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A milestone for Mark Williams -- 150 races!



When veteran co-driver Mark Williams belts into a thundering Hyundai Tiburon beside defending Canadian champion Antoine L'Estage next weekend at the New England Forest Rally, he will celebrate an impressive milestone. The race will be Williams' 150th in a successful competition career that has seen him partner with some of the fastest drivers in the sport.

Since he attended his first rally as a spectator in the mid-1970s, the veteran has co-driven top talents including six-time Canadian champion Tom McGeer, rally legend John Buffum, seven-time U.S. champion Paul Choiniere and ex-Subaru USA factory driver Ramana Lagemann.

The latter two chose Williams as a teammate this season during the critical Rally America qualification series leading up to the X Games. At the last-chance qualifier in Maine (July 13-14), L'Estage is hoping to win an invitation as well. If he does, Williams can take credit in getting three of the 12 competitors to the biggest rally show on the continent.

"He's very calm and is able to deliver the notes calmly and succinctly and directly," says Lagemann, who Williams will partner at the X Games. "Even when things get a little hairy or we have a problem or a moment or whatever, he's always got the right rhythm and it never waivers."

While there are many co-drivers who can take up a book of notes and call the course, part of the great skill in co-driving comes down to intangibles.

"I can help performance subtly and maybe the driver doesn't even recognize it," says Williams. "I know I'll have been successful if all they have to do is worry about driving the car. Then I can get them to drive the car faster, a little easier than they have before."

The 53-year-old Williams has an unassuming yet confident demeanor. When he locks onto a topic he cares about – like co-driving -- he speaks in an excited staccato of stops and starts as though he is waiting for his words to catch up to his thoughts. And there's no doubt that his thoughts move quickly. A Ph.D. in artificial intelligence from Stanford University, he works at Eastport Analytics, a company he co-founded in 2002 that offers information analysis for federal intelligence agencies and law enforcement. He isn't the kind of guy one might figure for a spy job, but maybe that's the point.

Williams discovered the sport he has come to lead in the mid-'70s while working a summer job in Mexico City. His boss was a factory driver for a Nissan rally team and invited the young Williams along to a race to help him sort out his rally computer. Williams was hooked.

His own career began not long after that, in 1981, when he began rallying a Fiat in the California rally series near his home. He tried a hand at driving, but found more comfort and success in the co-driver's seat. He and driver Gary Luke competed together for a number of years, taking home the regional championship and moving on to national events.

When work obligations saw him move from California to Maryland in 1989, Williams continued racing. He developed a partnership with Bob Elliott and their two-wheel drive team competed for three years on an aggressive schedule that included both U.S. and Canadian events. Williams calls it a critical time in his development as a co-driver. "Those are the years where I gained a lot more confidence in myself, honed my skills, and developed my particular style," says Williams. "And in doing so, I learned how to instill more confidence in my drivers."

In another big career move, Williams and the veteran driver Buffum partnered in 1995 to contest the Caminos del Inca Rally, a week-long marathon event through the Andes in Peru. For Buffum, the choice was obvious. Not only had Williams already distinguished himself as a skilled co-driver, but a childhood spent in Peru and Mexico means Williams is fluent in Spanish. Since then, Buffum has been one of Williams' biggest advocates,



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recommending him to the drivers he coaches on the national scene.

"If he says it's a left-five-minus over crest, it's a left-five-minus over crest," says Buffum. "As a driver, it's comforting to have confidence in the person sitting next to you."

In the early 1990s, Williams also began working on the organizational aspects of rally car racing, organizing events, working as a steward and serving as the chairman of the performance rally board of the SCCA – then the governing body for all stage rallying in the U.S. Through this involvement, he left his mark on the sport in many ways and says it has helped him as a competitor, as well. "I often say, when I'm quoting a rule, that I probably wrote at least half of the ones in the rule book," he says.

Even as he continues to compete, he has maintained his contributions to other aspects of rally car racing. He is often asked to provide stage notes for events, and serves as an event steward when he gets the chance. He is currently the director of competitions for the Targa Newfoundland rally, a marathon tarmac event that runs each autumn through Canada's easternmost reaches. He is also involved with the promotion of the new ECM rally timing system that has begun to see use at various North American events. He estimates he spends some 70 days a year on the road with the sport.

Williams says he has a simple objective in the co-driver's seat: to help bring drivers to their next level of accomplishment. In the past 14 years he has helped four teams – including three factory efforts -- attain twelve national and international series championships. And as he celebrates 150 contests, he's showing no sign of contemplating retirement – even as the cars get faster and the drivers get relatively younger. He says he'll keep racing as long as he can make a valuable contribution.

"In some cases I've been rallying longer than the driver has been alive," he says. "I keep telling them: 'You need somebody lighter, younger and cuter than me – but until you find somebody, I'll help you out.'"

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