

The 24 Hours of Daytona is always a sweet race

by Bill Center

For years, readers who are NASCAR fans have thought my coverage slanted toward open-wheel racing ... and open-wheel aficionados have complained that I am a NASCAR honk.

Yes, my favorite race as a youth was the Indianapolis 500, although over the years that switched to the Daytona 500.

But if the truth be known, my favorite form of racing was, and is, sport cars.

Four decades ago, I became fascinated with the 24 Hours of Le Mans - rising early in the morning to watch the special ABC "Wide World of Sports" coverage and see where the Ford GT-40 teams led by A.J. Foyt and Mario Andretti would finish.

Victory at Le Mans was sweet. But it wasn't just Le Mans. There was Can-Am and Trans-Am, the Times Grand Prix at Riverside and of course, the 24 Hours of Daytona.

Which brings us to this weekend and the 46th running of the Rolex 24 Hours of Daytona, which doubles as the official kickoff to the 2008 motorsports season.

I love this race. And thanks to Fox and The Speed Channel, I can now watch up to 17 hours of it. Plus, as a Californian, I have a rooting interest.

The reigning champions of the NASCAR-backed Rolex Grand-Am Series go into the 24 Hours of Daytona featuring four California drivers: regulars Alex Gurney and Jon Fogarty, supplemented by NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson and open-wheel veteran Jimmy Vasser.

Given the fact that their car is powered by a Pontiac engine and uses a Riley chassis, this is also one of the few purely all-American Daytona Prototypes in the 67-car field.

"My dad would be happy," said Alex, whose father, Dan, won the first sports car race at Daytona International Speedway back in 1962 - just one of the victories (from stock cars to Formula One to IndyCars to sports cars) that makes him a racing icon.

As the Daytona 500 is to NASCAR, the 24 Hours of Daytona is the crown jewel of its series, and an event that doubles as the series season opener.

For drivers and teams, this can be a candle that burns at both ends.

As the quartet of Scott Pruett, Juan Pablo Montoya, Dario Franchitti and Salvador Duran was giving car owner Chip Ganassi a second straight 24 Hours of Daytona victory last season (the car led by Indy Racing League standouts Dan Wheldon and Scott Dixon won in 2006), the Gurney-Fogarty car dropped out and was scored 22nd among the featured prototypes.

"While this is just one race and is scored like any of the other 14 races of our season, it took us all year to regain the ground we lost at Daytona," said Gurney. "We learned last year, you have to finish this race."

Much easier said than done.

Just to keep a high-performance race car running for 24 Hours is a challenge.

Then there's the traffic of 67 cars - with drivers of all experience levels, not to mention a 50-mph speed spread across the field - running around the 12-turn, 3.56-mile DIS road course that includes the high-banked third and four turns of the NASCAR oval.

Did we mention nonstop, around-the-clock?

"It's an extremely demanding race," Johnson said last year. "In NASCAR, we know and can easily identify all the other drivers on the track and every car is running at pretty much the same speed."

"In the 24 hours, as you approach to pass a car, you have to identify the car, guess who might be driving it at the time ... it could be a top-series regular or an amateur ... and calculate the overtaking speed differential."

Which, of course, adds to the fascination of watching the 24 Hours of Daytona.

Sadly, not all the great sports cars racing in America these days will be at Daytona this weekend. As in open-wheel racing, we have rival tours, the Grand-Am and the American Le Mans Series, which launches its season with the 12 Hours of Sebring on March 15.

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