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We Test the REYNARD

Riverside & Palm Beach Nationals



Profile

Gary Witzenburg

Al Holbert

Those who were on hand in 1973 for the unveiling of Alva R. Holbert, professional driver, may have been forgiven for thinking "Who's the new kid?". Bearing a striking resemblance to Ron Howard (Richie on TV's "Happy Days") doesn't contribute to being taken seriously in the tough Camel GT Series first time out.

But "The kid" drove like a man possessed, and the astute observer might have noticed the distinct aura of professionalism surrounding the Holbert truck, not to mention a certain proud father named Bob who was one fine driver himself not too many years ago.

Young Al, who at 26 was a bit older than he looked and who already had several years of SCCA amateur competition to his credit, became the STP Professional Rookie of the Year in '73 and returned the following year with a vengeance. Although he competed in only half of the 1974 season he won two races, finished third in the TransAm and fourth in the Camel series, and was the top money winner for the year.

Last season Holbert was again the top money winner, won six races (more than anyone else) and still had a chance at the series championship going into the final November race at Daytona. But a broken axle late in the final laps knocked him out of second place and into a close third in points for the year. In July at Mid-America he became the first driver IMSA history to win both heat races a single weekend.

Holbert, who is married and has two children, is now 29. The strain of three tough seasons has begun to crease the boyish face, but the easy-going manner, quiet good humor and unobtrusive confidence have not changed in spite of the obvious pressure and the uncertainty about his plans for '76.

He graduated from Lehigh University in 1969 with a degree in Mechanical Engineering, lives in Warrington, Pennsylvania, and is general manager of Holbert Porsche-Audi, Inc. in addition to his role as president of the Holbert Racing organization. His early years were occupied by competition on his high school track and wrestling teams and working for Roger Penske Racing — which may provide an insight into his present well-known passion for meticulous car preparation. Besides racing, he lists his interests as "sailing, flying, carpentry and cooking".

For '76, Holbert's racing calendar will certainly be full, but details were still uncertain as of early February. "I really wanted to do the Formula Atlantic series," he told me. "I tested a Doug Shierson car at Mid-Ohio, the March that Bobby Rahal drove last year, and we were quite pleased with the results of the test. I felt comfortable in it, but there is still a question of finances — whether I would try to do it on my own or on a rent-a-racer basis. That deal may still go together, but I know that Doug can't afford to wait around for my decision on it." One consideration is that he would like to have his own mechanic, '75 IMSA Mechanic of the Year Rick Routledge, taking care of his car, whatever it may be.

"There's another possibility in F/Atlantic, which I guess I can talk about



now," he continued, "which would be to compete as the second driver to Villeneuve on the Ecurie Canada team."

Holbert does have some less than satisfactory open-wheel experience in a Super Vee. He finished a creditable seventh in a Charlotte Gold Cup event, then had mechanical problems that dropped him from contention at Road America and Watkins Glen. "I found it very difficult," he candidly admits. "You really have to throw those cars around to make them go fast."

Like Peter Gregg, Holbert's plans to campaign a Porsche Turbo in the Camel series were squelched when John Bishop decided not to let the controversial Turbo compete. Yet there are no hysterics or theatrics from the Holbert camp.

"The Turbo deal was a big disappointment," said Al. "We have worked very hard and we had finally landed some factory support. But both Peter and I agreed that we would prefer not to compete unless we had a new car to develop. We feel that the RSR is totally developed, so in a way a lot of the challenge has gone out of it. If I were not so stubborn, I'd probably campaign the RSR for another year — but I said last year that I wouldn't run it again, and I guess I am a little tired of it."

The Turbo

I asked about the "show business" aspects of the sport in regard to IMSA's apprehension that allowing the Turbo Carrera to compete could open the door for another several years of Porsche domination.

"I agree with the concept that this is show business, but on the other hand I feel that John didn't give the car a chance. I don't really feel that it would be faster than the RSR, particularly at the tighter tracks like Laguna Seca, Mid-Ohio and Lime Rock. To begin with, the Turbo has more weight, less tire and less wing, and it's not the easiest car to drive.

"I drove a Turbo at Paul Ricard in France, and I don't think it's quicker than the better IMSA cars. Paul Ricard is a very fast track, and the Turbo was only a second faster than an RSR there — and I believe that our IMSA Carreras, because of rule variations and their level of development, are some three seconds quicker than the European RSRs. Even if the Turbo did prove to be dominant at places such as Daytona and Talladega, it

could always be restricted in some way to even up the competition."

Holbert confirmed the rumor that he might have a Monza in time for the Atlanta Camel event, but declined to give details of the arrangement because the backing was still uncertain. It will most likely be a Horst Kwech-built car, but the engine builder had not been determined. In addition, he has plans to run a Turbo in the SCCA TransAm "if the series is decent — more than just a few races".

At Daytona and Sebring, he drove George Dickinson's Carrera, the one that Hurley Haywood ran in '75, in the familiar Holbert number 14 blue and yellow trim, finishing second in the 24 Hour after a race-long battle with Haywood's Brumos RSR and Gregg's BMW CSL. Dickinson would undoubtedly like Al to stay in his car for the season, but it appears that the chances of that happening are less than slim.

Goals for the future? "I would like to do some European GT racing and perhaps some NASCAR. Mostly, I would enjoy an opportunity to do some racing and not have to spend my own money — to someday be in a position to get paid for it instead of the other way around."

"What about F1?" I asked dutifully.

"It's a possibility, but I intend to take things one step at a time," was the logical answer.

It's easy to be envious of Al Holbert. How many of us, myself included, wouldn't give our proverbial eye tooth to have the opportunities he has had: the famous and helpful father, the Porsche dealership, the money and connections necessary for a chance to prove or disprove one's talent?

Yet it's hard to hold these advantages against the man if only because he has done so much with them in such a short period of time. A lot of people with more have accomplished considerably less. And no one ever claimed that racing was fair.

The comparison to Mark Donohue is inevitable, and Holbert does little to discourage it. His father reportedly sold Roger Penske his first race car, and Al grew up learning the lessons of racing strategy and car preparation from two of the best. His cars carry the Penske dark blue and yellow colors, he is an engineer who combines great driving talent with an equal knack for race car development, and he readily admits that Mark was his long-time number one hero.

We will all know more about Al Holbert's immediate future by the time this appears in print, but I feel safe in predicting that whatever he does, he will do it well. Time will tell where "the kid" will go from there. I may be envious, but I must admit that it couldn't be happening to a more deserving guy.

