

From Dollar Menus To Racing Scholarships

HARRISBURG, N.C.

Random racing thoughts ... It was painful to watch Stanton Barrett and Milka Duno struggle to stay out of the way at the Kansas IndyCar Series event while racers like Tracy Hines and Dave Darland are never given an opportunity.

■ Lowe's Motor Speedway will have a 99-cent value menu at five of its concession stands during the May NASCAR races. While this is an outstanding idea, wouldn't it have been a lot simpler for concession workers if it were a dollar menu? Dealing with all those pennies will be a nightmare.

■ David Reutimann's performance in Michael Waltrip Racing's No. 00 Toyota has been a pleasant surprise. But perhaps an even bigger surprise is the fact that Reutimann celebrated his 39th birthday in March. With so much emphasis on young drivers, it's refreshing to see a veteran racer enjoying the fruits of his labor.

HIGH GROOVE



KEITH WALTZ

■ A recent press release from the World of Outlaws office incorrectly identified the 55-lap event scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 8 at I-55 Raceway as "the longest, most grueling World of Outlaws Sprint Car Series A main in history." Actually, it isn't even close. On Sept. 2, 1978, Steve Kinser won the 150-lap Midwest

National Championship at Indiana's Paragon Speedway. It was the sixth victory of Kinser's WoO career.

■ This one is from the wishful-thinking column. There should be a racing scholarship, funded by donations from corporations and individuals, that buys a ride for a USAC driver to compete in the Indianapolis 500. The scholarship could go to the driver who scored the most combined points in the midjet, sprint car and Silver Crown divisions the previous season.

■ Tony Stewart has always performed much better during the second half of the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series season. If that pattern holds true this year, he could really stink up the show in September, October and November.

■ Carl Edwards deserves a tip of the hat for the many times he removes his sunglasses during television interviews. Several drivers have "deals" that reward them when they are photographed or interviewed wearing a company's sunglasses. Thankfully, it appears Edwards is not among them.

■ Am I the only one bothered by the fact that Rockingham (N.C.) Speedway doesn't have SAFER barriers? Installing the barriers would be a huge expense for track owner Andy Hillenburg, but running ARCA RE/MAX Series and UARA late-model races without the extra protection is certainly a gamble.

■ The Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach is one of this country's major motorsports events, and it's a good thing because it's a lousy race. Actually, it's more like a parade, which makes it only the second best parade held each year in the Golden State. The best one is on New Year's Day.

■ A major part of the build-up to the Indianapolis 500 used to be a series of announcements during March and April, unveiling the innovative machines that would make their debut at the Brickyard in May. I miss that.

■ Marty Robbins is the only member of the Country Music Hall of Fame to compete in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series. The man who brought us such legendary hits as "El Paso" and "A White Sport Coat" competed in 35 races between 1966 and 1982.

■ Of the 12 Sprint Cup Series point races at Speedway Motorsports, Inc. tracks, only two were actually granted to SMI Chairman Bruton Smith by NASCAR. Smith and then partner Curtis Turner received two races for the 1960 season at Lowe's Motor Speedway. The other 10 races have been acquired through mergers and acquisitions.

■ Any NASCAR Sprint Cup driver selling fewer T-shirts than Digger needs to re-evaluate his marketing and public relations program.

IRL Makes The Right Moves Regarding 2009 Rules

BROWNSBURG, IND.

It's May and time for the greatest racing event in the world — the Indy 500. This year is the 100th anniversary of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The Speedway staff, under the guidance of Joie Chitwood III, has pulled out all the stops to celebrate the 100 years and it started in February with a Black Tie gala at the Indiana Convention Center.

I believe the IRL is really doing well considering the poor economy. As a person that does business in most professional forms of racing, I get to see and touch each series and hear the dialogue. The IRL is the least affected by the current economy. Although they have huge challenges ahead, they're the only major series that seems to be moving forward, picking up new sponsors and teams. A 22- to 24-car field in IndyCar is an ideal number and hopefully they will maintain that. The only exception, of course, is the Indy 500, which will always start 33. I think this year we will even see some bumping.

THE TECHNICAL SIDE



CHRIS PAULSEN

The chassis and engine package is the same for 2009 and we probably won't see a change until 2011 in those departments. Let's keep our fingers crossed that there will be multiple chassis and engine builders by then. We all remember the glory days when the rulebook didn't state a chassis manufacturer's name or a

specific engine name; it just stated the rules with dimensions. Those were the days.

There are a few subtle changes to the rulebook this year. Primarily there are four items that have been addressed — suspension, radiators/oil coolers, exhaust and clutches. I spoke with Kevin Blanch, the "Tech Sheriff" of the IRL, about what was implemented in the 2009 rules as far as the car is concerned. Blanch said, "We've made changes this year to save teams money and stop a lot of development. There is now a freeze on the wheelbase of 122 inches. We've narrowed down the choices of radiators and oil coolers to basically two core styles from Marston and two suppliers, C&R and Dallara."

