

A Night with Dempsey

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04/06/2014 For Patrick Dempsey, Porsche and Le Mans are even greater passions than his successful film and television career.

You think you've got a date with a Hollywood star, and then you find out he's a full-blooded race-car driver. For Patrick Dempsey, Porsche and Le Mans are even greater passions than his successful film and television career.

He is the star in Le Mans. But for him, Le Mans is the star. "Patrick, Patrick...!!!" scream fans of all ages, especially women. They give him a grand reception at the drivers' parade through the city center before the famous 24-hour race. Twenty hours to go before the start. Dempsey's blue eyes sparkle at the crowd, and the crowd beams back. You notice it at once. He doesn't need any movie make-up or the flattering lighting on a set. The man in front of you looks exactly like the one you think you know: an individual in high definition. Authentic. Even the consummate seriousness he exudes in the medical drama Grey's Anatomy is there.

Patrick Dempsey is a passionate race-car driver

He wants to concentrate on racing. That is of paramount importance. He is very close to fulfilling his greatest dream, namely, driving a Porsche in Le Mans. Patrick Dempsey is a passionate race-car driver. But at the parade on Friday, he plays the film star. He waves, greets, gives autographs, lets himself be photographed again and again with fans. He's professional. And grateful. It may be disappointing for his television fans to hear, but he says, "I don't find the satisfaction in acting that I do in racing right now. I enjoy having regular work in a series that has been running for ten years and enables me to enter races. But I've turned down many other roles because the sport is more important to me."

Cars, competition, and the public eye – all of his passions were present at an early age. In the beginning there was Route 4 in the state of Maine. The never-ending sound of cars rushing by his parents' home in the city of Lewiston fascinated little Patrick. Fridays were very special days. His father, an insurance salesman, would come home from work every week with a Matchbox car. "I was waiting at the door, excited to find out what model it would be," he recalls. And he still loves looking at cars: "I think they are sculptures."

In his youth he was successful at skiing, won competitions, and dreamt of entering the Olympics. Nothing came of that dream, although he did internalize the meaning of momentum and an ideal line. Today he treats curves on the racing track like gates on a slalom course. "But to come back to auto racing, it reconnected me to that point in my childhood again," he says. Patrick was quick and coordinated, learned to juggle, performed as a magician, and wanted to become a clown.

"A 1963 356 Porsche – the best car I've ever had"

His first big film, a 1987 teen comedy called Can't Buy Me Love, brought him his first decent check. A car salesman was happy to do business. "I spent it all on a 1963 356 Porsche – the best car I've ever had. I will never let go of it." It was his everyday car for fifteen years. He calls it "bulletproof." As a boy he had watched every auto race with his father, and now his wife Jillian Fink was observing how he was glued to broadcasts. "At some point she said to me, 'Get off the couch and do it yourself.'" She gave him a course at the Skip Barber Racing School as a present. He then went through training at the Panoz Racing School, where the head instructor was Joe Foster—who is now his teammate.

Dempsey's first race left a strong impression on him. "It was in Mid-Ohio and about 35 degrees, and I remember very well how hot it was on the pre-grid. But it was great to go out there and compete and to really be in that situation. There is nothing like it. There is a ballet to it; there is a poetry to racing. It's about managing your emotions." He thinks back. "Seventeen years after I started racing—it's a dream come true." Porsche and Le Mans. Both are full of magic for Dempsey. He says, "The 911 is an icon; it stands for speed, performance, endurance, success, and driving pleasure— Porsche simply embodies it all." He recalls how everyone in the late 1970s was crazy about the 930, whose gigantic rear spoiler gave it the nickname "Whale Tail." A faraway look comes into his eyes as he gazes into the pit at his 911

GT3 RSR, which he is entering in the GTE Am class (the abbreviation “Am” for “amateur” distinguishes the private from the factory teams).

He has set up a new team: Dempsey Del Piero Racing

His racing car has an enormous spoiler over its 338 kW (460 hp) six-cylinder boxer engine. He has trained hard, with endless miles on a bike and countless hours at the gym, and he was already steeled by his experience in the American Le Mans Series (ALMS). He has set up a new team, Dempsey Del Piero Racing, together with Italian soccer star Alessandro Del Piero, a legend in his own right. In May the team took second place at the ALMS in Laguna Seca. “The race showed that we are competitive,” Dempsey says. “Even more important, there is a feeling within the team, within all of us, that we can win.” And Dempsey might be the one who wants it most. Before entering Le Mans in 2013, he and the Dempsey/Del Piero Proton team went to Monza for testing. No hype, just going and driving the car. He smiles and remarks, “Perhaps the expectation was that this actor would be coming, just doing a short stint and then leaving.” It wasn't a film star who came to the Royal Villa of Monza Park, however, but rather Patrick Dempsey, the race-car driver. He wore down one set of tires after another until more had to be found, and someone was dispatched for more fuel too. “We drove and drove – it was one of the most enjoyable days in my life,” he says.

Dempsey fell in love with Le Mans during his first visit in 2005, as a spectator. By chance, Patrick Long was on board the same flight. In 2013, the 32-year-old Long is his fastest teammate. In 2009 Dempsey managed his first start in Le Mans. “It was an extraordinary night,” he says, “an in-andout-of-the-body experience in many ways, because it is something you dream about for so long and finally there you are—you’re alone out there in and out of your body. The race itself was just something we wanted to finish. Our codriver at the time fell ill, so it was just Joe Foster and myself driving. So we kept going and going. I got a lot of seat time; I think it was ten hours. And this is what it is about—it is about challenging yourself in situations that you never imagined.” His description is vivid: “When it gets dark on the course, an overpowering sense of solitude comes over the car. The engine pounds and you’re carrying the entire responsibility alone. At some point you see the sun coming up, and it’s glorious, certainly the magic hour. And that’s the toughest part, because there’s still so long to go until the finish in the afternoon.”

Le Mans is like coming home

Le Mans is more than the queen of all endurance races for Dempsey. “It’s like coming home. I feel very connected to the people here. There is something magical about the region. It talks to me. There is a very strong connection.” He is considering buying a house here. “In every moment of 2012 I was focusing on this race.” The ninetieth time that the race is held produces all manner of dramatic moments, including changing weather, with heavy rain. In the first hour, Long leads the class. Dempsey then leads when he takes the wheel—for the first time in Le Mans. The all-American trio of Dempsey-Foster-Long begins to believe in victory. Shortly before midnight an LMP car bumps Dempsey from the

track. He keeps driving. The flag falls. Fourth place, just short of the winners' platform. Where did they lose time? Maybe back in the early hours, with an unplanned stop for a slit in the tire. Now the exhaustion can be seen on Dempsey's face. He is disappointed.

It takes a while before he realizes what he has achieved. He made no mistakes, and earned respect. But that's not enough for him. The winner's cup is the new Oscar or Emmy. Might a connection be made there? “It would be great if you could find a movie that could cross over, where people who do not like racing would gain an appreciation for racing and understand it,” he says. “And where racers would go, ‘Yeah, that is the world we are in.’ It's hard to do that, but I would love to.” That is yet another thing that Patrick Dempsey and Porsche share—always keeping the best of both worlds in their sights. “When it gets dark on the course, an overpowering sense of solitude comes over the car. The engine pounds and you’re carrying the entire responsibility alone.”

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