

Alexander and Bongiovanni Take 2nd in 25 Hours of Thunderhill

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I love my Evo. When I bought it from Snorre Grunnan at San Rafael Mitsubishi, he said "You are going to have a lot of fun with this car." Little did I know just how true that statement would become. My 2004 RS served well as a track toy, and once turned into a race car allowed Goodsport Racing and Dave Brown to win the 2006 United States Touring Car Championship title with excellent reliability and performance. However, there was still another challenge that begged participation from the Evo, the 25 Hours of Thunderhill sanctioned by NASA.

Car and Driver's unsuccessful effort in 2004 had tarnished the Evo's reputation and I was guessing that a properly prepared effort could at least give this car the finish it deserved. It was all just a pipe dream until a casual conversation with K&N Engineering turned into some support, and made a low key effort possible. We had enough resources to participate, but winning against factory efforts would take more. However, a finish would at least show the truly reliable nature of a properly modified Evo and no doubt be a lot of fun. We prepared to run the Evo to the extent of its abilities and our budget, and hoped that the 2006 running of this event would mirror the last few years where class E0 had seen quite a bit of attrition.

The hardest part was finding the right co-drivers. After years of battling Ralph Alexander in the NASA enduro series, I knew he had the right combination of discipline, endurance, and mechanical sympathy that this race requires. The most reliable car in the field can fail in one hour with a ham-fisted driver in the seat, but in all these years of racing I never saw Ralph working on his car. One slight problem remained, however, as we only had two drivers for 25 hours of racing. Ralph assured me that he could handle it, and I assumed I would be fine as well. We knew it wouldn't be easy, but than again the best parts of life rarely are.

The next step was ensuring the reliability of the car. Luckily, the last racing weekend of the year turned up a weak head gasket, a failure that would have cost us any chance of a finish. The WORKS crew came though with shop space to allow me to do the job right, not to mention a wealth of parts and technical knowledge. Pete Kang, the owner of WORKS, stayed with me at the shop until 4am on Thursday night to get the job done, as getting to the track on Friday to test and tune is crucial to a decent performance in a race like this. Luckily, even after a full season of USTCC, other needs were only some attention to the CV boots, a full fluid change and a nut & bolt.

After little sleep on Thursday, we were able to get the car to the track on Friday where Ralph, Pete, and I did some last minute tuning to the maps while the flawlessly running Evolution qualified last in class E0, 32nd overall, with a 2:11.00 on the three mile road course. We were happy to be towards the back of the pack and away from those who were in a hurry. Twenty-five hours is a long time to be on track, and any sort of a decent finish had to be preceded by many hours at a casual pace.

Well rested, hydrated, and ready for the challenge, we started the race on Saturday morning enveloped by a quiet confidence that the Evolution emitted as it circled the track with consistant 2:14 laps without breaking a sweat. After six hours, we found ourselves in second place in class, 23rd overall. A quick strategy session confirmed my thoughts that a podium finish was definitely possible, and we continued our slow and steady pace to conserve the hardward and try to make the car go the distance.



At hour eleven, I noticed a noticeable vibrating sound during left turns, ominous on a left-handed track. My thoughts went wild with the possibilities, and hopes for a finish began to dim. Could it be a CV joint failing? Perhaps a wheel bearing was failing, but the brake pedal didn't have any slop, indicating there was no play in the bearing allowing the rotor to push back the brake pads. Hopefully, it was just a piece of plastic trim rubbing on a tire.

At the next pit stop, running in first place in E0 and 14th overall, a quick check of the suspension and tires found nothing loose or damaged, so back out we went, trying to ignore the increasingly loud noise and hoping when it broke it would be easy to fix. We continued to run our pace and other than the noise, the Evolution was running admirably with no oil use, and great tire and pad wear rates. At this point we calculated that we have to change only four tires and be able to complete the race without a pad change.

By hour eighteen, we were still in 14th place overall, but the Honda Research TSX had come on strong and was out in front of us in class E0 by seven laps, pacing our speed as we turned up the wick a bit to sniff them out. The team agreed that it would be foolish to jeopardize a podium finish with a drag race, and we continued our current pace and chose not to run in high boost mode to try and catch them.

Though the ominous noise, which later turned out to be a loose brake cooling duct rubbing against the tire, continued to the very end, it ultimately had no bearing on the outcome and the Evolution ran flawlessly to the end, bringing home second place in class E0 and 12th overall. The car used only eight Toyo RA-1s, and was able to complete the race on one set of WORKS WRP brake pads and two-piece rotors.

Goodsport Racing would like to thank the many, many people and organizations who have contributed to the success of the Evolution in this year's running of the 25 Hours of Thunderhill, especially K&N Engineering, WORKS, Robispec, Racing Brake, APR, Bugformance, Tony, Pete, Shintaro, Tom, Morgan, B&B Racing, San Rafael Mitsubishi, and NASA. Everyone's efforts exceeded my wildest expectation, as have the results from this race. I hope we have proven the truly reliable nature of the Mitsubishi Evolution, which matches in every way the performance virtue of this platform.

