

GUESS THE USCC CHAMPION & WIN FREE STUFF—Details on pg.56

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NOVEMBER 2008 — VOLUME 20, NO. 11

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- WRX STI
- BMW 325i
- Impreza L
- Acura NSX
- Nissan 350Z
- R32 Skyline GT-R
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MY FIRST Pro Race

Infiltrating the USTCC with Spoon Sports USA

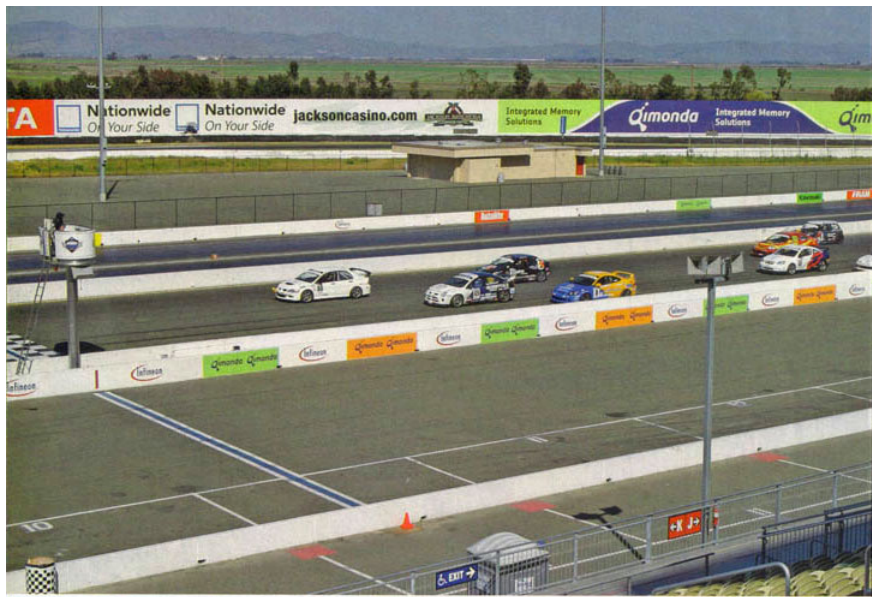
by Andy Hope

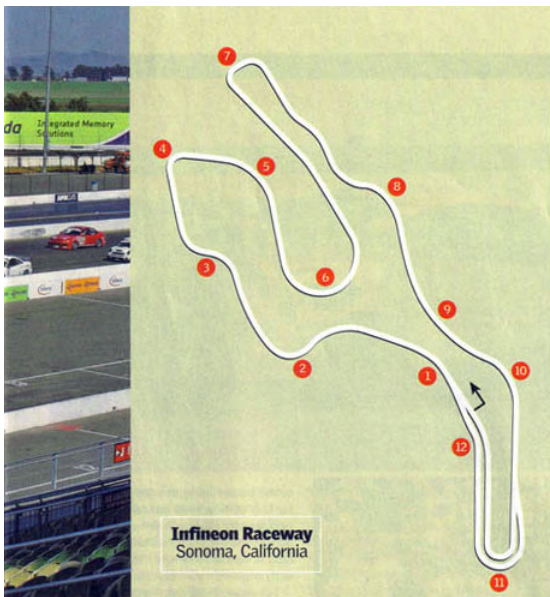
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAL TORRES AND TOM "GRANDMA" PAULE

What is professional racing? Is the guy that pays out of his pocket to race an Indy Car a pro? What about the Spec Miata driver that gets free labor at the local body shop; does that sponsorship make him a pro? From the outside, it's hard to say who's real and who's not.

Then there's the racing organizations, some claim to host pro races, but what makes a series professional? There are certain things we associate with pro racing—TV coverage, spectators, sponsorship, and, of course, champagne spewing trophy ceremonies. But, in reality, it all comes down to money. Not how much you spend, but how much you earn. By definition, a professional racing series is one which you can race and earn money. Those oversized checks up on the podium are not just winnings, they're taxable earnings. Take one to the bank and you're in business. Brake pads, motel rooms, and corn dogs all

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Infineon Raceway
Sonoma, California

"This wasn't going to be a typical amateur race against my friends. I didn't know any of these guys and they didn't know me."

Their spec tire program is the best that we've ever heard of. Each racer gets a free set of Nitto NT-01 tires at their first event of the year, and another pair of tires at each event after that. For most drivers that completely eliminates their tire budget, the most expensive cost of racing. There's also TV coverage, sort of. The staff puts together a half-hour telecast after most of the races. The show airs on various local stations and can be found online as well. Those are just a few examples of how the USTCC organizers do everything they can to promote the series and support its racers, which is sort of how I ended up sneaking in for a race.

