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Nascar's Not The Only Race In Town

By Paul Mroczka

When you talk car racing most people think of NASCAR—National Association for Stock Car Auto

Racing. It is, perhaps, the most popular sport in America. Along with NASCAR, there are three other major types of car racing in America—Formula 1, Champ Car, and Indy Racing League. Taken together, these four racing groups offer a range of competition and challenges for drivers and exciting experiences for racing fans.

FORMULA 1:

The Formula 1 race calendar starts in March and goes into October with 18 races in 18 different countries. The American race is held at the Indianapolis Speedway, with the 2006 contest occurring on July 2nd. The race covers approximately 190 miles or 73 laps on the Indy road course.

Formula 1 cars have open cockpits, open wheels, and are very low to the ground. They're made with one primary goal in mind—speed. Extremely fast speeds define Formula 1 racing.

The chassis, which must be constricted by the racing team, are made of ultra-light materials such as carbon fiber, allowing the cars to jet down the track. They also have wings in the front and back, which are designed to keep the cars low to the ground and to help them cut down air resistance. Every aspect is dedicated to precision and speed and thus an unneeded feature like bumpers have been eliminated. The intimate cockpit is in the middle of the vehicle, giving the machine a strong center of gravity. All of these elements help make them extremely aerodynamic and fast—their speeds top 200 mph.

One of the major challenges for drivers of these cars is the complex course they run. The Indianapolis track has 13 turns, including hairpins that demand a driver quickly downshift from a speed of almost 200 mph to 86 mph and then to 36 mph. Then the driver pushes the throttle up to 160 mph. All of this happens during a five-turn sequence that covers about 1/2 mile on the 2.6-mile course. Many Formula 1 races are run in city streets that become racetracks just for that event.

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Along with the blinding speed, lightweight vehicles, and complex courses come the dangers of this sport. When a car going 200 mph loses its grip on the track, spins and nails a retaining wall, other drivers have to instantly adjust. If they don't, the results can be deadly.

Of the four major categories of car racing, Formula 1 is the least popular in America. Perhaps this is due to the international nature of its venues—there's only one race in America—along with the fact that the races are run every other week, unlike NASCAR that runs every week except on Easter Sunday.

CHAMP CAR:

The 16-race Champ Car World Series starts in late March and run into the middle of November. Fourteen of its races are in the U.S., Canada or Mexico, with two other contests being held in Australia and South Korea. Bridgestone is the major sponsor of Champ Car (Champ Car is the short for Championship Car).

Although a few of the races are run on ovals, most of the contests are held on road courses. In fact, many of the races are held on city streets that have been converted for that one weekend into a road course. Cities that set up temporary tracks include Long Beach and San Jose, CA; Houston, TX; and Denver, CO. Although some are shorter and others a bit longer, most Champ courses run about 2 miles in length. Like their Formula 1 counterparts, Champ Cars reach speeds of close to 200 mph.

The Champ Car raceways, for the most part, are shorter than Formula 1 tracks and also have fewer and more gradual turns. You'll find Formula 1 courses feature between 12 and 20 turns with at least one tight series of hairpins, while Champ Car tracks average approximately 9 turns, and although they certainly demand tight maneuvering, they don't offer the complex, extremely narrow angles of Formula 1.

Because Champ cars race on ovals along with street courses, they are heavier and have a longer wheelbase. Oval courses with their lack of turns encourage higher speeds, and these speeds put more stress on a car; thus the wheelbase on a Champ Car is sturdier but less agile than those on Formulas 1 racers. These less maneuverable wheelbases are one of the primary reasons that Champ Cars do not have to negotiate the ultra-tight street course curves that their counterparts do.

There is certainly a rivalry between the American based Champ Car enthusiasts and the international Formula 1 fans that focuses on which is the better circuit, has more competitive races, and the best teams. In looking at each type of car, it's hard to tell the difference between them. They are very similar but each has unique characteristics.

Formula 1 race cars are powered by gasoline and are not turbocharged, whereas Champs burn methanol and utilize the turbo. Champ Cars also use non-grooved tires, and they are allowed to incorporate a set of softer compound wheels, providing them with an edge over other cars, making the outcome of the race less predictable.

Some race fans prefer Champ Car to Formula 1 due to the fact that lead changes are more achievable in the former and also because the less stringent tire rules allow for creativity that can yield excitement

and positive results on the track.

INDY RACING LEAGUE:

The Indy Racing League (IRL) sponsors races primarily on oval tracks with the centerpiece being the Indianapolis 500, which is held every year on Memorial Day weekend at the Indianapolis Speedway. The schedule, which has the fewest races of the four major racing organizations, produces 14 events. The IRL season kicks off in late March and runs until early September. The only road course for this series in 2006 is the Infineon in Sonoma, CA and the only race held outside of the U.S. occurs at Twin Ring Motegi, Japan.

The IRL was founded in 1996 and, since that time, has gone through various growing pains. Like the Champ Car World Series, its cars are open wheel racers with a central cockpit. At first the IRL had difficulty attracting top drivers; however, as the organization gained credence, it was able to attract some competitive drivers.

In 2007, as part of an environmentally friendly policy, all IRL cars will be running on ethanol. Indy circuit cars have tires that are similar to those used on Formula 1 cars, while their agility and weight are akin to that of the Champ racers.

