

ALMS, Grand Am Merger Talk Difficult To Swallow

CHARLOTTE, N.C.

Mergers are the “in thing” these days. Big, small, or in between, businesses are forming unions. Of course, this enthusiasm for “getting together” isn’t necessarily voluntary in this troubled global economy.

However, one can’t say either, in light of the existing circumstances, that it isn’t unexpected. Even so, there are some occasions where no matter what, a merger just doesn’t seem to make sense.

So pardon me for having difficulties believing last week’s rumors that perhaps NASCAR’s Rolex Sports Car Series and Don Panoz might be discussing bringing the Grand Am tour and Panoz’s American Le Mans Series together. These are the same rumors which first appeared a little more than a year ago, and while they came to nothing then, there were those who gave them more credence than they deserved.

Now they’re back, and, as was the case 13 months ago, they still appear to be “off the wall.”

Most believe that the reality behind the formation of the Grand Am was a desire on the part of its founders to keep the ALMS from dominating the professional North American road-

RAMBLING ROAD



BILL OURSLER

racing scene.

Given the comparative grid sizes between the two, it has achieved that status. For example, where the ALMS’s combined LMP1 and LMP2 prototype numbers are less than 10, the Rolex tour averages around 16 to 17. And, on the production side, the current strong point for the Panoz-owned championship, the ALMS still comes out second-best in the size race. So, if the Rolex series has achieved the main goals set for it, and if the Grand Am on an overall basis is profitable, as it is, then why would NASCAR want to spend the money to buy it from Panoz?

Moreover, one of the attractions of the Grand Am for the gentlemen drivers, who have always been the foundation of road racing here, is the lack of any card stacking in favor of the manufacturers and their mega budgets on the Rolex tour. If the two championships were put together, those gentlemen drivers would almost certainly find themselves in a contest with the factory teams they couldn’t win. Given those circumstances, it would not be at all illogical for them to take their cars and go home.

With that in mind, about the only thing the Grand Am could do if it acquired the ALMS would be to kill it, an expense that makes virtually no sense when money is tight; especially when, as far as the Grand Am camp is concerned, the ALMS has been neatly kept in its sandbox. However, in spite of all this logic, there is always the humanistic wild card of irrationality that creeps into any such equation, something evident in Max Mosley’s current approach to the problems plaguing Formula 1.

What if Don Panoz simply has had enough and wants to “leave the field of play” as the psychology majors among us would say? What if Panoz sees no way out for the championship with its manufacturer-oriented regulations at a time when manufacturers are either quitting, or thinking about quitting the sport. What if ... What if?

So far both sides have denied any conversations about buy-outs or mergers, and while there are hints that there may be some fire behind the perceived smoke, I, for one, remain a skeptic. Therefore, I’m going to sit back and await further developments. And, while I’m doing that I’ll be sipping on an adult beverage with my feet propped up on a stool watching reruns of “I Love Lucy.”

It all makes that much sense.

Goodyear’s Homework Should Pay Off At Indy

BROWNSBURG, IND.

It’s less than two weeks from the Allstate 400, which is one of the largest NASCAR Sprint Cup races of the year. The question on everyone’s mind is obviously the tire and if Goodyear corrected the problem that plagued last year’s race. Have they made a tire that won’t wear out in 10 laps? The answer is — yes. Goodyear was committed to solving that problem and did just that. They conducted several tests and spent an enormous amount of money to make sure this didn’t happen again. They now have a tire that will make it through a fuel run and also has grip.

Now that the testing is complete, there is a clear picture of what caused the same tread compound used on the old car to behave differently on the CoT. I spoke to Greg Stucker, director of race operations for Goodyear.

“Our data showed the new car runs at a higher yaw attitude than the old car,” Stucker explained. “It creates different wear debris, created a smaller particle size than what it had previously done on that abrasive surface. This (rubber dust) simply went airborne. It didn’t get driven into the race-track, as is typically what happens.”

Consequently, the track didn’t hold the rubber and form a groove. It became a

THE TECHNICAL SIDE



CHRIS PAULSEN

“self cleaning” sanding block and this rubber debris covered the wall, the grandstands and the spectators.

Since the 2008 Allstate 400, Goodyear has worked very hard to understand this problem and correct it. There have been seven tests at the Speedway and countless hours spent in their test facilities and in the engineering department. “We ground our test track using the same equipment, to the same surface, and by the same people that ground the Speedway. We did this for compound test evaluation,” Stucker said.

“One of the options was to go hard; evaluate a compound that was so hard that no matter how abrasive the surface was, you couldn’t wear it out. The grip wasn’t good. We don’t want to take that approach. We want something that that will provide a good, raceable set up,” Stucker said.

