



The one that got away

Forget the concept of dropping your worst round. For Mark Skaife, the entire 2006 season is one he would rather forget. Liz Swanton spoke to Skaife about the year that got away as well as the new one that's just beginning.

He can laugh about it. Now. Just. Talking to the HRT star about last year brings a whole range of responses. There's laughter, there's frustration, there's a sense of irony when comparing incidents of smooth sailing and the times that came unglued.

There are also times in the conversation when the tone of Mark Skaife's voice conveys disappointment, even sadness at the year that got away but really should not have.

His HRT Commodore was seriously quick, but he and the team which has previously been acknowledged as a benchmark in the game were faced with one challenge after another to the point where you could almost suggest fate was conspiring against them.

"Look at Adelaide," he points out, "then spread that out over

the season. It was weird. Our speed was fantastic. I qualified on pole position and the car was very, very good. Then we had a mechanical failure in the left front, in the first race.

"As I was coming back to the pits, I was coming up to the fastest corner of the track and the left front suspension failed, cut the wheel in half and the car smashed into the fence at over 200 kays. It's probably one of the biggest crashes I've had in a long time.

"So we rolled out the next day after the guys put in a fantastic effort working all night. The car was really competitive and we came charging through the field only to get caught up with Greg Murphy at turn eight again, same spot two days in a row.

"If you looked at that as an isolated case, it was sort

of the story of the year because, as a generalisation, the speed was outstanding. I don't remember a year since perhaps 2002 that we had such great car speed and either through mechanical failure or some other thing like bad pitstops at Tasmania and Indy where we were strong enough for a podium, but the season was a disaster."

The next question is inevitable. Skaife is not a superstitious person but was there ever a time last year when he thought he had killed a black cat or walked under a ladder? He chuckles.

"Well, yeah a little bit. Because the speed was so good. I was always really encouraged about how we were going and I was really frustrated by not getting a result when clearly there were times when we should have.

"We had been leading at Sandown and had a steering failure there, leading at Oran Park, had a gearbox failure there, leading at Hidden Valley and had a brake failure there..." he chuckles again.

"I mean, it was just a run of events that was unbelievable - and then there was Bathurst.

Mark Skaife

That was the culmination of all of that. You qualify on pole position and then you don't do one single lap.

That was probably one of the worst moments in motorsport for me, so yeah, although I was frustrated, Bathurst was the most heartbreaking," says Skaife, his voice softening, the emotion clear.

I cried, I said, expressing the disbelief common to most race fans within seconds of last year's start.

"Yeah," he says, laughing. "I did too!

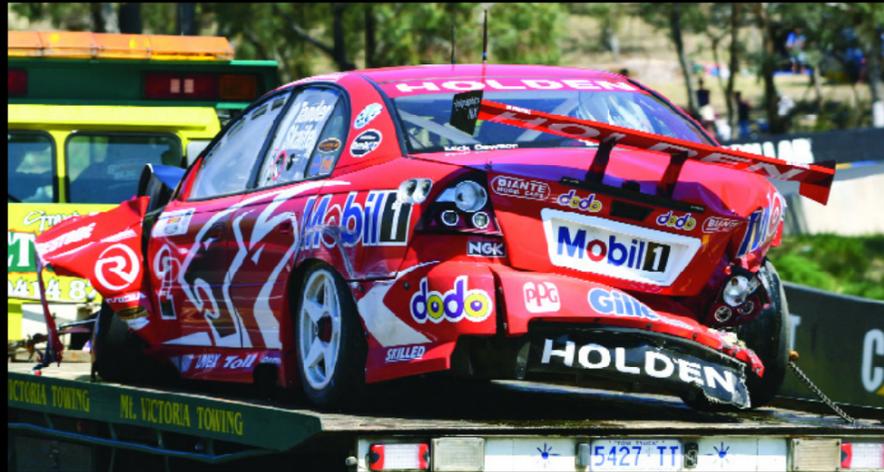
"When I got back to the pits and to [wife] Toni. It was just unbelievable. The look on the boys' faces when I walked in, it was just the most disappointing and heartfelt moment. I couldn't believe it."

