

Hillenburg Is A Man Of Many Hats

HARRISBURG, N.C.

Andy Hillenburg sits behind his desk at his FastTrack

Driving School headquarters in the shadows of Lowe's Motor Speedway.

His telephone rings, his cell phone buzzes repeatedly. Life is busy.

The former sprint-car driver from Indiana has a lot going on. In November, he added the title to his already long list of jobs, which include husband, dad, team owner, driving school proprietor, auto racing historian and occasionally race-car driver.

And it is that new title — speedway owner — that is keeping his phones ringing as much as anything else. Hillenburg purchased Rockingham Speedway, formerly North Carolina Speedway, and has been busily preparing the facility to host the Carolina 500 for the ARCA RE/MAX Series May 2-4 at The Rock. It will be the first stock-car race at the 1.017-mile speedway in more than four years.

While *NSSN* will tell the story of Hillenburg's revitalization of the Richmond County North Carolina oval in a future issue, the Carolina 500 is our topic for the day and Hillenburg's passion.

Hillenburg expects more than 80 cars to attempt to qualify for the 50 — that's right, 50 — starting positions in the 500 kilometer event, which will run on Sunday afternoon following the NASCAR Sprint Cup race on Saturday night in Richmond, Va. The race will be shown live on Speed.

"The best race date on the schedule was this first weekend in May and we wanted to make it where it was off for the Busch (Nationwide) and Cup guys because a lot of guys had expressed interest in coming and racing," said Hillenburg. "So, the Richmond deal with them racing at night and fairly close, if they don't have any weather issues up there, it is possible for guys from the Busch or Cup series to run. I don't know who is coming yet. A few guys are still working on it from both series. I feel like a few guys are going to do it."

Among those outside the ARCA regulars that have committed are Ken Schrader, Bobby Hamilton, Jr., Chad McCumbee, Austin Dillon

FROM THE DESK



MIKE KERCHNER

and Joey Logano. Speed analyst Phil Parsons will come out of retirement and call the race from the cockpit of a race car. Hillenburg expects a few more big names to be added to the entry list as the date comes closer.

Hillenburg "feels personally responsible for making this thing work." But it's not just the track he

has faith in. He believes the ARCA series can deliver the goods when it comes to a quality stand-alone product.

"I think down here with the exception of Daytona, there hasn't been an ARCA race that has been specifically promoted as an ARCA event," he said. "They raced at Charlotte and Atlanta and it was like, 'Oh fans, by the way, before you go to the parking lot, please enjoy the ARCA race.' That was another reason I made it a stand-alone event."

"I want people to understand that this ARCA racing is great. That is why Roush Racing fields a car, Hendrick fields a car, Ganassi fields a car, Evernham fields a car, the Pettys field a car. This is great racing. I think once people see that, then the ARCA series can take off and roll. This has the chance to be the moment in time to change the ARCA series into even a bigger entity than it is and it has been around for 56 years."

Hillenburg knows the quality of the event is what will bring people back.

"We have to convince people that this is a great event and we do that by getting their curiosity up. We need to make the ticket prices affordable," he explained. "It's \$35 for a frontstretch ticket, \$30 for turns one and two and \$20 for the infield. Make it affordable and guys will come out to see what you've got and then when 50 cars roll into that first turn, we are going to hook several thousand people on ARCA racing."

While the first few months of his stewardship of Rockingham Speedway have been preparing the facility for race fans, Hillenburg knows it's now time to get down to business.

"I have taken my hard hat off this week and put on my carnival promoting hat."

Now, IRL Should Address The Cars

BROWNSBURG, IND.

I think anyone who is remotely knowledgeable about racing in America is excited about the merger between Champ Car and IRL. This old race car mechanic is very excited.

The merger won't fix all the problems, but it's a positive step forward. Unfortunately, Indy-car racing has eroded to its current state, but that's water over the dam and it's time to move forward.

At this writing, projections show at least 24 cars at every IRL (let's call it Indy car) race this year. That's a positive, and 24 cars for an Indy-car race is a good number. The two series were struggling to get 18 cars per race.

Now fans can look at one series with all the best drivers. The ability to grow is there. Indy-car racing used to create household names like Foyt, Andretti, Rutherford, Unser and Mears. It's always been a melting pot for the best drivers in the world from sprint cars, F-1, NASCAR, sports cars and midgets. In 1995, the year before the split, Indy-car racing was at an all-time high. The competition was fierce, the teams were strong, stands were packed, and TV ratings were great. To compete in 1995, it took a budget of around \$20 million.

The ball is in Indy Racing League founder Tony George's court. He won the war. What will put Indy-car racing back on top from the fans perspective?