Of the four racing groups, the IRL may be the weakest when it comes to financial stability and name recognition. Many fans, sports writers, and officials who are interested in open wheel racing have called for the unification of IRL and Champ Cars, making one organization with the very best drivers and most competitive races. Many feel that American Indy car racing would benefit from the strength of having a single group in charge, resulting in a less diluted product while helping to establish dominance over Formula 1.

NASCAR:

Even if you don't know what the letters stand for or you've never been to a NASCAR sanctioned race, everyone knows that NASCAR is about stock car racing. Stock cars are simply racecars that take road models or common stock as the foundation from which the racecar is created.

The Nextel Cup Series, NASCARS' premiere event, starts in February and finishes up in November. Along with being the longest of the race seasons, NASCAR also boasts the most events—39! Additionally, they have the most drivers—50 as opposed to the approximately 20 involved in each of the other organizations.

NASCAR races are held on road courses, ovals, irregularly shaped tracks, and circular raceways. Three things that make NASCAR popular are the regularity of its schedule, the expert machines, crews, and drivers, and the ability of the organization to be innovative while still holding to tradition.

The look of the stock cars, unlike the racers for Formula 1, Champ Car or IRL, make NASCAR the race of the people because we all drive vehicles that look like the cars that Jeff Gordon, Sterling Martin, and Jimmie Johnson maneuver each week. Few of us can see ourselves behind the wheel of a Formula 1,

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but many of us drive a Chevy like Tony Stewart, a Dodge like Kyle Petty or a Ford like Dale Jarrett. This connection that fans make with the stock car certainly helps extend the popularity of the circuit in the U.S.

Also, unlike the other three organizations, NASCAR runs their races every week. It's grueling, but it also creates a great competitive atmosphere and a large following that wants to know if Sterling Martin is going to cut off Jeff Gordon just like he did last week; and if he does, what will Gordon do about it?

Stock car races tend to include many lead changes, sparring amongst drivers, and athletic pit stops. Also, NASCAR holds all of its races in the United States, giving the entire circuit a specific national focus.

Although NASCAR is not the only game in town, they are the best known and most organized, offering fans weekly competition with an intensity and drive that no other racing organization has rivaled. The other groups certainly have their following and produce a great product, but Formula 1 may be too elite to ever reach Americans the way NASCAR has. Champ Car is more grounded in America but lacks the weekly head-to-head competition and IRL has been unable to exploit the mystique of the Indy racecar.

It may behoove you to check out all four of these major racing organizations and their events. If you're a NASCAR fan, you may find something unique in Formula 1 that you can also enjoy. Champ Car lovers should be able to get into the non-stop nature of stock car racing. Formula 1 folks may enjoy the variety NASCAR offers, while IRL enthusiasts might like the international flavor of Formula 1.

Then again--these camps and their allegiances may not be interested in ever crossing over to the other side.

ONLINE BETTING

If you think that sports wagering is limited to the four major sports (football, basketball, baseball and hockey), think again. A number of online sportsbooks offer race fans an opportunity to cash in on their favorites. You can easily find odds online on which driver or team will win a race, capture the pole position or finish in the top three.

The cars are running--take part in the excitement on race day.

This article was written by Paul Mroczka for

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A NASCAR Primer

By Jena Luthovski

Does this sound familiar? Your significant other is a huge NASCAR fan, while you don't even know what NASCAR stands for, much less what it all means. You'd like to get a meaningful themed gift for the upcoming birthday/anniversary/holiday, but don't really know where to start. Here are some tips.

So let's start with the name. NASCAR stands for National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing. NASCAR actually sponsors a few different race series, including ones for trucks, but the most commonly known and most popular is the NASCAR Nextel Cup Series. It's one of the fastest growing sports in the US in terms of popularity. It might surprise you to know that the NASCAR fan base is not as testosterone loaded as you might think. Estimates put NASCAR fans as 60% male and 40% female. No one knows for sure, but it could have something to do with the fact that it's not just the cars that are hot. NASCAR drivers have more than their fair share of admiring female followers.

The ultimate gift, of course, would be tickets to a race. How much will those run you? For races at smaller, less popular venues, online prices can start at around \$60 per person and go up to \$200 per person. At a race mecca like Bristol, Tennessee, tickets can go upwards of \$700 each for the really good seats, down to \$175.

If you're looking for memorabilia for your NASCAR fan, team jackets or hats are a good pick. Like any other sport, fans are loyal to their team, or in this case more specifically, their driver. Unlike other sports, favorites are not dictated so much by hometown as personality, and with a jacket or hat, your fan can wear his pride. If she attends a lot of NASCAR races, you might want to look into getting a scanner. With this, you can listen to talk between drivers and their spotters and crew chiefs, as well as radio announcers covering the race should you lose track of the action.

Maybe something to hang on the wall would be more your speed. There are lots of posters, mini hoods, and prints available for purchase, as well as personalized and one-of-a-kind items like photos framed along with pieces of tire used during a race.

Readers will find lots of books out there, from driver biographies to books on how to throw the ultimate NASCAR tailgate. There are also several magazines dedicated to NASCAR racing and venues.

Jena Luthovski writes about Sports Fans Gear Coupons,

<http://www.sportsteamfanheaven.com>



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