

## **AIM Retires From Rolex 24 With Deflated Tire**

Impressive run ends after 16 hours

2008.01.27: AIM Autosport didn't make it to the finish of the Rolex 24 At Daytona, but the Toronto-based team certainly made a statement. The Exchange Traded Gold/Barrick Gold Ford-Riley had an outstanding opening to the 2008 Rolex Sports Car Series Season before a series of bad luck setbacks ultimately forced the team to park the entry and begin preparations for the rest of the season.

All four AIM Autosport drivers-Mark Wilkins, Brian Frisselle, Andrew Ranger and Colin Braun led the race at different stages as the team put lessons learned in its 2007 Rolex campaign to good use for the 2008 season opener. The decision to move to a new powerplant for 2008 and pair Ford power with the newest offering from Riley proved to be prescient as the Ford-Riley combination led nearly 40 of the 448 laps the team completed over 16 hours of competition.

Starting from the pit lane in order to switch to slick tires when the weather changed after the car was presented to the grid, Wilkins progressed through the field in the opening stages. Fellow pilots Braun, Ranger and Frisselle then fought through tricky variable track and weather conditions and intense traffic to move the No. 61 to the front.

"Last year we were very conservative and worked our way up and were eventually fifth at the end," said team owner Ian Willis. "We had good luck last year, but it certainly didn't go our way tonight. We had a number of issues that put us about 26 laps behind at some point and when the tire let go—the car is repairable and we could probably get it back out on track in a couple of hours, but when you're that far back, sometimes you just have to cut your losses. But this was a good kick off to the season as far as pace was concerned and we know we had a podium-caliber car and driver line up today. Andrew did an amazing job when we had the tire problem to keep it off the wall, and we're working with Pirelli to evaluate the cause."

Despite a worrying problem with fuel pressure, the plan set by Willis and the AIM Autosport crew was following along exactly as hoped through lap after lap. But the strong sophomore story went sour when the combination of rain, oil and track debris in the bus stop sent Wilkins off-course and then behind the wall for repairs. Making the most of the yellow flag situation, the team also worked to find a solution to the fuel pressure problem as well as preemptively changing the brakes to be ready for the next 12 hours of action. But the effort suffered another set back when Brian Frisselle was forced off course in turn three and then penalized on the subsequent re-start for passing slow GT traffic before the start finish line.

The final blow came just before sunrise. Ranger was continuing to impress in his Rolex debut, when a tire went down and cut the rear bodywork. The damage proved significant enough to force the team to park the car after 16 hours of tough competition.

"Ford Racing gave us a great motor and even though we had the fuel pressure issues, it turned out to just be a bad fuel filter, and we were still able to be really quick," said Willis. "I think that's a testament to how strong a motor the Roush Yates is that it didn't really effect our performance. So this is a disappointing result, but if we step back, I think this weekend gives us a lot of confidence about the rest of the season."

"It's too bad for us because the car was very good," said Ranger. "AIM Autosport did a great job

the whole weekend. I was just coming into the corner before the banking when the right rear tire exploded and I hit the wall twice and there was a lot of damage to the car. The first half of the race was really an unbelievable thing to be a part of, having all four of us leading the race, just a perfect start. Unfortunately though you have to have 24 perfect hours and our luck didn't last that long today. But this was a great experience to race with AIM again, and I really hope to be back at this race again next year!"

"The AIM guys certainly have the right thing going this year and we had a great run going even though our luck didn't last all the way through the morning," said Braun. "I loved being back in these Daytona Prototypes and of course anytime you are running up front, it's good no matter what you are driving. This was a great way to start the season off, in Ford-powered car that ran up front, and now I'm looking to put a Ford F-150 up front the rest of the year!"

"This obviously isn't the result we were looking for to start off the season, but it certainly is the form we were hoping to have—running up front and keeping a strong pace," said Frisselle, who will share the controls through the 2008 season with Wilkins. "The team did a fantastic job, the new package is extremely capable and we'll just have to move on from here to the sprint races. We were proud to run up front on merit and really excited to feel like we'll be doing that again soon."

"This race can be so tough on you—just the emotion of running up front, dealing with the weather and all the changes and feeling like you are on the right path to a good result, and then having it come apart like it did, it's really tough," said Wilkins, who already has two Rolex 24 podiums to his credit. "But everyone on this team knows they should be proud of this effort and we're just going to move on and look forward to Homestead and get the rest of the year going."

AIM scored a top-ten finish in the Homestead event, and will look to go even better in a second visit to the oval-based road course on March 27-29.