In my opinion, eliminate spec cars and engines. It's gotten sterile and very boring from the technical standpoint. Innovation and technology gives Indy-car racing personality. The cars and teams are as important as the drivers. Fans like to see race teams that will do whatever it takes to win. Certain spec components will ensure safety and control cost while being transparent to the fan and won't alter the car's performance. Spec components help control costs without making the race look like a slot car event.

Remember A.J. Watson, George Bignotti, Junior Johnson and Smokey Yunick? They had fan followings. Everyone watched to see what they were going to do next. A.J. Foyt was a great mechanic and people used to admire the way he did his own engines and chassis. In

THE TECHNICAL SIDE



CHRIS PAULSEN

later years, it was Dan Gurney's Eagles, March, Lola, Galmer and Reynard. Who remembers Davey Hamilton's dad, Kenny, who came to the speedway in 1982 with the Eagle Aircraft Flyer, a very radical design.

We must get innovation back into the competition of Indy-car racing. Thirty-three Dallara chassis with 33 identical Honda

engines? BORING. It makes tech inspection easy. Let's forget about easy tech and open up the rules to some creativity.

"Easy" and "success" don't go together. It evolved to this sterile, spec state because the popularity went into the toilet after the split. Teams couldn't secure sponsorships because of lack of fans and TV ratings. The reaction was to cut costs by going spec. The cost of racing is self-policing. It's controlled by the popularity of the series.

Is NASCAR an example to study? I think so. There's a lot of concern about the high cost of racing. Teams work on \$25 million budgets. Six years ago it took \$10 million. The enormous popularity in recent years attracted sponsors to spend extra money. Moves are being made by NASCAR to control costs. Now, there are empty seats in the stands, sponsors are leaving, TV ratings are down, and that magic feeling in the garage is starting to go away. Is it because of the spec CoT body that makes the cars look the same? Could it be because there's no panic bodywork being done by the crew chief looking for an advantage? Possibly.

The IRL can look at a budget in 1995 (\$20 million) compared to \$8 million today and say, "We fixed that." But did they? No, they just eliminated the business case for the sponsors to be involved. Sponsors and fans flock together.

The merger is a great thing. The moves made by the IRL need to be calculated and precise. They've tried many marketing gimmicks, but have ignored the most important part of the problem, the spec nature of the cars. A field of identical cars may make for close racing, but it doesn't make an exciting series.

An NFL game played with robots could be very competitive, statistically. Think about it.

Goodyear Really Is NASCAR's Sacred Cow & Mourning The Loss Of Another Track

VALLEY STREAM, N.Y.

For many years I said Goodyear was a sacred cow as far as NASCAR was concerned. I applaud Tony Stewart for having the stones to inform the world about it.

Goodyear has had free reign of NASCAR for years. They dictate race conditions by the tires they foist off on the competitors at \$1,800 bucks a set. They even have the media brainwashed. On TV, someone hits the wall because they "cut down a tire." It is never suggested by any of the TV mouths that there was a tire failure.

So, the fans at Atlanta paid good money to see a terrible race. I guess

Goodyear needs to sell as many sets of tires per race as possible. When Carl Edwards ran off and hid from the others when he had new tires and his rivals had seven laps on theirs, that showed the quality of their product.

NASCAR takes a hard line on its competitors. Fining, suspending, revoking points for picayune infractions, but it allows Goodyear to do anything possible to fill its coffers and louse up the races.

NASCAR and Goodyear have been in bed together for a long time and it's time for new sheets.

■ The speculation that Wall Stadium (I'm using the old

RACING JOURNAL



GARY LONDON

name...the one it had when it was successful) is going to shut down seems real. This is a very sad story.

The only way the track can be saved is someone who REALLY loves racing pour a couple of million bucks

into it, which won't be seen again. This is unlikely. I doubt someone can lease the place from its current owners since there are debts to be paid.

If this happens, there will be only two weekly race tracks left in New Jersey, New Egypt and Bridgeport. Both are dirt tracks that run on Saturday nights.

What will be the future of the Wall racers? They have few choices, none close by. Riverhead is a long and costly trip. Mahoning in Pennsylvania may be in its final season this year. I really feel for them.

Our sport isn't the only one ripping its fans off. Next year when the new Yankee Stadium opens, it will cost

\$29 just to park.

■ New York Governor Eliot Spitzer, who resigned in disgrace last week, is a race fan. A relative works for Hendrick Motorsports. Maybe NASCAR will make him Commissioner of Cheating.

■ I heard that Bobby Santos, III, probably the hottest young prospect in racing, has lost his NASCAR opportunity. I guess what I wrote about the plight of young drivers recently is true. If I owned an Indy car, Santos would be my first choice.

■ Double-dating with the Gov at 25 Emerson Place, Valley Stream, N.Y. 11580. E-mail to Racewri771@AOL.com.

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