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One Dollar

We Test the REYNARD

Riverside & Palm Beach Nationals



Profile:

Gary Witzenburg

Nick Craw

Nick Craw is your basic racing overdog: a skilled and experienced professional driver in a first-class professional car, running a relatively low-dollar semi-pro series.

Followers of the B.F. Goodrich Radial Challenge over the past several years have surely grown tired of watching and reading of his exploits in the Miller & Norburn BMW — not to mention his fellow competitors.

Craw shared the series title with arch-rival Amos Johnson in 1973 (the first season he competed for it), finished a close second to George Alderman in '74, then came back to win it last year after another outstanding, hard-fought, season-long battle. In the 1975 Mid-Ohio Six Hour he teamed up with John Morton to triumph even after carrying a lady journalist passenger for the first third of the race.

I had never met Nick Craw prior to our interview at Daytona and was frankly prepared not to like him. Anyone who wins with such disturbing regularity, I reasoned, couldn't help but be a little too impressed with himself. But I was in for a pleasant surprise.

He studied foreign affairs at Princeton, then went on to land a master's degree at John Hopkins University and ended up working for the government, rising to the position of Director of Operations for the Hospital Ship Hope.

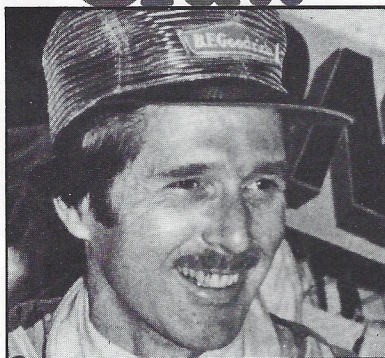
Craw saw his first big race, an F1 event, in Switzerland at the age of 11 and remembers being much impressed. But the hook was not set until 1962 when he was driving past Daytona Speedway and stopped long enough to watch a prototype car do some test laps. Finally six years later, he made the big decision to quit his government job and go racing full time — even though, incredibly, he still had almost no driving experience.

Also, incredibly, he started in a Formula B car — and at the ripe old age of 32. "You're starting late," advised a knowledgeable friend, "so there's no point in getting into small production cars or sedans and working up from there. You'd better start right off in FB. If you're any good, you'll know it right away. If not, you'll save yourself one hell of a lot of time and money."

Nick won 18 races in the B-car competing in SCCA amateur events and in 1970 graduated to the L&M Continental Series, finishing fourth in the FB division. In '71 he was third in season points driving for Fred Opert and appeared to be well on his way to an outstanding open-wheel career. But L&M dropped its support prior to the '72 series. With the resulting cut in prize money, it became decidedly unprofitable to compete.

Meanwhile Craw had returned to work for the Big Uncle as Director of the Peace Corps and found himself able to compete only occasionally in '72. He did manage however to gain some valuable experience in a couple of European events and drove prototype cars at Daytona and Sebring.

Then in the last IMSA Camel GT event of that year, he drove a BMW in the under 2.5 litre class and ran against Russ Norburn. Craw finished third in class and apparently impressed the Nomex socks



right off Norburn, because after the race Russ came up and asked him: "Where did you come from?" The two made a deal for the '73 season and the most successful team in the history of the series was born.

I asked Nick if he missed open wheel competition and whether he had any plans to get back into it. "I'd really like to run an open wheel car again," he told me, "but I can't afford to get caught in the trap of investing in a series that does not have adequate financial backing."

Craw left the Peace Corps job in '74 to again become a full-time racer and appears to be satisfied for the moment with the Miller and Norburn ride. L&M's pull-out from the Continental Series just as he was reaching for the top was a bitter lesson; he intends to stay where the money is, and that appears to be IMSA as far as road racing is concerned.

While the uncertain financial situation in professional formula car racing may continue to keep him out of it, Craw has nothing but praise for open wheel competition, particularly in today's version of his old class: "I've driven single seaters, sports cars, prototypes and most everything else," he told me, "but nothing beats Formula Atlantic for sheer competitiveness."

How does racing a small-displacement sedan on street radial tires compare to the faster and more aesthetic forms of the sport? "It all boils down to getting four small patches of rubber around a given race course in as little time as possible," the ex-diplomat philosophizes. "The BFG sedans are fairly simple to set up, but they're no less competitive to drive. Still it did take a while to get used to having all that metal around me." Those who have seen BFG events, by the way, know there's truth in what he says. Enormous fields and super-close competition flag-to-flag make this series the Formula Ford of closed-wheel racing.

Did the danger factor bother him in the FB car? "I had a couple of pretty good shunts, one at Edmonton and one in South America, but you've got to put the idea of getting hurt out of your mind or there'll be a big, invisible spring pulling up on your throttle foot. I was able to do that."

Finally, I asked Craw what kind of driving he would like to try that he had not yet experienced. "One thing I'd really like to do is run a NASCAR Grand National car," he replied without a moment's hesitation. "I think that would be a real ball."

At 38, the BFG Series' most consistently outstanding performer is not the arrogant, cocksure young lion one might expect. On the contrary, Nick Craw couldn't be more personable, articulate and pleasant. I wish him continued success in 1976 and beyond — even if he does seem to be irreversibly converted to racing family sedans.