Opak Racing, the exclusive importer of Spoon Sports products, has been fielding cars in the USTCC for several years now. They proved their competence in their first season by winning the '05 championship with Dave Brown behind the wheel. Following that, they held a driver search, which led to a driver development program. The team wasn't satisfied with just producing the best equipment. They wanted to bring up new drivers and learn to work with them. The program not only included mechanical support,

but also a professional driver's coach. Several familiar drivers have worked with the team, including Tyler McQuarrie, who landed on the podium in all three of his races, including one win.

It all sounded too good to be true. Most aftermarket companies don't invest that kind of money and time into racing programs. Not unless the owner is the one out on the track. But then one Wednesday in April, the guys from Opak passed by my cubicle during a visit to the SCC offices. The owner, Edman Laurea, casually inquired, "Hey Andy, nobody is driving our car this weekend. Would you like to come and try it?"

Three days later, I found myself in the USTCC drivers' meeting at Infineon Raceway. While I was on the World Challenge Touring Car roster in '06, I never saw a checkered flag, or a green for that matter. So, officially, this would be my first pro race. Ali Arsham, the series director, introduced me as a guest magazine editor that would be racing with them. I could hear the whispers passing through the group. "Better not get in my way, better not cause a full course yellow." Automotive journalists have a pretty bad

reputation amongst racers. I can't say we don't deserve it.

Despite my overwhelming confidence, I was pretty lost for the first few sessions out on the track. The last time I'd driven it, I sealed up my Honda Challenge championship with a Second Place finish. But that was years ago, in my own CRX. This time I was in an unfamiliar right-hand-drive car on an insanely crowded track. Theoretically, the USTCC cars should have been the fastest things out there. But many of the locals in their Spec 944s, Miatas, and BMWs were negotiating the turns better than I was. I ended up following an H2 Civic around just hoping to get the rhythm back.

One of my competitors offered to work with me on my line. Of course I brushed him off, but secretly I knew I needed help. The team introduced me to Steve Romine, their driving coach. He is not only an instructor at Infineon's Jim Russell Racing School, but also a certified athletic coach, which is a whole different thing. This was the first time I'd worked with a coach and the first instruction I'd had in ten years. We reviewed my in-car video and discussed what I should do to go faster. Some tips were down to the foot, like specific turn in points, but others were tricks about reference marks that were a quarter mile away. Turn 1 is a seriously high-speed, blind left-hander. I was lifting early there to play it safe. Romine taught me that I could look under the bridge just as I passed start/finish and locate the entry to Turn Two. Once I had that reference point I could sail through Turn 1 and set up for the next series of corners before I could even see them.

Mark Villaluna and Jimmy Hufford, the head Opak mechanics, wanted to know what set-up changes to make. But honestly, I hadn't even thought about it. You know a car is good when you forget that it's there. Before the main race, they pulled the car out of the paddock to change the engine and transmission oil. Opak Racing's shop is right there on the premises at Infineon. Inside sat a pair of Spooned out Fits and another DC5 Integra (RSX) that was identical to mine. The fluid change seemed a little excessive, but it was a nice touch. Diligent maintenance is part of their formula and their endurance racing results are impeccable. The only other task they had was to get the transponder working. That was our only real crisis of the weekend.

We had been using hand timing and nobody bothered to check the official times until after qualifying. With help from Romine, my practice lap times had dropped considerably. We knew that I was right there with the leaders. But on the grid sheet, I was listed last with no qualifying time. It was time for me to put that automotive journalism networking to use.

For the last year or so, SCC has been using the MaxQData, data acquisition system as a back up for our telemetry. The GPS based unit



is small enough that we usually take it with us, instead of our normal bulky accelerometer based system, whenever we have to fly out for testing. This year, the USTCC is using a MaxQData system in every car to monitor their acceleration on the track. The series' method of equalizing the field is a complicated yet well thought out power to weight ratio formula that the cars must meet. Most pro racing organizations don't implement a power to weight ratio because it's too easy for competitors to cheat on the dyno. But, using telemetry to monitor each car's performance throughout the race is a great way to keep everyone in check. Anyway, I hunted down Ed Lansinger of MaxQData and he was able to extrapolate my qualifying time from his system. He started embellishing on how he cross-referenced my time with the others, but he soon went over my head.

All I cared about was that I was being bumped up to Third on the grid. I was put me on the inside of the second standing start. In front of me, on p the '07 series champion, Curt Simr SRT-4. Next to him was Dave Bong the '06 championship winning EVG knew Opak's '05 champ car had a : was going to be a real fight. I would company.

