

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Patrick Long may not be on the career path he expected but, with Porsche's support, has a golden opportunity. **By Andy Hallbery**

Patrick Long has just turned 24 years of age, and the world seems to be at his feet. The Southern Californian certainly has momentum, with his short career full of moments where pieces have fallen into place just when you would least expect. Who would have thought that as a youngster determined—and well on the road—to become America's first F1 racer since 1993 he would have shied away from it and taken up Porsche's offer of a sports car career, aged just 22?

But that's what he did, and he has absolutely no regrets. In fact, day by day, he can't believe he even had to think about it. It's indicative of the man that he, in his own words, exercised "due diligence" before signing on the dotted line, and effectively nipped his single-seater career in the bud almost before it began.

"At that time it seemed like quite a big decision," he agrees. "I had just come off the back of the first Red Bull F1 Driver Search. I had had a real high and low—I had come through the 16 to the final six, and then four of those six were going to get a paid-for drive. So there was a big high going into that last day when they eliminated a lot of my biggest competition. But then to *not* get the nod was like a huge surprise and letdown.

"But I knew that with just the amount of exposure and hype that was going 'round the program in its inaugural year, it would help. And sure enough, the next morning, the phone rang. It was Uwe Brettel and Helmut Kreiner, who started the

UPS junior program that's the starting point for most Porsche drivers currently racing under the factory banner."

Wanting to see what it was all about, the Patrick Long who's way more mature than his years would suggest, hopped on a plane to Germany, and tested. Shortly afterward, he got a call saying that while they understood his single-seater aspirations, if he wanted the Porsche job, it was his. Time to make a decision.

"That's when I went and did my due diligence with everybody who has been successful in motorsport," he says. "From drivers to team owners—in fact, anybody who would return my phone call! And their opinions were unanimous—it was too good an offer to pass up at my age.

"For a factory to want to put their name behind me, with the risks involved for them, and how successful Porsche has been in racing, how loyal they've been, and so on, it was a no-brainer in everyone else's eyes. That really woke me up, and made me realize what kind of an offer it was. That tipped the scales."

Fast forward two years. Already, Long has been a class winner at the Le Mans 24 Hours and the Sebring 12 Hours. In the

American Le Mans Series, he and teammate Jorg Bergmeister are regularly snapping at the heels of the perennial GT2 favorites at Alex Job Racing, and Long, as the speedy "Young American" is

being marketed left, right and center by the ALMS in a championship that seems set to grow very big, very quickly. Things couldn't be rosier, could they? Well, actually, yes, they could.

Porsche is introducing its exciting LMP2 prototype car, with the highly anticipated arrival of Roger Penske's team, and more customer versions following for 2007. Rumors continue that Honda is on the verge of joining, and IRL big guns Andretti Green Racing and Team Rahal have given the ALMS more than a sideways glance.

So, for many, it was a surprise when Porsche announced that its development race drivers for the LMP2 car would be Sascha Maassen and Lucas Lohr, leaving one of the company favorites, Long, still in GT2. But that's also not to say there won't be opportunities in the future.

"Sascha and Lucas will be in the car this year," says Long. "It won't be a full program next year anyway as they work toward customer cars in 2007.

"There are guys who have been with Porsche longer than me who would get first dibs next year, but obviously the plan is to develop it as a customer car for '07, which means that there will be a lot more opportunity for the other drivers." More than that, he's not saying. "I'm just trying to get the results where I am, stay focused. I believe that if I can just keep learning about endurance racing, keep trying to win races, then everything will fall into place in the future."

In the Petersen White Lightning entry, Long (LEFT) and teammate Jorg Bergmeister have been a factor in GT2 all season. At the Le Mans 24 Hours (BELOW) they were joined by Timo Bernhard and finished second in class, and 11th overall.

Those words are typical of Long underplaying his approach and determination to get to be where he wants. In his karting days, as a teenager, he moved to Italy. By then he had already confidently sought out the advice of Bobby Rahal and Danny Sullivan. He also learned Italian. "Originally, I had to. It was a case of survival," he says. "They didn't speak English, so I had no choice." It proved to be a valuable weapon in his arsenal. "There are many quick drivers out there, so it pays to have things like that to help set you apart."

From karting, aged 17, he moved to France, and the Elf La Filiere series. And yes, he learned French. After a season that saw him crowned Rookie of the Year in Skip Barber's Formula Dodge series, the next stop, in 2000, was to England to race in Formula Ford, where he struck up another unlikely relationship with Kenny Brack. "My team was run by Mike Baker, who ran Kenny and an Italian American called Marco Repetto in the late '80s. I was struggling a bit, and Mike

passed me Marco's number. Marco put me in touch with Kenny, who gave me advice and useful contacts. In the end the three of us formed a management company; Marco was the businessman, Kenny had the contacts, and I did the driving. That was a big help in my single-seater time."

And then along came Porsche. Two years living in Germany added a fourth language to his repertoire, and also put him on the fast track to sports car stardom. His performances in the UPS Junior team were enough for Porsche to give him his ALMS debut at season's end at Petit Le Mans. He hasn't looked back.

"It's been a great learning experience, and of course, it's a huge opportunity. Fortunately, for the most part, I've been able to shine with the opportunities they've given me."

Porsche isn't the only one utilizing his potential. The ALMS is also making the most of its "Young American."

"I do tons of media exercises, pre-race stories, interviews, all sorts, and they constantly have a schedule for me," he says. "Although time on the road is not the biggest thing I need right now. I realize that it's a huge window for me in trying to make myself a household name, not only in sports car, but in motorsport. They are kind of giving me the tools to do that."

Recap: Porsche factory driver, Le Mans winner, Sebring winner, ALMS "poster boy"... This kid knows what he wants. **FR**



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