

GRAND-AM MASTER

He's pushing 50 years old, but there's no dimming Scott Pruett's enthusiasm.

By GARY WATKINS



Pruett is gunning for fourth Daytona 24 win



'Politics' put paid to NASCAR opportunity

A belated Christmas quiz question: who won the most major sportscar races in North America in the decade just gone? You'd think it would be one of Audi's American Le Mans superstars, perhaps Dindo Capello or Frank Biela, but in fact it's a homegrown driver. Many of Scott Pruett's triumphs, in Trans-Am and now Grand-Am, have slipped under the radar of European observers, yet his 29 victories make him – pardon the local vernacular – the 'winningest' sportscar driver of the noughties in the US and Canada.

Pruett, who is bidding for a fourth overall Daytona 24 Hours victory this weekend at the age of 49, has enjoyed an Indian summer to his career. Not only has he won races by the dozen, but he's notched up championship success in both Trans-Am (2003) and Grand-Am ('04 and '08). His record is all the more remarkable because he was ready to hang up his helmet after an attempt to break into the NASCAR Winston Cup ended prematurely.

"I said the transition from CART

would be tough and said it had to be a three-year deal. Cal Wells [owner of the PPI team] and Tide [the sponsor] agreed with me," he says, before explaining that management changes at Tide's parent company resulted in his replacement. "It was all down to politics and who was friends with whom.

"For a new team, we had some decent performances [including qualifying second at Las Vegas] we could have built on for the second year. I was so frustrated by the NASCAR disaster that I decided I was done with racing."

"The first driver through the paddock gate in the morning is Scott, and he's probably the last to leave" Riley boss Bill Riley

Pruett raced only a handful of times in 2001 and '02, instead concentrating on a TV career that dated back to the early 1990s. "Doing the TV thing but still being around racing became very frustrating," recalls the Californian. "I'd kept my hand in, but soon I wanted to race full-time again."

That resulted in a call-up from Paul

Gentilozzi's Rocketsports Trans-Am squad. An ultra-successful year with the Jaguar-backed team resulted in eight race wins and a third Trans-Am title. Pruett also found time to notch up a Winston Cup podium finish at Watkins Glen as a road-course ringer for Chip Ganassi Racing.

"I had that relationship going with Chip, so when he went Grand-Am with Lexus in '04, he said, 'Hey come and join me,'" says Pruett. "Everything aligned because I was already known to Toyota [Lexus's parent company] from my final days in CART."

The link-up with Ganassi has resulted in a period of success only rivalled by Pruett's years with Roush Racing in IMSA and Trans-Am in the late 1980s. So far the relationship has yielded a pair of Grand-Am titles, two victories in the blue-riband enduro at Daytona and a record 21 overall wins.

Pruett's CV suggests he is most at home in the tubeframe sportscars that have given him so much success in IMSA, Trans-Am and Grand-Am. He begs to differ. He reckons it's the style of the racing rather than the nature of the cars that's the common link.

"In Grand-Am you race hard: it's a physical sport and you have to lean on

people," he says. "That kind of racing, whether it's IMSA GTO or Grand-Am, has always been good to me."

Pruett's dedication and determination, on and off the track, are the stuff of legend. Gentilozzi needs only a handful of words to sum up the American's strengths: "Have you ever seen anyone pass Scott Pruett on the last lap?"

Bill Riley, whose family company makes the Riley Daytona Prototype chassis in which Pruett has accrued all his Grand-Am successes, has his own view. "If you sat at the paddock gate in the morning, the first driver through would be Scott and he'd probably be the last to leave in the evening," he says. "He's really into the car and using every tool possible to make it better."

Pruett has no problems motivating himself in what even he admits are his twilight racing years. "I'm still having so much fun," he says. "I still absolutely love it, and that makes it easy to go to the gym and do all those things you need to do to have success in your latter years."

Pruett turns 50 in March, yet he's about to embark on his busiest season since the 1980s. As well as his bid for

a third Grand-Am title with Ganassi, now with BMW rather than Lexus engines, he will be reunited with Gentilozzi to race for his new factory-backed RSR Jaguar squad in the American Le Mans Series.

"Spectacular" is the word Pruett uses to describe the forthcoming season. That's his passion for the sport shining through, but in the next moment it's his legendary determination. "We want to get our title back; we should have won it last year," he says. "The BMW is a big step up: the horsepower is similar, but the driveability and acceleration are significantly better."

The chance to race a factory Jaguar in the international arena, including the opportunity to go to Le Mans for only the second time of his career, is described by Pruett as "a real honour". "That's not to take away anything that we have done in the US," he says, "but this is something different."

Obstacles to be cleared first include RSR gaining an entry for the French race, and the inconvenience of Grand-Am races scheduled either side of the Le Mans weekend. So will he be there? "You bet," he says. "I'm not missing that for anything."

THREE THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT SCOTT PRUETT

- He tested for the Larrousse Formula 1 team at Estoril in 1987 courtesy of his Ford contract. "We had a great test," he recalls, "but there were just too many hurdles for an American no one had heard of to get to F1."
- Pruett is a published children's author. So far he has written four books with wife Judy, including *Twelve Little Race Cars* and *Racing Through the Alphabet*.
- His first single-seater race was his CART debut with Dick Simon Racing at Long Beach in 1988. "For most people it wouldn't have happened that way," he says. "I had no money and, after karting, I was trying to do whatever I could."

HISTORY OF CHAMPIONSHIP SUCCESS

- 1986 – IMSA GTO – Roush Ford Mustang
- 1987 – Trans-Am – Roush Ford Merkur
- 1988 – IMSA GTO – Roush Ford Merkur
- 1994 – Trans-Am – McCall Chevrolet Camaro
- 2003 – Trans-Am – Rocketsports Jaguar
- 2004 – Grand-Am – Ganassi Riley-Lexus
- 2008 – Grand-Am – Ganassi Riley-Lexus