rates by 15 pounds a corner to optimize the setup. We were making little changes. This is how well we knew the car." Success, he says, builds upon itself.

It's also about knowing who you are - are you willing to put in the work necessary to make this all happen. Is Andrew? "It comes to the question of what you would do if you hit the lottery," he tells me when I pose the question. "Yes, I'd love to get paid to drive and go to Le Mans, however, the chances of that happening are very slim. What's my ultimate goal? I don't really know. I like building cars. I like racing cars. As long as I can keep on doing that, there isn't much else that's going to be exciting enough to pull me away.

"There are times when it's 2 a.m. and the truck leaves for the Runoffs in three days and I question why I'm doing this yet again," he admits. "But then I wake up the next morning and think, what else am I going to do? Which comes back to winning the lottery - I'd still be tinkering with cars and loading trailers." ◉