

## Formula 5000, The Secret Series - Racing

These white-knuckle stock-block open-wheelers were exciting...but why no notoriety?

By Sam Posey / Photos by Bob Tronolone  
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### Formula 5000, The Secret Series



A racetrack is a lot like a car dealership—it's a distribution point for a product. Forty years ago, in 1970, American road-racing tracks had three SCCA series to sell: the charismatic Can-Am, the manufacturer-backed Trans-Am, and Formula 5000, which came last and never attained the status of the other two.

Although I never won the championship, some of the achievements I'm most proud of as a driver came in F5000. The cars were fast, challenging and evenly matched because so many teams could afford the components you needed to win. The racing was terrific, and the opposition included some of the top drivers of the period. But the series did little to burnish my reputation. No one outside the racing world seemed to know F5000 existed.

In the early years, the series included teams that could no longer afford the Can-Am (like ours) as well as those stepping up from the SCCA's Formula A. After three years, Eagle, Lola, Surtees and McLaren had all built F5000 cars for sale. The engines were American-made stock-block V-8s and the displacement limit was 5000 cc—five liters. Fuel injected, that gave us about 500 bhp at 8000 rpm, in a very light chassis. Almost everyone had a [Chevy](#), although we saw the occasional [Ford](#) or Plymouth. Skip Barber ran a 3.0-liter Cosworth in a March chassis—the rules allowed F1 cars to compete. The racing was white-knuckle stuff, with many different winners. Crashes were frequent and violent (see the last 25 minutes of James Garner's *The Racing Scene*). The first three champions—Gus Hutchison, Lou Sell and Tony Adamowicz—were all Americans, and Lou and Tony won with Eagles. Still, the fans stayed away. Jim Haynes, Lime Rock's general manager at the time, summed it up: "Personally, I loved the series, but I just couldn't give the tickets away."

One of F5000's handicaps was lack of identity. The cars were best described in terms of what they weren't. Were they F1 cars? Not exactly. Indy cars? Well, no. At first, the SCCA called the series Formula A, which confused it with their Formula A amateur class. Then they called it the Continental, which meant nothing. It was three years before they settled on the alliterative Formula 5000.

In the spring of 1971, an investment company called Questor decided to hold a combination F1 and F5000 race on the Ontario Motor Speedway road course. The track promoted the event vigorously throughout the Los Angeles area and this seemed like a golden opportunity to put F5000 on the map. We would be racing against [Ferrari](#), Tyrrell and BRM—going wheel-to-wheel with World Champion Jackie Stewart.

Mark Donohue, George Follmer and I qualified in the top 10, but in the race, only Mark, in the Penske Lola, was able to stay with the leaders. He was running 3rd when his fuel injection failed. Mario Andretti won with a Ferrari, while Mark, in 9th, was the highest-placed F5000 car. Later in the year, I drove an F1 Surtees in the USGP, and I realized then what our F5000 contingent had been up against. An F1 Cosworth engine was much lighter and more compact than our stock blocks, and an F1 car was quicker on the straights and far better balanced in fast turns. F5000 cars had beaten F1s at some European tracks that put an emphasis on torque, but in a twist that seemed typical for the series, the chance to impress American fans came on a track ill-suited to the purpose.

After the Questor, series sponsor L&M declared that they were going to make F5000 a success or quit. To promote one event, they chartered a jet for Skip Barber and flew him around like a presidential candidate. They assigned David Hobbs and me to their PR ace, Rod Campbell. We soon tired of repeating the same pitch and to amuse ourselves we pretended there was a feud between us—bad blood at 180 mph! We traded insults. We proclaimed our superiority with Ali-style hyperbole. To our astonishment, many of the fans thought it was real. Whether we helped the series or not is anyone's guess, but that summer's barnstorming was the foundation for our friendship and subsequent careers in TV.

I was 2nd in the championship behind David in 1971 and 2nd again the next year, behind the New Zealander Graham McRae. After Tony Adamowicz, no American would be champion. The 1973 season

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saw future F1 World Champion Jody Scheckter win, but hot on his heels was the man who would become F5000's most successful driver: Brian Redman.

Before Brian came along, the championship had changed hands each year. But he won three in a row, dominating the series much as Michael Schumacher would dominate F1 30 years later. In a sense, F5000 had been looking for a way to define itself, and finally it had Brian as the guy everyone knew you had to beat. In the car, he was tough-minded, aggressive, technically astute and almost recklessly fast. Outside of it, he was modest, self-effacing and inconspicuous. His exploits in sports cars, where he drove with Ronnie Peterson and Jacky Ickx on Ferrari's factory team and with Jo Siffert and Pedro Rodríguez in John Wyer's fearsome [Porsche 917](#), proved conclusively that he was among the top 10 drivers in the world. As far as the American press was concerned, however, he hadn't won Le Mans and he hadn't driven Indy, so how could he be a true hero? F5000 was left with a great champion that flew under the media's radar.

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