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The new Toro?

BY MARC WEISBLOTT February 13, 2008 15:02

Today on the Scroll: Finally, a decent little dust-up between two Canadian magazines — too bad one of them has been dead for the past year.

Canadian men’s magazine *Toro* bit the dust one year ago this week, its publisher surrendering the idea of a homegrown equivalent to *Esquire* or *GQ*, setting the stage for *Driven* to claim they had the right formula to succeed in that space.

"We've always been confident that men want to read about what's new in fashion, technology, watches and cars," boasted *Driven* editor-in-chief **Michael La Fave** at the time. "The failure of our primary competitor does not lend credence to the theory that men won't read about products ... only that despite offering a quality publication, *Toro* failed to assess exactly what men are interested in."

La Fave must have sustained that confidence. A year later, he's struck out with two other former *Driven* colleagues to launch *Sharp*, which "aims to delve into the myriad interests of the modern man ... the result of careful consideration, years of feedback and experience." The distribution channels will bear a striking resemblance to *Driven* (owned by Quebecois publisher *Auto Journal*): 150,000 copies in the *Globe and Mail* and plans to get into Air Canada first class lounges.

"Our intention at the time was not to discredit *Toro*," says La Fave, calling from the Canadian International Autoshow. "The message we wanted to get across was that there was a necessity, a demand and a viability for a men’s magazine in Canada. But it also means you need to be doing what’s realistically attainable."

Reality, based on reader comments on the *Canadian Magazines* blog and a recent online story in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, means paying writers no more than the decades-old dollar-a-word glossy standard — and sometimes even less — plus editorial content frequently influenced by advertiser interest.

There was never such collusion at *Driven*, claims La Fave, even if automotive journalism is especially notorious for being kind to companies who supply the test drives. "There are always naysayers challenging anyone’s professionalism," he says. "The people criticizing us usually have no direct experience running a magazine. I’ve got four years of experience as the editor of *Driven* behind me."

Which is pretty good for a 32-year-old, now helming what he describes as blend of the current incarnation of *Details* and *Best Life*. *Sharp*’s first of five 2008 issues will cover summer style, hybrid SUVs, golf destinations, digital SLRs and diver’s watches, but also will contain a feature about the smuggling of the mineral *Coltan*.

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The editorial blend sounds near enough to *Toro*, only without the sex stuff — which initially clashed with what the *Globe and Mail* thought their subscribers could tolerate when *Toro* was first stuffed into home delivery editions in 2003.

Derek Finkle, recruited by publisher **Christopher Bratty** to help realize his goal of creating something akin to circa 1969 *Playboy* (only without the naked ladies) won that battle after producing proof that the *Globe* was no stranger to running its own salacious articles. But he couldn't win over enough advertisers for it to work.

"The owner took the lack of advertising as a typical Canadian slight," says Finkle, 39. "He was willing to back this magazine for a while, and there was no one else willing to support it — a tepid response to something that he thought was good. Complicating things further, the way we ran the magazine, it was an expensive product to produce."

Those commissioned celebrity cover shoots, stories from unusual events around the world, and even the occasional coverage of a product promotion provided some impressive clips for those involved, including Finkle, who is back to doing crime journalism. Knowing the expense and intuition involved, he's skeptical of any effort to succeed with a tamer equivalent to what *Toro* was.

"I used to think the Americans were the uptight ones," says Finkle. "But even some members of my staff thought some of the [photographic] sexual content in *Toro* was beneath them, or too insipid. And the advertisers were totally timid — the Canadian office of Tiffany & Co. didn't even want to lend us their products for a photo shoot.

"But then I pick up *Details*, and the same car companies like Volvo, who didn't want to advertise with us, are in there alongside [Meet the Mandingos](#), or [Gay or Asian](#)? Why were they begrudging us for what we were trying to do?

"What I learned is that Canadian magazines were not allowed to have a sense of humour. That they should be more like *Flare* — or maybe *Canadian Geographic*."

Finkle figures it unlikely anything ever produced in this country will, like *Toro*, qualify for such a uniquely diverse array of National Magazine Awards — from design and photography, to fashion and travel, to columns and investigative reporting — let alone winning them all.

And it doesn't help when it's all but impossible to make a living as a magazine writer. "We've got problems when the only way to make any kind of long-term career in this industry is to marry someone who makes more money than you," says Finkle.

Naturally, a contender like *Sharp* is designed with an upwardly mobile reader in mind, the kind that subscribes to the *Globe and Mail*.

Yet another new custom publication, *Argyle*, is being distributed with the *Globe* in certain postal codes — although the magazine is designed for members of the Cambridge Group of Clubs. Published by advertising-media magnate [Bassett Media Group](#), the short and servicey content skews toward the senior executive set. The debut issue's apparent male slant only reflects the fact that women are more likely to pick it up than the other way around, explains 27-year-old editor-in-chief **Alan Evanson**.

If nothing else, ye olde dead tree newspapers might have a future in this country as a wraparound delivery system for these glossies.

Still, does the target audience really want to *read*?

"They're the ones who are throwing out lines like 'definitive resource for ambitious and successful men aged 25-54 who value intelligence, style and sophistication in their personal brand,'" recites Finkle from the *Sharp* [press release](#). "They're not exactly getting *Road & Track*."

A favourite pastime in the *Toro* office, according to Finkle, was to peruse each issue of *Driven* to take stock of how the wristwatches were being conspicuously exposed in the fashion spreads — all the better to court potential advertisers with.

But while rumours abound that *Toro* will be resurrected as a website — perhaps to flounce around in the same low-rent space as *XYZ* and its [national chain](#) of e-newsletters for guys who want to be like Russell Smith — the last thing Michael La Fave is

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looking to do is position Sharp as a competitor of a defunct magazine. (Driven, meanwhile, continues to publish with the formula La Fave established.)

"Toro left the marketplace and the publisher gave the impression that men's magazines weren't a viable business in this country," he says. "It was a bit of a backhanded blow to those who were trying to succeed.

"We're going to show that there is a demand for this sort of product – and how it's something that Canadian advertisers will want to support."

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