

# Lights, Action...Green, Green, Green

BY JOHN JEPPESEN

Like Paul Newman, James Garner and Steve McQueen, Patrick Dempsey would swap a wheelbarrow full of Emmys for a laurel wreath and the top step on a race podium.

The silver screen legends were smitten by their roles in "Winning," Le Mans" and "Grand Prix." On the other hand, the "Grey's Anatomy" heartthrob came in a different door. He tells his story in Velocity Network's four-part series: "Patrick Dempsey Racing Le Mans." It chronicles his 15-month saga to race at the fabled Circuit de la Sarthe in France.

Dempsey's passion to race began when his wife, Jill, bought the motor head in her life a very special present. She grew weary of his watching racing on TV on free weekends. "I've never seen anyone love a car as much as Patrick," she said. "It's crazy. Cars, racing...sometimes he looks at me and thinks I'm a car...as a gift I gave him Skip Barber (Racing School), three days in Northern California. That torched it."

The documentary's opening shot sets the stage: "My life started when I started racing," Dempsey said. "I never felt like I belonged in the acting community. I always struggled in the theater. In a car, it's very clear cut."

The same can't be said for acting success. "When you do well at the track," he added, "there's nothing more satisfying than that. You're present. You're in the moment. It's a very spiritual experience."

What motivates the wealthy and famous to risk their careers...even their lives? Insightful interviews with Newman, Garner and McQueen answer the vexing "Why?" question for the actor/racer's living dream lives.

A reporter asks McQueen if the studios were nervous about his racing. "Shhhh," is all McQueen said. Later, the interviewer asked if it's money or glory. McQueen had an abundance of both. OK, is there some psycho issue?

McQueen flatly said: "Society today thinks neurosis is such a popular

commodity. Nowadays, if you're not in trouble, you're in trouble. I don't have any kind of death wish...I'd just like to do it well and that's about it."

Time is another critical factor for Dempsey. He must juggle the shooting schedule for his award-winning series "Grey's Anatomy," with an equally demanding racing schedule.

"I am lucky to have a lot of good people helping me on both sides," he says. "I couldn't do it without the cooperation of 'Grey's Anatomy,' certainly, and the crew on the racing team is also experienced in working with my late arrivals, limited track time. It is always a race just to get to each race, but we make it work."

Dempsey believes there are similar disciplines between acting and racing.

"Racing is about repeating a task, fine tuning little nuances each time and staying focused on the details, very much like acting," he explained. "There is also a lot of repetition in the perfection of both, but I would say focus is probably the biggest shared factor: Joe (Foster, co-driver) tells me that I am good at taking direction when he is coaching me because I am used to being directed all of the time."

"Beyond that, I don't think you can compare the two. There are so many things that are out of your control when you are racing," he continued. "I don't think I have achieved anything in Hollywood like I have on the level of satisfaction I have in racing. The visceral reality of driving a race car is a much different experience. You're going to a place where you're completely aware. You're so focused. You're absolutely alive."

Newman's take on the sport adds

another dimension: "Obviously you have to have driving skill, but that in itself isn't much good if your mind isn't hooked up," said the late actor, racer and team owner. "How good a driver you are really starts with your frame of mind."

Garner has his own perspective as well.

"Going 180 mph down a straightaway is not particularly thrilling to me," he said. "What is thrilling is taking a 30 mph corner at 29.999. That's the thrill for me and, of course, beating the other guy."

Paradoxically, driving at speed can have a soothing effect, especially because the frantic world of stardom and acting disappears when the helmet visor goes down. "I suppose the only time I really honestly relax-relax is when I am motor racing," McQueen said. "One really has to. You don't want to be tense when something comes up and you can react and cope with it."

"Doctor McDreamy" is grateful for the fame, notoriety and money acting has brought.

"Do I love acting? I don't know," Dempsey said. "I'm nine years into a hit TV show that's been incredible. It has transformed my life and my family's life. I left home when I was 17 and have been a professional actor. There comes a time when you want to do other things."

Dempsey added team ownership to the challenge of simply learning how to race competitively.

"It was a romantic notion at first," he explained. "I didn't realize how difficult it would be. It's an incredibly expensive sport."

Although Dempsey admits stardom has opened sponsorship opportunities, "You're always chasing money."

Dempsey claims he's lucky to have Foster as a partner and there was a

role reversal at the start. "We met at the 2003 Petit Le Mans although I don't remember," Foster said. "I was driving a Panoz in the race and he (Dempsey) asked me to sign his hat. Several months later he came through the Panoz Racing School and I was giving a vehicle dynamics talk. He was sitting in the front row wearing that hat."

Their relationship grew in stages. "In the beginning he (Dempsey) was just a friend," Foster said. Various people offered him rides and Foster became a "consigliere" for the highly sought after TV star. Dempsey raced a Duke's mixture of cars before getting downright serious.

"In 2008 he bought the team I was racing for," recalled Foster.

They started racing the Mazda RX-8 in the Rolex Sports Car Series. Although Dempsey didn't win, he and Foster scored numerous top-five and top-10 finishes in six years with Mazda. That was not enough for Dempsey. He was shooting for a lifelong dream — to race at Le Mans.

The team first decided to race a Lola LMP2 Prototype. The deal could not have happened at a worse time. They took delivery of the car right when the legendary race car manufacturer declared bankruptcy. The challenges of sorting and driving the new car without spares or engineering help were too much and Dempsey Racing returned to GT racing in a Porsche-backed coupe.

In sharp contrast to what most think racing is, the story of getting to Le Mans is a no-holds-barred drama of crashes, funding challenges and team layoffs. The hero wins the day with the beautiful girl at his side at the curtain. Not only did Dempsey achieve his dream of racing at the fabled Circuit de la Sarthe, the team came within a minute of a podium finish.

Dempsey and Foster will press on in 2014 in Porsche's new 911 GT America in the TUDOR United SportsCar Championship.

"I don't just want to be an actor who races," says Dempsey, "I want to be a racer who wins." ■



PATRICK DEMPSEY

RICK DOLE PHOTOS

