



MR. HRT

Mark Skaife

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IMAGES inetpics.com

While the Holden Racing Team is beginning to make its presence felt again in V8 Supercars, there was a time when it dominated the series. Mark Skaife was at the forefront for that all-conquering period.

While Mark Skaife doesn't use the word 'blessed', he will happily describe himself as fortunate.

It's not hard to understand why when you consider a career spanning nearly three decades has been spent with the three teams which dominated that timespan: Gibson

Motorsport, the Holden Racing Team (HRT) and, most recently, Triple Eight.

It's HRT, though, that Skaife is synonymous with. As more than 'just' a star driver, he was part of the inner workings of the team and finds it easy to explain just why it was so dominant for so long.

"Motorsport is such a complex sport with so many variables," he says. "If you don't have the structure right, the complete house in order, it just won't work. We were very fortunate we had all of that in place and that's what made it so successful."

At the base of that success, says Skaife, is what he calls a tripartite structure - Holden, Holden Special Vehicles (HSV) and HRT - three very powerful brands that were almost inextricably linked throughout the glory days of the team.

"They were powerful properties by themselves but this triangle, this tripartite structure, made HRT very strong as the official factory team for Holden," says Skaife.

"The racing link helped sell HSV cars and the connectivity of the three brands, from a promotion, sponsorship and funding standpoint, made it the number-one team in the country.

"Nothing outside of having the right people in the right house in the right community makes the right

outcome. That's the Triple Eight of today, that was Gibson Motorsport in the early nineties and that was HRT in the 2000s.

"You cannot underestimate the importance of the right people and we had John Crennan to thank for that. John did a fantastic job with HRT/HSV; he basically put a big fence around the whole business and didn't let anybody in.

"That was a very powerful statement to the motorsport industry and it was a very powerful statement back to Holden that anyone who was trying to milk more money out of the factory relationship was unable to do that. Based on that, he found good drivers and very clever and committed team personnel."

The names that, like Skaife, were synonymous with HRT are still highly respected: Jeff Grech, Rob Starr, Richard Hollway, Matt Crawford and Rick Wyatt, among many others.

"They are guys who know their stuff, know the importance of attention to detail," says Skaife. "When you have the right resources, from a funding standpoint, you are able to do things the right way.

"Not that John Crennan ever wasted money - in fact, he was very frugal. The economics of the business were very important to him so he did a very good job on keeping a tight rein on where money was spent.

"Jeff [Grech] was also very good at determining the right thing to spend money on, in terms of stuff that made cars go very fast. It wasn't lots of frills. It was all about having the right people with the right equipment and the right drivers to deliver the right result."

There were plenty of 'right results' along the way, but Skaife's entry into the team had the potential to be a bit shaky. Joining the team in late 1997 to pair with Peter Brock for the enduros, he recalls some early trepidation on both sides, but it was not the 'Brock factor'.

"Pete was rapt that I was coming to drive with him," he says. "He and John [Crennan] had agreed that Brock would retire at the end of that year, and they both wanted to finish 1997 off as well as possible, which



ABOVE: Skaife was more than just a driver during his spell at HRT, forced into the role of team owner in his latter years at the team.



SKAIFEY!

Scan to watch highlights of Mark Skaife's V8 Supercars racing career, which includes his glory days with the Holden Racing Team.



meant Pete was 100 per cent endorsing me to drive with him at Sandown and Bathurst.

"What was weird was that I had just finished a very long association with Gibson where I had a lot more to do with the business. A lot of the HRT team were guys who used to work for me and that part was quite difficult at the start because either they had left or I had asked them to leave," he chuckles. "So you could say there were some concerns about me coming in, and some of those relationships."

"But John was very strong, supporting me and making sure the atmosphere was as good as it could be. Then, fortunately, some things just work out in life. We put it on pole at Sandown and again at Bathurst, which sort of fixed everything in terms of how people felt about me coming in."

From there, aside from not winning Bathurst that year [they were leading when the engine stopped], Skaife says there were so many positives, including

the level of support he received from Holden, HSV, Crennan and, yes, from Tom Walkinshaw during the TWR era, which he describes as amazing. And there were some memorable race results...

"From last to first at Clipsal in 2000 and being able to win Bathurst and the championship on the same day and with Jim [Richards, 2002] are just two of so many races and events that are great memories," he says.

"The competition with Craig [Lowndes] was fantastic and really intense. The ability of the team to keep on delivering two good cars for whoever I was working with, whether it be Craig or Jason Bright or Todd Kelly or Garth Tander. That level of performance from everyone meant that we had to have a very strong foundation, and we did."

From his days with Fred Gibson, Skaife has always loved the business side of the sport, as well as the competition, so he relished the opportunities John Crennan gave him, such as getting involved in HSV with engineering and test driving for the road-car business.

"As time went by, I also formed a really strong bond with the engineering group at the race team," he says. "That part of racing has always been something I've loved and worked very hard on, in terms of developing the car and continuing to want for the car to improve."

