

My Initiation Into Formula 5000 Racing

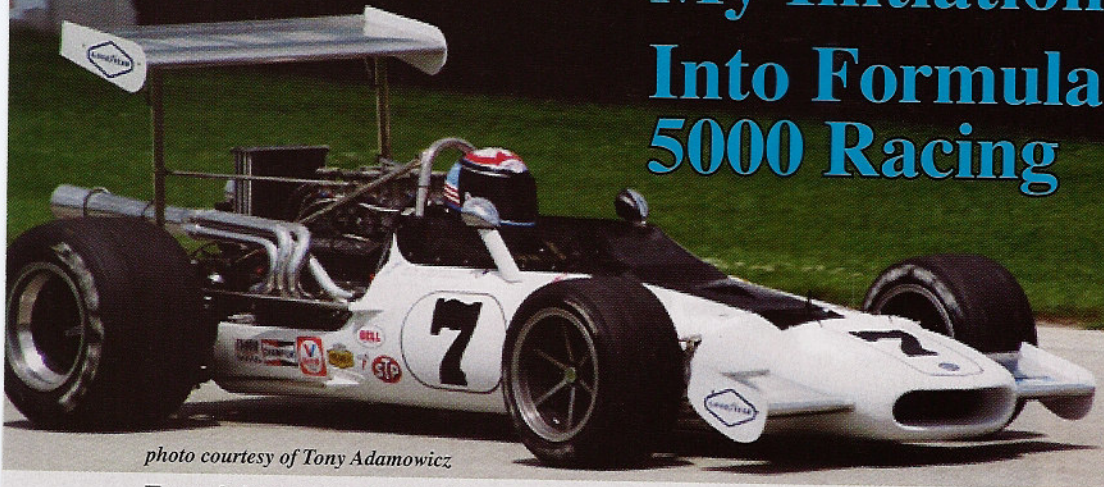


photo courtesy of Tony Adamowicz

Tony Adamowicz in the Gurney Eagle Mk 5.

-story by Tony "A2Z" Adamowicz

Straight from winning the 1968 Under 2 liter Trans-Am Championship for Porsche, where we dominated this pro series, my car owner Marvin Davidson of Milestone Racing asked me what I wanted to race the following year. With out hesitation I indicated to him, the Formula A/5000 series with a Gurney Eagle Mk. 5 would be a great opportunity.

What I didn't know was how things were to work out, and actually I was to bite off more than I could chew. You see I had never driven an open wheel car, let alone a 1400 lb, 5 liter Chevy stock block with then 480 available hp. My intro to my desires would unravel quickly as I was asked to drive the car at VIR (Virginia International Raceway) for *Car & Driver Magazine*. Leon Mandel had arranged to have Sam Posey's Can-Am car there and it was to be a comparison between the cars. When I arrived at VIR, the Can-Am car had already been destroyed. I was faced with the daunting task of fulfilling my job to drive Eagle for the test.

My first time in the car was with sub zero weather with ice water running across various parts of the track; my eyes became as big as saucers. I was able to make through this test unscathed and immediately related to my car owner, that we needed to get some real seat time in sunny California. He agreed and my former Group 44 mechanic Roy Wade and helper Don Bresslauer and I proceeded to drive to CA. arriving at our destination, Willow Springs Raceway, located in the desert of Rosmand, CA. We unloaded the Eagle and proceeded to get some valuable seat time at this unknown raceway.

Little did I know that the winds came up around 3 o'clock in the afternoon and provided some interesting consequences for me? Our Eagle had no down force wing at the time, as I was entering turn 6, a fast right-hand, blind, reverse camber turn a gust of wind helped my Eagle to become airborne and promptly take flight, level off and ultimately plummeting into the desert floor outside the track. It continued to become airborne again and repeated the second stage of my previous uncharted flight plan. My open faced "Jim Clark inspired" helmet with goggles did little to protect me from a serious cut above my eyebrow, more over I had some serious pain in my ribs. A quick jaunt to the local hospital revealed I was very lucky not to have any broken bones, small consequence to our totaled Eagle.

Fortunately we had a brand new Gurney Eagle being completed at the All American Racers factory in Santa Ana, CA. It was not yet completed and it was less than 2 weeks before the first race at Riverside International Raceway. The crew proceeded to strip down the wrecked Eagle to save any useful parts for spares. John Cannon had been testing our new wings and larger rear wheels at Riverside Raceway and was doing quite well with the new pieces. Finally our new car was completed by AAR and we arrived at RIR ready for practice. My bruised ribs did not allow me to enter or get out of the cockpit by myself; I had to be helped in and lifted out the car each time. The bumps encountered over the track, provided me with excruciating pain to endure.

Practice with these new FA/5000 cars provide more excitement as various cars started to crash

and have their new high mounted suspension wings come apart. Sam Posey totally destroyed his new Eagle, providing a spectacular shunt and becoming airborne, complete with flames. Fortunately he was alright, however his car was destroyed, I immediately determined that these Eagles were not meant to fly....do you think?

As the very first FA/5000 race drew underway, I was fortunate to get a good start and was running 2nd behind John Cannon in his sorted and very fast Eagle. During the course of the race I was challenged by Lothar Motchenbacher in his new McLaren and rather than risk going off track, I motioned for Lothar to pass me going into the famed turn 9 oval. The bruised

ribs provided enough pain to allow this to take place. We finished the 40 minute race in 3rd place, hmmm not bad for a rookie.

The following races provided more entertainment as we encountered several failures with chassis components. It was becoming acutely aware that we were way in over our head in chassis preparation and my lack of Formula 5000 driving experience. It was then that my car owner had made a deal with Carroll Shelby to hire his team manager and engineer, Carroll Smith. Carroll had been with Shelby as team manager when their Ford Mk 4 won the 24 hrs of Le Mans. We welcomed Carroll as a team manager addition to our group, providing expert knowledge and application to our Eagle. Being a former formula driver in Europe himself, allowed him to mentor me in my education of Formula 5000 racing.

We struggled through the 13 race season with two wins, one at Road America, Elkhart Lake, WI. and Seattle International Raceway, in Kent WA. We racked up consistent top points by our well placed finishes through out the season and we had enough points to be leading in the Championship for the final race, Sebring, FL and took the series. We had the opportunity to drive among some great professional international drivers and teams. Thanks to our team and particularly Carroll Smith for the excellent driver mentoring and preparation of our Eagle. Without Carroll's engineering expertise, we would have never won the Championship

Almost 40 years later, little did I know that there would be a 40th reunion of F 5000 cars. My Championship Eagle was purchased by Doug Magnon of the Riverside International Automotive Museum in Riverside, CA. With the help of chief mechanic Bill Losee and UK transplant fabricator Morris, our # 7 Eagle was thoroughly prepared to compete again, but was the driver? Our first intro back to vintage racing was at Infineon Raceway in Sonoma, CA. where we were rewarded a 3rd place podium finish for our '68 to '71 class of racers. Ironically we had finished 3rd our very first race at Riverside, and now we accomplished the same feat in 2008. Was it meant to be? Well some say it was more than just serendipity that all of this happened again. ■



photo courtesy of Tony Adamowicz

Adamowicz at-speed leading the pack during the F5000 Reunion.
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