



CARPET RACERS THE MOVIE? **THAT'S RIGHT A MOVIE!** pg. 130

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CARPET RACER

THE MOVIE?

Interview by: Derek Buono | Photos by: Mike Rooney

A FEW YEARS AGO WE NOTICED A FEW GUYS walking around the Snow Bird Nationals with a video camera. We immediately walked up and asked what was going on. When we learned that they were producing a documentary on carpet racing, we couldn't help but chuckle. Could a movie about our obscure little racing segment be something that people would watch? Well just a flip through the TV Guide and you'll see the pages littered with "reality" shows that honestly are easier to laugh at than a bunch of guys racing toy cars in strange places. You've got shows about dwarfs, half-ton people, wives of football players, and that's only the surface of what documentary styles films could be. So over the years we've kept in touch with the two who were responsible for this film and we've even seen a few cuts...and you know what. If anything it was much more than we expected and who knows, maybe somebody will see it and want to find out more. The debut of the film is coming and we thought it was time to sit down and talk to Mike Rooney and Jay Thames to see what it's all about.



OKAY THE OBVIOUS QUESTION, WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO MAKE A DOCUMENTARY ON THE LIFE OF AN RC RACER?

Mike Rooney: I have been in and out of RC all my life. When I bought a T-Maxx in 2003, I was amazed at how far RC cars have come since the late 1970's and early 1980's. I was so impressed with the technology, and so unimpressed with customer service in the hobby world, I opened up a shop called Steel City Hobbies (www.steelcityhobbies.com) I had an off-road track at my pilot test store in Oakland Maryland, and when I opened a shop in Pittsburgh, PA I built what was considered to be one of the nicest RC carpet tracks in the country. From there I went to large RC events such as the Snowbird Nationals where I sponsored top end racers like Ray Darroch and Jon Orr.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE CARPET TOURING AS THE SUBJECT?

Mike Rooney: Carpet Racing is close in nature to real life racing such as NASCAR—with all the rules, regulations, and vast differences in technology. I found that there were many carpet tracks around the world, which kind of formed this underground "cult-like" group of people. Some places have between 50–100 entries per week, which is amazing. If you asked a person off the street, chances are he never heard about carpet racing. It would have been great to cover all of RC racing, but with Carpet Racing already so huge, it would have taken a mini series to cover all forms of racing.

Jay Thames: It just kind of emerged that the faction inside carpet racing was the most compelling. The track itself seemed extremely difficult to navigate, especially given the unreal velocity of these little cars, and the drivers were literally getting EVERYTHING out of the cars and themselves that they could possibly get. I found that the on-road drivers, by the time they left events like Snowbirds and the IIC, were absolutely spent. They were not getting any sleep, and they were frequently not even eating or if they were they were eating garbage—just to squeeze every last drop out of their potential. It was a sight. When people go to those extremes, it's good for film.

DID YOU FIND YOURSELF MORE INTERESTED IN THE SPORT AS THE FILMING WENT ON?

Jay Thames: Definitely. Once I started to grasp more and more what really goes into making these cars go around the track—the work, the discipline, the practice—I became more and more interested in the type of person that can be good enough at this to do it for a living. The way these guys interact with each other in this very encapsulated world is fascinating. I hope we can go public with the movie and attract more people who want to experience this sport from the inside. Hopefully we can make some fans, both young and old, out of the people who see this film.

WAS IT HARD TO FIND PEOPLE THAT HAD PERSONALITY TO KEEP THE AUDIENCE'S ATTENTION OR GET THEM ATTACHED?

Mike Rooney: The world of carpet racing is a reality show in its own world. There were so many characters for us to choose from. Choosing who to follow was one of the easier tasks in making this film—it was quite natural. We decided to make this a documentary not only for the entertainment value, but to raise the awareness level of RC. If this were going to be a feature film, we would have had to script it and use actors. The way we shot this film tells the story of what it really is like to be a carpet racer more accurately, since we used real racers and not actors.

Jay Thames: As the director, I initially tried to film as many people as possible, as they ALL interested me. But once I started to notice certain things, the subjects of the film started to emerge. People like Barry Baker and Chris Tosolini have tons of personality, and are great at their craft, and people like Jilles Groskamp and Paul Lemieux, while not the most outspoken of people, are so dedicated, so good, so 'into it' that the camera just finds them. These two different types of racer really balance the film. Hopefully, you see it from both sides of this 'racer extreme.'

CARPET RACER

Rumor has it Derek's cameo is Oscar worthy!



DID YOU LOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO WERE INTERESTING OR JUST CHOOSE PEOPLE TO FOLLOW AND SEE WHAT HAPPENED?

Mike Rooney: Being around big races for a few years gave us a head start on who was doing what, etc. It was pretty easy to figure out who were the naturals and who would provide entertainment value.

WHO TURNED OUT TO BE MORE INTERESTING THAN YOU FIRST THOUGHT?

Mike Rooney: Originally I wanted to follow Jon Orr. He is from Western PA (Pittsburgh) and was a sponsored racer from Team Associated. Here you have a guy who was a white-collar worker with a very respectful job. Jon would take limited time off to practice before an event, then go to Nationals and win! He was a natural. Due to real life circumstances, work prevailed and he had to retire. The other guys we followed were great and very interesting. Jilles Groskamp was a level headed guy who was very consistent and enjoyable to work with. Barry Baker was on the other end of the spectrum, as he was more vocal on any concerns he had while racing—but he was a lot of fun to watch.

Jay Thames: No simple answer there. They are all very interesting. Even the racers that are only in the film for brief glimpses or not in it at all were interesting. They all have stories to tell, all of them. But I would have had to make an 80-hour film to be as in depth as I would have liked to be with each racer. There were just too many people to cover. If I had to pick one guy who really stood out I would say Mike Dumas. When I first met him, he kind of stayed to himself, out of camera's way so to speak. But once I started filming him more, and started watching him race, he opened up a little more each time the camera came around. I think he shines as one of the people you really root for in the film, and people will wonder what his future holds for him, both in and out of racing.

HOW MANY HOURS OF TAPING DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE SOMETHING LIKE THIS? HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TAPING?

Mike Rooney: We have over 100+ hours of HDV video tape with about 20+ hours of standard video tape from earlier tapings. I have been building this production since the 2005 Snowbird Nationals in Orlando, Florida. It grew from there as I brought in experienced people such as Jay Thames—whom I have known for years. I helped produce a film that Jay wrote ("Automatic") which won a few film festival awards. I knew that my ideas and resources combined with ideas and production experience from Jay would result in something special.

WHAT ARE THE PLANS FOR THE FILM WHEN IT'S FINISHED?

Mike Rooney: To tour the film festival circuit and maybe hit DVD sales. Full feature length movies have not been ruled out—one step at a time for me.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THE FILM WILL ACCOMPLISH?

Mike Rooney: To build experience for my film making career and to possibly get into more filmmaking. This is a serious hobby for me alongside my "day job" of working in NY. The main purpose of this documentary was to augment my shop's credibility, as well as to become an informative source for RC enthusiasts around the globe.

We're only a month or so away from getting to see a final product and hopefully hearing that the documentary made it into some film festivals. If you want to stay up to date or find out more about the film be sure to check out the website www.carpetracers.com.