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Photos: LAT



Hall (inset) is currently driving a Dodge in ALMS

Living the American Dream

Chris Hall has taken a long journey from Brands FF1600 to the ALMS

by Matt James
racing editor



Anyone who went to Brands Hatch in the 1980s would have seen Chris Hall.

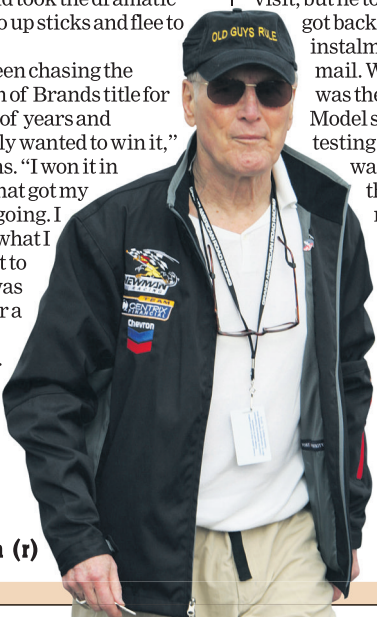
He was a mainstay of the Champion of Brands Formula Ford 1600 Championship. He was the leading Jamun driver, a fixture at the front and conquered the contest in 1991. And then he disappeared from the UK scene.

But now he is eyeing glory in the GT2 division of the American Le Mans Series and a drive in the Le Mans 24 Hours in an LMP2 car is a very real possibility.

Hall was 37 when he won the Champion of Brands title. He'd taken on the best Formula Ford drivers around, people like Johnny Herbert and Eddie Irvine, and shown them the way around Brands Hatch. But he wanted a change and took the dramatic decision to up sticks and flee to the USA.

"I had been chasing the Champion of Brands title for a number of years and desperately wanted to win it," he explains. "I won it in 1991 and that got my thoughts going. I had done what I had set out to do, and I was looking for a new challenge. I had become friends with Adrian

Hall ran Newman (r)



Fernandez when he was racing in the UK and he had a ride in Indy Lights, so I went to watch him in a race. I was intrigued by the American scene and I had that thought in the back of my mind. I just needed a change. Jamun had been my life and I just needed a change of not just scenery but racing too."

Hall went to the USA with no money, no drive and very little prospects. He pitched up at Road Atlanta, got a job at the racing school (as he had done at Brands Hatch in the 1980s) and tried to build up his reputation. It was through the school that he got his chance to return to the tracks.

"I was running a school kid who was 18 and I got talking to his father, who ran a big medical company in Atlanta. He was a good ol' boy. He asked me what I wanted to do racing-wise and I said NASCAR. He asked me what I needed and I threw out a figure. I was due back in England for a visit, but he told me that when I got back there would be an instalment cheque in the mail. When I got back, it was there. I bought a Late Model stock car, went testing every week and he was paying me to run the car and paying me to drive the car."

Hall progressed through the regional short-track ovals in 1996 and '97 to the NASCAR Goody's Dash Series in 1998, a feeder formula into stock cars.

And he was making the right impression, running third on



Hall in Brands FFord action

his debut at Daytona and mixing it with the frontrunners. "Being a Brit, the other drivers look at you and think 'where the hell are you from, boy?' I never got a hard time on track, but I had particular bother with one guy and my crew chief, over the radio, said 'OK Chris take him out,'" remembers the Londoner. "I waited for my opportunity and I took him out. But I also took out eight other cars and there were a few other drivers who tried climbing in my window net after the race to sort me out. It made TV because there were cars all over the place."

Hall was riding the crest of a wave but his main sponsor was bought out by another firm at the end of 1998 and he was once again without a drive. Being desperate to race, he jumped in to a fearsome Sprint Car to compete in America's iconic category.

"They are the wildest race cars I have ever driven," explains the 54-year-old. "We raced on pavement and the loose stuff, and I got on best on pavement which you probably would expect. I think I am the only Brit to have raced in it, and certainly the only one to have won a race. All they are is an engine stand with a wheel on each corner and about 800bhp. They weigh 1000lbs at the most. It is what I call instant

acceleration because they don't actually have a flywheel as such. They only have the one gear and it is locked in, so you have to be bump started.

"When you hit the throttle, those things jump up in the air like nobody's business. They are incredible. They are agricultural, they are raw, but my God do those things keep your attention. It is a huge series over here.

"After a while, I tried to figure out what my real area of expertise was and I figured it was road racing. I had a chance to run in the 1999 Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta in a Porsche 911 GT3 RSR. It whetted my appetite and I realised that's what I loved most."

Hall formed a small team at Road Atlanta, ran customer cars and eventually graduated to Grand Am with a paying driver. "I still wanted to drive but I wanted some stability too so I got into running cars and created a little team," he says. "We ran a Corvette C5 that I drove in the Grand Am Cup in 2003 and it went from there. The following year we ran a Daytona Prototype. I was not only team manager but I was driver, coach, crew chief and the truck driver. I did the whole thing. We did pretty well, too."

Through contacts with the Crawford firm, Hall's team was chosen to run film legend Paul

Newman on his last attempt at the Daytona 24 Hours in 2005. The 80-year-old wanted one final outing and Hall was the man on the pit wall. Hall remembers: "It was a privilege to deal with someone like that. We did some private testing and I got to know him face-to-face: what a charming man. Everything that's written about him is true. He was a lovely, humble guy."

This season, Hall is racing alongside Joel Feinberg in a Dodge Viper in the ALMS and the Primetime Race Group, which runs the car, is ambitious. Le Mans is definitely on the radar. It would be the pinnacle of Hall's career and the fulfilment of a dream for a man who has been racing for more than 30 years. "I sit down and think times are hard but I think about how lucky I am that I can still race competitively and I am still getting paid at my age. I am making a living at it. I am not getting rich at it, but I am enjoying it. To be honest, I can't see myself stopping. The only reason I will stop is if I am not fast any more, if I realise that I am not as quick as I should be.

"Obviously, I think that if I had got the same breaks as Eddie Irvine or Johnny Herbert, I think I would have been able to achieve what they did. But I don't have a jealousy thing, I don't think of it that way. I just think wow, and I think I could have made it with the right breaks and had I been a little younger.

"I have got to race in the Sebring 12 hours and I have done two Daytona 24 Hours and Petit Le Mans, and Le Mans would be like the highlight of my career. That's the goal of the team and Joel's a very determined young guy and I hope I am still on board when it does happen." ■

How Hall helped Jamun to the top

The boss of Jamun Racing Services, Tony Mundy, is in no doubt about the importance of the role Chris Hall played in developing what is now a multiple British Formula Ford title winning team.

"Without Chris, we wouldn't be where we are today," says Mundy. "He was the perfect driver for us at the perfect time."

Hall was, in effect, a Jamun works driver for almost a decade in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Although it was a small outfit compared to the might of Swift, Van Diemen and Reynard, it was a competitive proposition at its home track of Brands Hatch and Hall remained loyal to the marque. "Chris had swapped a motorbike for an old Jamun T2," explains Mundy. "And he turned up on my doorstep one day with no clue how to run it and he asked for my help. We hit it off immediately.

"Chris never complained, even though a Van Diemen might have been faster and he always gave us his best.

"It is a shame he never really got the recognition on a wider scale in Britain, because he deserved it. We were lucky to have him. I think he finished seventh at the Formula Ford Festival seven times for us. That was a great achievement."

Hall in 1991

