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### Neil's Corner



When it mattered most, the *Champion* in James Courtney rose to the occasion. Last weekend, at Sandown Raceway, in the middle of a fractured weekend of intense racing, James took a significant step towards adding the V8 Supercar Championship to his C.V. In recent events we've seen Courtney's points lead eroding. He didn't quite have the pace at Bathurst. On the Gold Coast he made a critical re-start mistake on the Saturday and copped an inappropriate and huge penalty. In Tassie he pushed Lee Holdsworth off at Turn 6 and rightly toured the pit lane like a naughty boy for his trouble. By the time he faced the starter for race 24 last Sunday - that points margin was down to just over 30 points - he appeared to be a drowning man.

On Sunday James qualified 5th and finished 1st. Nice work. The points margin is back out to 53 and there's two races remaining with 300 points on offer. In the background, Charlie Schwerkolt and Dick Johnson, once best mates, have somehow managed to declare war on their friendship, mid-season, and Dick Johnson Racing (DJR) is now a sinking ship. Strike one. The whole crew is hoping the water doesn't wash right over the deck and sink the boat until the last lap in Sydney - it's going to be a close call.

Sporting Director, Adrian Burgess hasn't waited for peace to prevail - he's off to Team Vodafone for 2011. Strike two. Holden and Ford are locked in a serious fight to retain James. Strike three and instability now rules. James is trying to win a Title against a tidal wave of stupidity in the background and it is having an effect. This equation equals a big weekend in Sydney for the Sydney Telstra 500.

I've been quite close to James Courtney since he stepped up from Kart racing. He's an interesting young man with an amazing story. His Dad Jim and his Mum Deanna supported their boy's racing habit from a very early age. As a kid, James lived in Europe like a gypsy. His prize at the end of a very tough journey for a young bloke was two World Championship's in '95 and '97. Real World Championship's too, in both Junior and Senior Karting, not the cereal packet titles that get handed out like sweets in Karting.

Then he hit the metaphoric wall. What next? Via a mutual friend, Kim White, Jim and James found their way into my lounge in the late '90's seeking advice. Not that I was (or am) any kind of guru. Keeping your own career on track is hard enough let alone helping another...I wanted to help but the input was limited to a *Black Book* full of good international and domestic industry contacts, but no \$. Certainly nothing like the sort of money needed to kick start a car racing career. Long

story short, after trawling the world for input, help and drives, we ended up at the doorstep of ex-pat Aussie Alan Gow. Gow was my Team Manager at Brock's in the late '80's. He'd gone off to Europe and *done good* as the colloquial saying goes...Gow was aware of this kid called Courtney but could he help? After some thought, **yes** was the answer.

A lot of money later, (I'm talking the kind and size that pays off a very big mortgage for you and I mere mortals) James was winning in British Formula Ford, then Formula 3 and along the way landed a test contract with Jaguar in F1 when Ford owned the team. (Jaguar was Stewart Grand Prix and is now Red Bull Racing) Luminaries like Niki Lauda and Bobby Rahal were fans but a rear wing failure in a test at Monza not only almost killed James, it turned out to be a career and personal set-back that took much time to overcome. Jaguar was a team in turmoil and the car was unreliable and as it turned out - dangerous. European motor racing is tough. The European influencers and glitterati stepped over him and just kept on walking. James was quite literally left behind as a broken young man.

James ended up in Japan. He won the Japanese F3 title and also contested the Japanese GT Championship. Problem was with Jap GT you always end up with a *kamikaze* local by your side because its endurance racing. He won races but not the title. The co-drivers were average to say the least. The upside here was this was the venue where James met his future wife - Carys. 3 long years in Japan were harsh. No family, nothing like a normal life, and limited prospects of returning to the European mainstream.

Even worse, James had a reputation of being a party boy. Alan was his Manager but I was the annoying old bloke who chipped in with advice from the sidelines. We clashed more than once about his *focus* or lack of it.

With hindsight, it's quite easy to understand why James ended up in this position. Via Kiwi driving ace, Greg Murphy, another successful Aussie businessman with a motorsport passion, Peter Hill, offered to chime in with more help to structure a deal for James back into the top level perhaps F1 or even Indycar. This meant more money and more debt for James. He was scared.

At Port Melbourne in a meeting in 2005 an emotional and very tired James Courtney told me in a cheap cafe he couldn't bear it anymore. No more Asia, no more Europe and no thanks to a life in the US. He wanted to come home. *Thanks Peter - sorry to trouble you* was the end game to that meeting. The next phone call was to Mark

Skaife at the Holden Racing Team (HRT) and James V8 Supercar career began. After Sandown and Bathurst in the red corner, with no full time room at HRT, James accepted an offer to turn blue at Stone Brothers Racing (SBR) replacing the NASCAR bound Marcos Ambrose.

The 3 years at SBR didn't yield much for either party. The promise was there on occasion, but we all began to wonder whether it would ever work out for James. Would James be just another kid with huge talent but so much reliance on that talent that all the other stuff was brushed into the background?

On the side - the opposition ribbed him about being a pretty boy with nothing to show. *Dancing With the Stars* is nice, but what about a race win was the theme...In 2009, James moved to Dick Johnson Racing (DJR). In this move he reunited with an old friend and colleague, Adrian Burgess. Adrian had a successful organisational background in Formula One. DJR was on the ascendancy. 888 Race Engineering chassis, DJR powerplant, good team of guys...Fast forward to 2010.

DJR is (was) a disciplined, modern, well run race team. James is 29. Married and with 2 cute kids. He's finally got some balance in his life. Phil Young is James trainer. Phil trained Formula One driver Jenson Button in Europe. Phil is working James hard. Very hard. James now looks like a peak athlete.

Heading into Sydney, James has a 53 point margin over Jamie Whincup. The two biggest races of his career are calling. Conquering this Championship quest will be a very important milestone for James as a person and a driver. He's fought against the current all his life to achieve his goals.

A decade on, Gow's investment has begun to pay a small dividend. But keep it in perspective. Even the share market would have been better...Gow is earning his keep. He's the duck on the pond trying to look cool while his grubby little webbed feet are flat out below trying to resolve a future for his man. Two decades on, all of the powers James has crafted since he was a pup are needed to make this work on the track in Sydney. His opponents are the well drilled army down at Team Vodafone. Like most outsiders, I'm wondering how the hell Dick and Charlie managed to get themselves into this back room brawl with so much at stake?

And a decade on, I'm still an interested and annoying bystander who chips in with no official ties - but I confess, I would like to see him do it.



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