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Neil's Corner



It's game on again. At last!

The V8 Supercar Championship jumped back into action again last weekend after 9 weeks AWOL. It felt like the start of a new season.

The L&H 500 at Phillip Island was an interesting event for several reasons.

The rules governing co-drivers changed this year. The regular drivers stayed in their own cars unlike previous years when the two leading drivers typically drove together.

I didn't have a firm view regarding this change but I reckon it worked quite well.

It was apparent that some Teams were simply under baked in terms of supporting talent and that's because there's not a lot of it out there.

For too long we've been focused on too few drivers and we've been strangling our own future to some extent. The new rules give more kilometres to more guys, and importantly, more limelight.

This is due to the existing testing rules being way too tight and combined with the old enduro rules, this typically meant in years past, the "B" car was not taken seriously - which of course did the supporting drivers no favours at all.

Part of the problem has been solved now and so capable young drivers like Steve Owen, Owen Kelly, Dean Canto, Jack Perkins and Luke Youlden really went to work at Phillip Island and did a terrific job.

The reason they did was they played a more important role. They were better prepared, more effort and resource supported them and they stepped up.

I really loved talking up their stock. New blood, new personalities, new interest all round.

The other interesting aspect of the weekend was how well my mate Mark Skaife drove.

As you probably know, "Skaife" has been loitering in the commentary box with me since Bathurst last year.

He's quite content with the role of being part time driver these days. His day job involves wearing lots of caps ranging from V8 Supercar Board member role to his Seven Network and Triple M work and a bunch of other key clients.

He ranks with the very worst lunatics for working around the clock, day in a day out, so I watched with interest this year to see how he would go switching focus back to driving for a brief while.

Well, not only did he do it damn well, he was among best on the ground all weekend long, including the regulars drivers.

And make no mistake, not only did he drive well, but his fingerprints were all over the outcome.

When Mark last worked with Craig Lowndes 10 years ago at the Holden Racing Team, they were the dynamic duo.

All these years later, they simply picked up where they left off.

Lowndes the talented "freestyler" with Skaife the talented and determined "deep thinker". Bolt them together and you get trophies.

I don't enjoy any real insiders privileges when it comes to understanding what happened inside their bunker last weekend, but I know both men

very well and I can put the puzzle together quite easily from the outside.

Craig remains one of the most naturally gifted drivers on this globe but sometimes his weakness lies in his analysis of what's needed to make more speed or consistency or both.

Give CL the right tools to do the job and lookout everybody but if he can't evolve a suitable set-up he is prone to over driving and this often makes things even worse for him...

Mark also has that special something in terms of speed but he also brings with him a deeply engaging mind and a meticulous level of planning and execution detail to what he does.

It was and is potent combo. Especially for enduro racing.

As soon as I saw Craig I could see he had a "pep in his step" last weekend.

A few set-up tweaks here and there - and suddenly the all new car 888 was the benchmark.

Clearly, the TeamVodafone outfit is first class and there can be no doubt about what they deliver to their drivers in terms of machinery and support but don't underestimate the Skaife factor in mining the last little bit needed to make Craig look like he did 10 years ago!



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