So, the hard man of V8s does cry? While he can laugh at the question, the amusement disappears as he continues.

"On that day, I think you would have to be a pretty weird individual if that didn't upset you. It was certainly, it was certainly... well, if you got through that one without much emotion, you're obviously don't feel strongly enough or passionate enough what you're doing," says a driver who very clearly still does.

For Skaife, there was more pressure at Bathurst in 2006 than on any other visit except perhaps back in 1997, his first year with the team, when he shared a car with the retiring King of the Mountain. Last year's race weekend was all about the legend, particularly for his former team-mates, Skaife and Craig Lowndes.

"I mean, we always go to Bathurst trying to



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win and as the factory team for Holden you're expected to go well and we put our own emphasis on that. But I think the Brock factor was very strong for me. I don't remember ever wanting to win a race so badly.

"I was very proud of the team, how we collectively ran through the week and got our brain into gear with how good the car was. I have never been to Bathurst and had such a smooth run through practice and qualifying - the car and the

team were just outstanding. And then to have the Sunday morning drama...

"I mean, especially after all the tributes to Peter before the start. Craig and I walked up pit lane together, and I knew on that day we were going to have to put a special effort in to win and that was something we desperately wanted to do, so if you weren't emotional after that sort of event, and that sort of ending, for us, it would have been incredible."

Skaife says he spent 30 minutes in the pits getting his emotions under control before turning his mind to the challenge of getting the second car of Jim Richards and Ryan Briscoe closer to the pointy end of the field. History shows it was not to be. Richards hit the wall on lap 24, giving HRT a score of nil within an hour of the start.

"Then I could not get out of there fast enough!" Skaife chuckles.

"Toni and Marg Curtis [HRT staffer] organised a helicopter and I got out of there. I was gone! I just didn't want to be there. I was back in my lounge room in Melbourne about half past one or something.

"I watched the TV because I was eager to see what was happening but I was definitely not in love with the idea of being at Mount Panorama at that point. And yes, I admit I did have a quiet beer that afternoon!"

The end result of last year's nightmare is a new record that Skaife definitely is not proud of - he finished 16th in the series points.

"A career low. That's a milestone, isn't it? We had all those pole and front row positions and seven race wins and then I finished where I finished. Normally three or four round wins would win the year for you and there was probably seven

The '06 season was as much of a write-off for Mark Skaife as was his car at Bathurst just moments after the start. But he's feeling confident that the new VE Commodore will bring about a return to his winning ways.

Clay Cross/Chevron; Andrew Hall



or eight occasions where we were strong enough to have at least been on the podium, and to have won more rounds."

While Skaife maintains he never thinks about records, there was an important one last year - in New Zealand, he equalled Brock's 37 round wins. From then on, the media speculation mounted with each new event - would this be the new record?

For Skaife, that wasn't the focus. Championship chances were far more important. New Zealand and then the following round in Perth where he won two races made him feel the team was coming back after the disaster in Adelaide.

"Adelaide put a lot of pressure on, because you can only drop one round, so we knew we couldn't afford to have another one, if we wanted to be in championship contention.

"I really thought we were on the comeback trail but by the time we had the brake failure in Darwin, it was pretty well the end of it. When you're in the lead and you come into the pits with the brake pedal on the floor, you know you're in trouble and by then we were in big trouble."

After Bathurst, it was simply a matter of finishing the old year and getting ready for the new one. Skaife says the team has not missed a beat, powering through the challenges of last year - including all the major rebuilds and logistical issues - and continuing the pace through the off-season.

"We planned and organised the VE project very well. I'm surprised by how early we got the cars done and how well they have rolled out.



Mark Skaife



I've been really impressed with how our guys applied themselves to getting them done and when you see the quality of the build of the cars, they're about the best we've ever built, which is encouraging.