The easy way out of this problem would be to build a tire with a “rock hard” compound and not worry about wear. Goodyear chose to do the right thing by building a tire with adequate grip so there is a “chance” of a good race. I say that because the recipe for a good race depends on many ingredients. It isn’t an automatic. It takes more than just a tire.

With the new tire development, based on many test miles, teams will definitely be able to make a full fuel run. That could be anywhere from 35 to 45 laps, depending on yellows, etc. “Our goal was to make sure we made a fuel stop very safely and we certainly have accomplished that,” Stucker said. “We were testing at lap speeds faster than we will see in the race.”

This new tire will drop off some during a run, but the balance seems to stay consistent. That’s very important. There will be factors like chassis set up and race conditions that will vary in terms of lap times and how they drop off. “Kasey Kahne saw about a nine tenths of a second drop after 15 laps. We’re seeing about one second over 15 to 20 laps,” Stucker said.

This drop gives the teams something they can dial to. The good teams will work with this and make their car better for the long run and will experience less drop off over a fuel run. Other teams will be fast on stickers and see the tire fade quicker. This scenario usually makes for a good race.

The bottom line is nobody was at fault for the tire issue that took place last year. Yes, it’s easy to point fingers at Goodyear, NASCAR or Indianapolis Motor Speedway, but this was a situation that was nearly impossible to predict. Believe me, if it was obvious, there were several very talented race team engineers that were sleeping during the testing in 2008.

My prediction: with this new tire and the double-file restarts, the 2009 Allstate 400 will be a great race.

Remembering Grundy County’s Frank Welch

CHICAGO

Did you ever go to a party or a family get-together and have a feeling that someone was missing? That’s how it felt one recent Friday night at the Grundy County Speedway in Morris (Ill.) without Frank Welch.

Welch, longtime promoter of the third-mile northern Illinois paved oval, died June 14 at the age of 89. Welch had been an important part of the Grundy County racing scene, dating back to the old Mazon Speed Bowl, where Welch assisted legendary promoter Wayne Carter. Welch, a former stock-car competitor at Mazon in the ’50s, worked for Carter for years after his driving days were over, doing numerous race-day jobs at the high-banked quarter-mile, including flagging, announcing and scoring the races, and later, acting as pit steward.

Running out of room for expansion, Carter and Welch, both members of the Grundy County Fair Board, built a new fairgrounds just north of Morris. The new Grundy County

Speedway was part of the new fairgrounds complex, with the raceway holding its first stock-car program May 30, 1971.

Grundy became the site of weekly Friday night stock-car racing with the fairboard handling the promotion each year. With Carter’s passing in 1980, Welch became

CHICAGO CHIPS



STAN KALWASINSKI

the track promoter, handling the day-to-day activities of the speedway, including a “hands-on” approach every Friday evening, pretty much doing everything and anything.

“He sold tickets,” said his son, Jim. “He would go inside the beer stand and sell beer, or sell popcorn. Where he was needed he would jump in, which is what a good manager does. Sitting behind a desk and pencil pushing was not my dad.”

Handling the rather unique fairboard-promotion of a weekly short track for more than 25 years, Welch, who became the fairboard president in 1969, faced the “ups and downs” of any promoter. For the most part, he kept the speedway “solvent” year in and year out, despite rumors of the track closing.

Grundy was pretty much the “home track” for John McKarns’s ARTGO late model series from its inaugural event Sept. 7, 1975, and every year after that through 1997, the final year of ARTGO action. Before his ARTGO days, McKarns and his wife, Sue, had worked at Grundy as announcer and scorer. McKarns worked with Welch, scheduling numerous ARTGO events, including a Dale Earnhardt vs. Mark Martin “match race” in 1991 that drew a record crowd.

“One thing Frank was correct about was paying the ‘little guy’ a decent amount of prize money, whether he finished 10th or 25th,” McKarns said. “He always had a few bucks for the racer who broke down or wrecked before the main event. Frank and I talked recently about some track improvements, including repaving the track and possibly contour/compound banking. He wanted to leave it in better shape than when he built it. I would say he did.”

Late last season, stories were flying that this would be the last year of racing at Grundy under the guidance of Welch.

During Grundy’s final stock-car program of the season, Welch, like so many Friday nights through the years, was seen on his golf cart, checking on things as the day progressed. After a long night, Welch was at his usual seat at the front-gate ticket office, paying off prize money to his stock-car racers.

“I’m probably done,” said a weary-looking Welch at the end of the night. “It’s no fun anymore.”

In failing health, Welch turned his promotion duties over to his son, Jim, who had served as a Grundy track official and later track announcer. Jim would relate that pretty much till his last hour; his dad was worrying about this or that regarding the speedway, instructing Jim on how to handle it.

Frank Welch’s dedication to the Grundy County Speedway has made it a successful speed venue for more than 35 years. Rest in peace, Frank.

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