The freeze on wheelbase means that at various tracks, teams don't have to have several wheelbase combinations to tailor the balance of the car. At a track like Indy, the wheelbase is shortened to help with aero drag. This is done by sweeping the front suspension back. It reduces drag by the airflow to the underwing, but also makes the car "looser" to drive, thus a little scary for the driver. The 122-inch number is a very stable package and will work anywhere.

Blanch also noted that a muffler specification is in place and available from S&S. "This muffler doesn't necessarily change the loudness, it changes the tone of the exhaust," Blanch said. "Headers are available from two suppliers, Howerton Products and S&S."

Blanch went on to say, "A new rule this year is the option of running a carbon clutch. The carbon clutch is more forgiving on the launch, such as a car leaving the pit, and won't snap axles as easily as the normal clutch. The other advantage to the carbon is that one clutch will last all year long. Although it's more expensive to buy, it proves to be cost effective over the course of the season."

With the exception of the mufflers, the race fan won't notice any of these changes. Although I'm not a "spec" race-car fan, I must say these moves are very good in today's economic climate. It won't alter the race and will definitely save the teams money. The good thing about these changes is it still gives the teams some flexibility.

With the exception of the AP clutch, there are options on the other components. The teams can buy suspension from several suppliers or build it themselves as long as it fits the rules. There are two Marston core designs specified. The teams can buy complete coolers from C&R or Dallara or purchase the cores from C&R and tank them themselves to save a little money.

Well done by the IRL. It should be a great Indy 500.

Mourning Pontiac's Loss With 'Little GTO' Memories

SAYRE, PA.

It's a sad day when General Motors decides it's time to shutter the doors at Pontiac.

It's especially distressing when one checks Pontiac's history, as the first Pontiac car debuted in 1926. Prior to the automobile, the division dates back to 1893, when Edward Murphy operated the Pontiac (Horse Drawn) Buggy Company in Pontiac, Mich.

On the racing front, it's just as troubling. Be it Jim Wangers and his Royal Pontiac 421 Super Duty drag cars to Fireball Roberts wheeling Smokey Yunick's black and gold Pontiacs into victory lane, Pontiac was a winner.

In present day professional NHRA competition, Pontiac is a top-notch Pro Stock entry with several factory cars. Over in the Grand Am Rolex Series, Pontiacs run in several divisions and even power many of the top Daytona Prototype cars. In sportsman drag racing, there are Pontiacs everywhere.

RACING BRIEFCASE



GREG ZYLA

A tip of the hat goes to the late John DeLorean, who had enough forethought to inspire the Pontiac GTO back in 1964, which set the Detroit muscle-car industry in motion. Even the singing group Ronnie And The Daytonas made the charts with the hit single "Little GTO" to validate GTO's popularity.

However, this is reality time, when decisions made by GM (along with Chrysler and Ford) will invariably impact racing and affect what we've come to expect as normal from our car manufacturers the last 35 years. I still feel there will be factory cars somewhere in racing, but I don't expect U.S. car companies to keep spending like they used to on racing programs.

Regardless of the economic principal of "win on Sunday, sell on Monday," thanks to this recession, the old adage just may not compute any longer. Heck, even Audi cut back its ALMS schedule, so things aren't much better anywhere else either.

The worst-case scenario could be a complete domestic manufacturer pullout of major racing support until things get better. Rumors already have Dodge considering dropping out, regardless of what proposed Chrysler savior Fiat does to help. Ford is in better shape, but being knocked to one knee instead of "on your back" isn't something to take lightly either. I truly hope Ford does emerge without taking any government money, which continues to be the current chatter.

I feel GM will file a bankruptcy restructuring, especially since GM bond holders are now being asked to accept stock in trade. Professional money people say the "debt for equity" deal will fail and not meet the 90-percent bond to stock conversion needed for GM's plan to succeed.

Regardless of how GM restructures, you can take to the bank that it will restructure and do whatever it needs to stay alive. Hopefully, even with the bad news of the demise of Pontiac and 21,000 more losing their jobs, it will result in a leaner, tougher company when GM turns around.

Intuitive readers will see I said "when GM turns around" instead of "if GM turns around," because frankly, if GM dissolves it will be one very depressing day for America and a precursor of worse things to come.

I'm not a big fan of government intervention, but in the case of GM, I have to be on the side of those who want to see GM survive. Remember, too, that Chrysler got a government "loan guarantee act" when it was close to bankruptcy back in 1979-80, and they survived.

I think Buick's days may be numbered, and you can throw in Saturn, too. I expect the "new" GM will offer up Chevy/Cadillac much the same as Toyota, Honda and Nissan all survive with one nameplate and use its upscale Lexus, Acura and Infiniti nomenclature, respectively, for the higher demographic consumer sale.

Still, when I hear "Little GTO" on the oldies station, I'll turn the volume up and reminisce about Pontiac's great heritage, with gratitude to all those who carved the brand's reputation.