"Both Todd and I believe the feel of the car is very similar to last year's which bodes well in terms of knowing what the car likes and being able

to tune the car based on that feeling. But having said that, it is a new car and there will be some little idiosyncrasies we'll have to work on through the year, to get the ultimate tuning."

While the red team was kept busy with the cars, Skaife was distracted by the Walkinshaw Performance-HRT-Toll/HSV ownership saga, in terms of meeting the requirements of the TEGA

Teams' Licence Agreement that at one point looked like it might result in another no score at Adelaide for Skaife as TEGA threatened to withhold the team's licence. However, Skaife insists that distraction won't carry over into the new season.

"I always find the race weekends, when I get in the car, is better for me. I go there, it's my fun, my passion. I find that part is easy and it brings me back to reality. All the other sideline things that are involved - the administration, the operations - it puts it into simple perspective. We are there to go racing.

"When we get to the track, I don't feel like I'm there in any managerial role at all. I just go there with my helmet to be a race driver and the guys do a great job of covering me so I can do that.

"So although there have been some distractions coming into this season, I don't feel underdone at all. I'm ready to go driving. In fact, when we went to Winton to go testing in February, I didn't sleep very well on the Monday night because I was really excited about driving the car the next day.

"That's how I felt when I was 20! And that's always a good gauge as to how motivated I am, or how much desire is there for me to perform well. So I'm not thinking about retiring very soon!

"Mind you, I'm not talking about it - everyone else does!" He laughs.

"People do ask me about it, but I say don't get too carried away by it, because the way I feel, I think there's another four or five years if I want to. I always say it will depend on the motivation and how much I'm enjoying it and ultimately, how I'm going.

"There's no way I would ever continue, in the official Holden factory team, if I was not able to perform at a level that is commensurate with what He's a five-time Championship, four times winner at Bathurst, and yet he's only won a handful of races since he last won the title, in 2003.

Andrew Hall

"We planned and organised the VE project very well. I'm surprised by how early we got the cars done and how well they have rolled out."



the team needs and that's not something I have a problem with. My desire is to do the best I can for the team."

This year is a landmark for Skaife - the big 4-0. He says he's not worried by it, pointing out with mirth that he has a few years to go before he catches up with John Bowe.

"Mind you, I've said many times that in my view Jimmy Richards was the world's best touring car driver in his early 40s. He was fit, he was motivated, he was experienced and all the trademarks of the way Jim approaches his racing.

"He's the most competitive bloke I've ever been around and in that part of the career he often carried the car on the day. There were many times when I was staggered by how he dragged a result out of cars that shouldn't have been where they were. So to me, that's something I often refer back to, and think there's no reason why if I have the

same feeling for it - the motivation, the fitness - that I wouldn't be similar."

This year, there won't be a Skaife/Richards show at the enduros, but Skaife has ensured an early start to the pre-Bathurst publicity by hiring former team-mate and rival, Glenn Seton.

"There was a little bit of sentiment in the decision," he admits. "I've always said to Glenn it would be great for us to be together in a team. Actually my line was to him, 'well mate before you retire, you've got to drive a great car'. He had a bit of a chuckle about that one!

"But to me he was the stand-out choice. What Jim had provided for us was a solid second car option and whenever you think about Jim driving our second car, he was qualifying in the top 10.

"Blokes who aren't in the car all the time and then come along and qualify in the top 10 are amazing, so Glenn to me was the obvious choice.

Big news for Skaife and the HRT at the start of the year was the announcement that Glenn Seton would join the driver squad for the enduros. Skaife and Seton grew up together in karts but have never raced together since their late '80s Nissan days.

I'm really glad he's accepted and I think from our perspective it was vindicated when he drove the car at Winton.

"He went so well, fitted in with the team, gave the guys good feedback on the cars and he was on the pace immediately. He was like a kid with a new toy, so I'm really happy he felt like that, and our guys, when he made the comments he made about the car, they're feeling good about it too.

"It's all a great indication of how Glenn is approaching it and I think he will be outstanding - and I'm hoping we're going to have a good year."