

Age Is No Problem For Peterson

By JOHN JEPPESEN

Doug Peterson won his second consecutive Trans-Am championship last year at age 64. He's living proof drivers can show speed and remain competitive after their 50th birthday.

Despite a late start to his racing career, Peterson confesses to a long-standing fondness for fast cars, not unlike another "late bloomer," one Paul Leonard Newman.

Peterson and Newman are twin sons of different mothers. That's because both started racing in their late 40s. Newman was stung by the racing bug when he starred in the 1969 movie "Winning" at age 44 and got seriously involved three years later. Newman discovered another talent equal to his silver screen finesse. The superstar became a racing star when he won his first of four SCCA national championships in 1976.

Peterson traveled a similar road but started a year later than Newman. Both had careers that took precedence over racing ... Newman in films and Peterson building his business, 3Dimensional Services Group. Peterson's Detroit-based company provides rapid prototyping services for the automotive industry. He started with a handful of employees and now more than 300 work in three Michigan facilities near Detroit and at a similar facility in Bad Homburg, Germany.

While Newman began racing fendered cars like the Datsun 510 and Triumph TR6, Peterson jumped in the deep end in Formula Mazda. This single-seat, open-wheel

class was the domain of fearless young drivers like Scott Speed with their sights set on big-time stardom. Peterson got with the program quickly, giving as well as he received. He was the 2004 SCCA national champion and continued in the class until 2013.

Peterson has also gained notoriety for his open-wheel piloting skills as an in-car camera captured a well-executed snap roll at the start of the 2012 Road America June Sprints. Thankfully uninjured, his disapproval of the flight is evidenced when he angrily tossed the steering wheel out of the cockpit after the landing.

That isn't Peterson's only venture in the fast lane. He also began racing in the rarified air of the Ferrari Challenge. Ferrari Challenge races are support events on select IMSA race weekends. Obviously, the drivers are well-heeled "gentleman racers," or so one would think. Swapping paint in an exotic super car that costs nearly a quarter-million dollars is not for the timid or financially challenged. When asked how hard he drives the 458C, Peterson simply said, "It's just like any other race car."

That means he's fully prepared to throw the keys over the hill.

The quest for speed didn't end there. Peterson continued searching for the right race car. He tested the waters in other racing series.

"I had the opportunity race some Grand-Am and some World Challenge and a lot of SCCA racing," he said. "I like Trans-Am out of all of those. They are pretty friendly men and women. The cars are



CHRIS CLARK PHOTOS

AGELESS WONDER: Sixty-five-year-old Doug Peterson (87) has won two consecutive Trans-Am Series championships. (Below) Peterson celebrates in victory lane last season.

very, very similar in engine and design, so it comes down to getting the setup right, saving the tires a little bit and really racing hard for those last seven or eight laps and, hopefully, trying to win the race."

Peterson came to Trans-Am racing in 2011, while it was rising from the ashes of its near fatal demise. He was competitive but the cars he drove were down on power, usually unreliable, never set up to his satisfaction and falling short of his quickly growing acumen at the wheel.

Like any goal-driven businessman, Peterson was looking for the right fit — a team that could translate what he is feeling in the cockpit into setup changes that turned into fast lap times. Experienced race teams are dismissive of wealthy and relatively inexperienced drivers new to the series. Drivers may ask for some changes and the crews will do something else, thinking they know better. The communication and response gap resulted in a predictable failure to meet Peterson's expectations.

Peterson knew one thing for sure. He was tired of looking at Tony Ave's tallights. A perfunctory SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis revealed the notion that Ave must be cheating. He decided he wanted what Ave had and asked him to build a car. And while Ave was at it, Peterson asked him to prepare and

transport the car to the races.

"I come to all the races," Ave said. "So that's no problem for the team."

Ave recalled the early days of the partnership.

"When Doug came to me, he really loved the Trans-Am cars but he hadn't had good success yet," Ave said. "And so he was looking into the best equipment he could get and make a run for some race wins and he bought a new car from us and won the first race at Mosport. He ended up with two wins that year and even though he didn't run all the races I think he was third or fourth in the championship."

Peterson finally found a home and a team that would work with him.

"It (his performance) showed me he had plenty of driver ability and aggression," Ave explained. "We just had to make the car to his style."

Well, surprise, surprise. "We did that and he won the next two championships," Ave declared.

Ave is a second-generation racer and has been around the sport his whole life. He quickly spotted Peterson's natural talent, much like the talent Bob Sharp saw in Paul Newman.

"He (Peterson) didn't start until very late and frankly had he been in a position to start racing when he was really young he could have easily become a professional driver at the highest level, because if he's comfortable

in the car and has the setup the way he likes it he is fearless," Ave continued. "I mean really fearless. And that's why I think we've had the success we've had ... most of the older businessman drivers just don't have that killer instinct like he does."

Peterson is on a roll. He has a new Cadillac CTS-V Trans-Am car in the works. Unfortunately, it wasn't ready for the season opener. No matter, Peterson's Corvette still has plenty of life and speed left under the bodywork and behind the wheel.

So the question is: Can Peterson pull off the hat trick this season?

"I definitely think he has a chance to make it three in a row," Ave said. "He's going to have a new teammate with us this year in Paul Fix, who has won quite a few races for us, too. And with any luck those two guys will push each other to the next level."

Ave's belief in the now 65-year-old Peterson puts credit to David Hobbs' comment about Jerry Hansen, an SCCA legend known to race in the Trans-Am. Hansen's last-lap banzai run in the 1983 Trans-Am race at Minnesota's Brainerd Int'l Raceway nearly stole a victory from Hobbs.

Even though it was a tiny bobble short of victory, Hobbs noted: "There are old racers and there are bold racers, but there are no old bold racers. Jerry Hansen disproved that today."

Doug Peterson is one such racer. ■

