

Open-wheel merger may open door to change

by Bill Center

Open-wheel racing in America finally became a unified sport Wednesday, although the official announcement of the Indy Racing League-Champ Car World Series merger left many unanswered questions.

The new IndyCar Series, however, will be an expansion of the current Indy Racing League with the Champ Car World Series disappearing as an entity - although not until after the Long Beach Grand Prix.

Long Beach will be run on April 18-20, the same weekend as the IRL's race in Montegi, Japan.

Because neither race could be moved and both are important to the new IndyCar entity, Long Beach will be run as Champ Car's final race but with drivers also earning IRL points.

IRL founder Tony George Wednesday said the IndyCar Series could run up to 19 events this year, including Long Beach plus the events in Edmonton, Canada, and Surfers Paradise, Australia.

George said future IndyCar Series schedules would likely number 20 races with half the events on ovals and half on a blend of street and road courses.

The current 16-race IRL schedule has 11 ovals, three road courses and two temporary street circuits. Long Beach, Edmonton and Australia are all street circuits.

The remaining 11 races on the 2007 Champ Car schedule - including the Mexico City finale, three European events, Canadian races in Montreal and Toronto, and the May 18 event scheduled for Mazda-Laguna Seca Raceway in Monterey, Calif. - are canceled.

George said some of those venues would be considered for future IndyCar Series events. Some American events, including Laguna Seca, could continue with sports cars being the premier attraction.

During a news conference Wednesday at Homestead-Miami Speedway, the site of the March 29 IndyCar opener, George hinted that beginning in 2009 the series could number more than 20 races, although he admitted many car owners are resistant to more than that.

"Next year looks to be the time to look at other events," said George. "But our offseason is way too long.

"We need to build the value in our sport through exposure. There are international opportunities out there. We need to stabilize open-wheel racing and build a schedule that makes sense."

Which sounds like a call for schedule expansion.

Both George and Champ Car World Series co-founder Kevin Kalkhoven said the merged IndyCar Series is not a "magic bullet" to all the problems facing open-wheel racing, which during the IRL-Champ Car war lost considerable ground to NASCAR in fan and sponsorship support.

The first hurdle facing the merged series is getting enough Dallara chassis and Honda V-8 engines to field all the teams - up to 28 cars - for the season opener.

That won't be a problem at Long Beach as the Champ Car teams will be using the Cosworth-powered DP-01 (Panoz) chassis for the last time.

George Wednesday hinted some IRL regulars could fly home from Japan in time to compete at Long Beach some 36 hours later.

"I think we're going to have a great event," said Long Beach Grand Prix President Jim Michaelian.

"As the last Champ Car race, which is an extension of the CART series, there will be a lot of nostalgia. We'll also be crowning the last Champ Car champion."

George said the merger calls for the IndyCar Series to include the histories of all IndyCar-style racing, including CART and Champ Car.

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