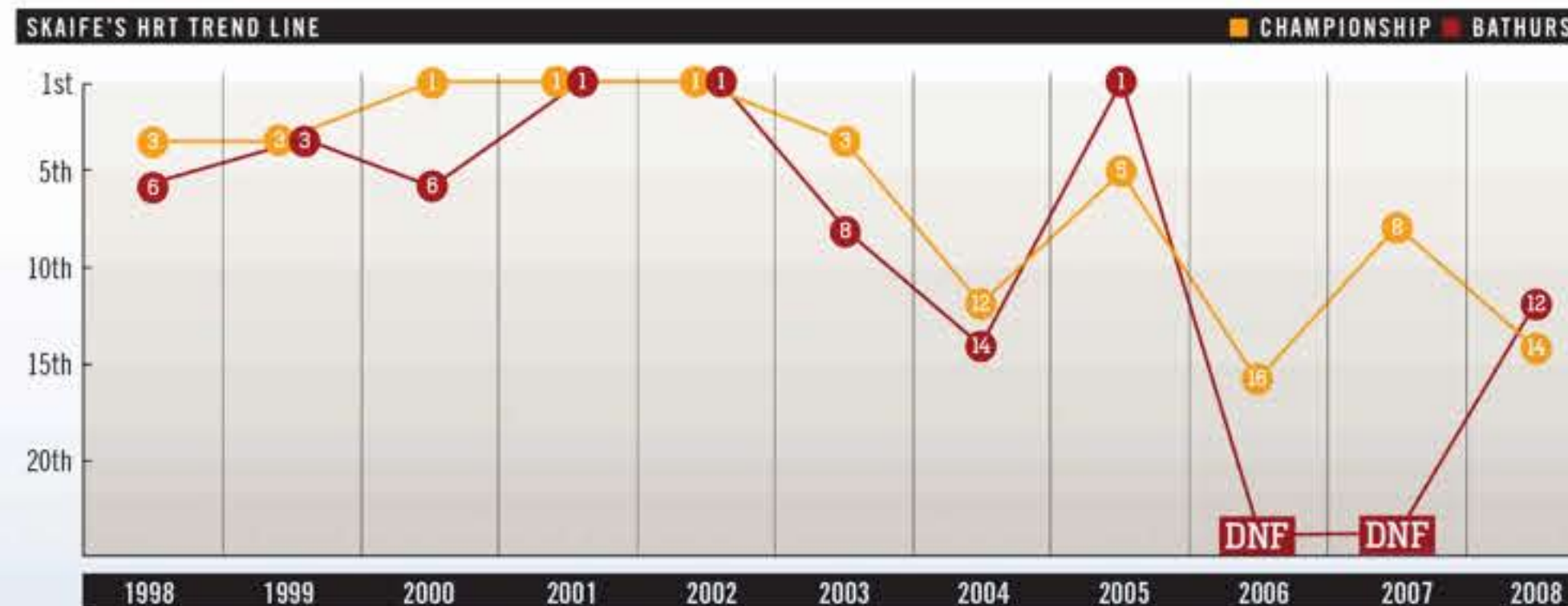
"My desire to be competitive meant I also had a strong desire to improve the car and work really well with those guys to do that, and being at HRT gave me an opportunity to do all of that at the highest level."

As to the lows, from a racing standpoint, there were also some moments: not being able to deliver a 10th win for Brock's in 1997, so too was the 1998 race with Lowndes when they were leading the field until slowed by a puncture. Being black-flagged late in the 2003 race when the door came open was another, but one event is head and shoulders above the rest.

"Race day at Bathurst in 2006 was probably the worst day of my racing life," he says. "To go into the race as the shortest priced favourites of all time, to be on pole position and be out of the race within one kilometre was

ABOVE: Craig Lowndes and Skaife formed a formidable combination at HRT at the turn of the century.

BELOW: Skaife in deep conversation with HRT team founder and owner Tom Walkinshaw.



LEFT: Skaife's HRT championship-Bathurst trend line shows the early period of dominance followed by the struggles of the latter years.

BELOW: Skaife would claim three consecutive championships and three Bathurst wins for the factory Holden team.

just extraordinary, especially given we had won the race the previous year.

"It was a great example of how cruel the sport can be. When you have a situation where you win one year and you go back odds-on favourite to win the next one and you're out within that first kilometre..."

"We were using exactly the same type of clutch as the year before but it fails on the start line. What a mongrel game! There couldn't be a better example of how motorsport unfolds. It was a shit of a day!"

Asked if there is anything he wishes he could re-write or do differently and that dreadful day in 2006 doesn't get a mention – but the answer comes without pause, hot on the tail of the question.

"Ultimately, in terms of ownership, the way Holden Motorsport was configured and the actual business structure that was promulgated out of me buying it," he says. "In hindsight, it was a flawed structure that didn't

really allow the factory team to stay as factory team.

"It probably placed too much focus on the wrong areas of the business and took some of the cohesive, really unified team spirit out of the place. Ultimately, that would be the biggest mistake in terms of the period I had with HRT."

Skaife knows well that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger and so he has taken some positives from a negative experience.

"There were aspects of that last part of my time there, trying to drive the car, operate the team, find the sponsors, negotiate with partners, the whole thing, that were some of the worst years of my life, but I've learned so much from that phase," he says.

"And they are lifelong learnings. If I ever had my own team, or went into some other sort of business, they're things you draw from. They make you understand what makes a place tick."

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