While mentally preparing for the race I started picking up on the pro race. This wasn't going to be a typical amateur race against my friends. I didn't know any of these guys and they didn't know me. The grandstands were far from "N weekend" crammed, but I had friends family up there, and the Opak Team entourage, plus a few hundred other people watching. They were all being



same for him though. Some of the passes were ruthless. I may have run a Spec Miata off the outside of Turn 4, but I can't say for sure since I never mastered looking out of the left and center mirrors from the right side.

The amps got turned up to 11 when I caught the leader with two laps to go. The SRT-4 had been smoking the front tires while exiting the corners for several consecutive laps, and now they were overheating. Simmons could no longer get his Dodge down to the apexes. It looked to be understeering both on and off the throttle. He overshoot Turn 4 and I took the lead. But then he motored up the inside of me on the next straight.

Had it been the last lap, I would have blocked him, but playing dirty for two laps straight would leave him with opportunities for retaliation. Fortunately for me, his car still wouldn't hook up. He shot by me on the inside under braking, allowing me to inside out him and lead into the esses.

At the bottom of the esses I was going to catch a pair of 944's right at the apex of 10. This would kill my momentum and allow the Dodge to blow past me at the following straight. To even things up, I backed off and reeled him in next to me, so we'd both have to slow down to squeeze through the turn side by side. It was my favorite move of the race.

By that point though, things were no longer fair. I was forced to dig deep into my bag of tricks, but only because of the overwhelming tenacity and skill of Simmons. His car was done, but mine was running as strong ever. My last lap was actually faster than my second

lap. The car could do this because that's what Spoon Sports builds cars to do. Nothing on the car is at the ragged edge. It is all just carefully balanced and measured to be reliable. That way it can be pushed hard lap after lap.

Pulling into victory lane was awesome. I think the OpaK guys were more pumped than I was. Up on the podium, I was given the Top Rookie award along with my First Place trophy. I also received a cool little video camera from GoPro and a box of Nomex cleaning products from Molecule. I thought the rookie thing was somewhat inappropriate. But, just then, the corks popped and I realized I deserved it—I got caught totally unprepared

and unarmed—I was blinded by champagne before I could even find my bottle. For those that think the champagne is there for celebration, it's not. It's war. It is there for the Second and Third Place drivers to avenge their loss. Had I managed to locate my bottle I would have broken it and started shanking people.

Fortunately, the bottle was saved for the many people who deserved a taste of victory.

The race really came down to the end and everyone's efforts counted. Had the car not worked perfectly, or Romaine not gotten me up to speed, or MaxQData not logged my qualifying time, I'd be writing yet another story on how and why I did not win.

We'll put together highlights from the in car video and load them up at sportcompactcarweb.com. There's also a very entertaining telecast of the race that can be downloaded at FinalDrive.net or on YouTube under "Nitro USTCC Infineon". ■

SOURCES

OpaK Racing
www.opakracing.com

Spoon Sports USA
www.spoonSPORTS.us

United States Touring Car Championship
www.ustcc.com

Elnex Tuning
www.elnuxtuning.com

OPAK RACING/SPOON SPORTS 2004 HONDA INTEGRA TYPE-R

ENGINE

Engine Code: K20A (Type R)

Type: 1,996cc DOHC inline-four, aluminum block and head, VTEC variable valve timing

Internal Modifications: All components balanced and lubricated by Spoon Sports, Japan, Mobil oil

External Modifications: Spoon Sports air filter, header, exhaust, baffled oil pan

Engine Management: Stock ECU, Bosch fuel pump, Spoon Sports spark plugs

DRIVE TRAIN

Laysan: Transverse front engine, front-wheel drive

Drivetrain Modifications: Spoon Sports clutch, shortened final drive gear and limited-slip differential, DriveShaft Shop axles, Mobil fluid

SUSPENSION

Front: Shimizu dampers, 14 kg/mm Swift springs, Spoon Sports offset pillowball mount equipped lower control arms

Rear: Shimizu dampers, 20 kg/mm Swift springs, factory anti-roll bar

BRAKES

Front: Spoon Sports stainless steel braided lines and four-piston monoblock aluminum calipers, Endless CC-X pads, Mobil RBF 600 fluid

Rear: Spoon Sports stainless-steel braided lines, Endless CC-X pads

EXTERIOR

Wheels: 17x6 AME, Inzer, +35mm G1 +35mm D0

Tires: 225/45/17 Nitto NT01 spec tire size for USTCC

Exterior: Paint and collision repair by Absoluter Customs

Interior: Custom roll-over bar by Spoon Sports, Japan; Spoon Sports steering wheel and carbon bucket seat, tubular harness