

Countdown to the 50th Anniversary Rolex 24 at Daytona #13: Andretti vs. Unser in '91

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The Andrettis' Dauer day at Daytona. (LAT archive)

The 2012 Rolex 24 at Daytona, Jan. 28-29, marks a half-century of top-level sports car racing on the high banks and twisting infield of Daytona International Speedway. We're counting down to that milestone with a series of stories looking at some of the drivers, marques and stories that have shaped those 50 years. This week, a team owner dreams big and two famous racing families go head to head in 1991.



The Gathering of the Clans

Like many of the best ideas, this one came about in a bar. But having a great idea and successfully pulling it off can be two very different things. Especially when the plan involves getting the foremost names from two great U.S. motorsport dynasties, the Andrettis and the Unsers, to race against each other in a sports car superteam at one of the world's biggest endurance races, the 1991 Rolex 24 at Daytona.

Yeah, good luck on that one...

The architect of this ambitious program was Jochen Dauer, racer, entrant and font of good ideas. (Just three years later, his Dauer Porsche 962 “road car” would win the 24 Hours of Le Mans in the hands of the Porsche factory.) The German had already had a couple of Unsers – Al Jr. and cousin Robby – aboard one of his Porsche 962s at Daytona in 1990 and decided, while enjoying a few “adult beverages” one evening, that if you could have two Unsers then you might as well have four.

Dauer claims credit for this initial idea. “We were in a bar near the Nurburgring,” he says. “And it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

The concept was moved on by the team manager at Jochen Dauer Racing, expatriot Briton Steve Charsley, who takes up the story: “After a bottle of champagne or two to celebrate our good idea, I said, ‘We can't do this. It will be rude because it will upset the Andrettis.’ So Jochen said, ‘We'll just have to run two cars then, one for the Unsers and one for the Andrettis.’”



Dauer's links with the Unsers and Charsley's with the Andrettis (he'd been crew chief for Mario and Michael during their sports car forays back in 1983) meant contact was quickly made with the two racing families.

“I phoned the Andrettis' manager, Don Henderson, and ran it past him, and that opened up a meeting at Elkhart Lake at the CART event. They verbally signed up there and then. The Andrettis were in and so were the Unsers. It took me just 90 days from the idea to getting all the contracts signed.”

Mario Andretti remembers being immediately attracted by the unusual proposal.

"We always had a friendly rivalry with the Unsers and figured we'd have a bit of fun," he says. "We always like to give each other a bit of needle in a friendly way, so Jochen's idea was very attractive."



Dauer's plan was to run Mario, his sons Michael and Jeff, and, before a clash of sponsorship intervened, nephew John in the Andretti car, with Al Sr. and Jr., Bobby and son Robby in the Unser entry. The next question was to find someone to pay for the ambitious program that, at one stage at least, looked set to include a full IMSA campaign with the younger drivers from each family entered in a car apiece.

“It was a case of ‘build it and they will come,’” says Charsley, who today is North American vp at Lola Cars International. “We believed that we had enough time and that the program was large enough that we could sell the idea.”

Charsley was right. Mario Andretti arranged a meeting with long time backer Texaco, which caught the team by surprise by asking for its Havoline brand to be the primary sponsor on the 1978 Formula 1 World Champion's car.

“Mario said that we needed to talk to Texaco because they wanted an involvement,” recalls Charsley. “I remember going to the hotel lobby while we were at the Laguna Seca CART race. They asked how much it would cost, and I showed them a few options for 30 or 40 grand. They turned around and said, ‘No no, we want to sponsor the whole car.’ I wasn't ready for that, so we had to arrange another meeting.”

Computer giant Olivetti was lined up as a sponsor for the Unser clan, although events in the Middle East, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, meant it provided only limited assistance, resulting in the car running largely unsponsored at Daytona. Another potential taker as the plan came together over the second half of 1990 was Mercedes-Benz, which was in the process of wrapping up that year's World Sports Prototype Championship.

“We approached Mercedes and they were very excited about the program. The Mercedes C11 Group C car wasn't legal in the U.S., so I got on the phone to IMSA and spoke to Mark Raffauf [today director of competition at Grand-Am] and said, ‘Can I bring a Mercedes to the U.S.?’ He said that if I could get Mercedes into IMSA, he'd find a way to accommodate them.”

The Mercedes plan eventually came to nothing, so Dauer went back to the original idea of running a pair of Porsche 962s. Two new customer-spec cars were ordered from Porsche and Dauer came up with its own bodywork, which was produced by the Arrows Formula 1 team.

Ian Dawson, who was brought in to manage the Andretti entry, remembers no expense being spared. “The cars had the best of everything,” he explains. “We even had an early telemetry system. It was an ambitious project – perhaps a little too ambitious.”

That ambition and a shortfall in funding for the Unser car, which ran in plain white at the 24 Hours, meant the cars were behind schedule. The Dauer team missed the pre-event Daytona test early in January and the cars arrived in Florida late after getting stuck in customs, the result of the outbreak of the Gulf War just days before the 24 Hours.

“The cars weren't quite ready when they arrived in the U.S., and I remember a few all-nighters in the lead up to the race,” says Dawson. “But they were quick.”



So much so that Michael Andretti was able to make rapid progress from sixth in the starting field to take a short-lived lead in the No. 00 Porsche on the opening lap. He was back in the lead on lap nine, before settling down to complete the opening stint in third place.

However, the Andretti's bid for Daytona glory had started to go off the rails even before Michael handed over to his father. He reported a misfire that would eventually lead to a long stop in the second hour. This and what Charsley calls "other little gremlins" resulted in the Andrettis falling 17 laps off the lead.



The Unsers, running with No. 0 on their Porsche, also led briefly, but their Rolex 24 ended early when Robby crashed going up onto the banking in the night, reportedly as a result of the one working headlight failing. The Andrettis, however, had the right car for the conditions.

"I remember Michael insisting on a lot of downforce," says Mario, "and when it was wet in the night that really helped us."

The No. 00 Porsche fought its way back up to seventh by midnight and was third when dawn broke on Sunday morning, though admittedly nine laps down on the leader. That became second when the best of the Nissans ran into problems, and then first when the Andrettis swept into the lead, passing the No. 7 Joest Porsche driven by Frank Jelinski, Bob Wollek, Henri Pescarolo, Hurley Haywood and "John Winter" shortly after nine o'clock.

The remarkable comeback soon ran into problems as Mario had to bring the car into the pits when a flywheel bolt sheered. The resulting stop, lasting more than 70 minutes, left the Dauer Porsche in fifth, which was where it would eventually be classified. In fact, the car was running fourth when the engine expired in the closing stages, but it had completed enough laps, 56 laps behind the winning No. 7 Joest entry, to be classified fifth.

"That car was easily fast enough to win," recalls Dawson. "We were flying during the night and the Porsche guys were going mad because they thought we were going too fast. We should have won, and won it well."

Still, not a bad effort for an idea dreamed up in a bar...