

Dueling races on Memorial Day weekend show that Indy 500 and NASCAR are on different tracks

by Bill Center

INDIANAPOLIS - Standing at the corner of 16th and Georgetown Road Wednesday, the man holding the "I Have Tickets" sign has seen better Mays.

"I used to be able to sell tickets for 50 to 100 percent more than I paid for them," said the man, who gave his name only as Jim. "And I used to pay more than face value for the really good seats.

"Now, I'm selling them for much closer to face value. And I'm not buying seats in some sections right now. It will be different for NASCAR."

Once, and not that long ago, the Indianapolis 500 dominated the annual motorsports calendar. Indy wasn't just about the Memorial Day weekend, it was about the whole month of May, if not the year.

The winners of the Indy 500 became legends - Foyt, Unser, Mears.

Then NASCAR took off in the early 1990s just as the open-wheel series supporting the Indy 500 split into rival factions.

Stock car racing quickly eclipsed open-wheel racing. But the Indy 500 hung on as racing's premier event.

But now NASCAR's Coca-Cola 600 is threatening to top the Indy 500 as not only the top racing event on the traditional Memorial Day racing weekend, but as the top annual event in Indianapolis.

Yes, Sunday's 91st Indianapolis 500 will draw a near-capacity crowd of around 300,000 to the famed Indianapolis Motor Speedway. That crowd will surely top the crowd expected for the Nextel Cup's race the same day at Lowe's Motor Speedway just outside Charlotte, N.C., if for no other reason than the Indy facility is much larger.

But that's not the figure NASCAR's leaders and sponsors are following.

The television ratings will tell the real story.

Last year, according to Nielsen Media Research, both races drew a 5.1 rating - the Indy 500 on ABC and the Coca-Cola 600 on Fox.

Even those ratings are inconclusive, because the races are not in direct competition. The Indy 500 starts shortly after 7 a.m., and the longest race of the NASCAR season starts at 11 a.m. and races well into prime time.

And NASCAR argues that the Coca-Cola 600 is not even its premier attraction. That would be the Daytona 500 - which NASCAR has labeled "The Great American Race" - in February, which draws higher ratings but is up against no competition.

But many in motorsports view Sunday as the last bastion for open-wheel racing in America.

Lose Memorial Day - or Indianapolis - and the battle is lost to NASCAR, if it hasn't already been lost.

Once, NASCAR wouldn't even challenge the Indy 500. It didn't run its series' longest race on the same day as the Indy 500.

Fifteen years ago, the Indy 500 drew a 10.9 rating. The Coca-Cola 600 wasn't even on network television.

But two things happened.

The Indy 500 still drew a 9.4 television rating in 1995, the year before IMS President Tony George formed the Indy Racing League and triggered the now 12-year-old battle for control of open-wheel racing in America. The following year, the ratings slipped to 7.1 for the IRL-only Indy 500. They plunged to 5.0 in 1997.

Meantime, lights were installed at then-Charlotte Motor Speedway and the Coca-Cola 600 was moved to the evening. In 2001, Fox began telecasting the Coca-Cola 600.

In the first year of the races' head-to-head battle, the Indy 500 had a 5.8-to-5.3 edge in ratings. But in 2002, NASCAR scored a coup when it won a ratings edge on the Indy 500. NASCAR held the edge for three years.

Then the arrival of Danica Patrick in 2005 pushed Indy back into the lead. Last year, the races drew even - not necessarily good news for Indy 500 backers since 2006 produced perhaps the greatest finish in the history of the event.

Although officials of the Indy Racing League are concerned, they will not talk on the record about their plight. But people around Speedway, Ind., will.

Many hotels now charge more for rooms on the weekend of NASCAR's Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway than they do for the Indy 500.

"There's a lot more people in town for the NASCAR race," said Jim Hacking, looking over a huge vacant field just west of the Speedway that becomes one of Indiana's larger towns come race weekends.

Once there were two major events in Indianapolis annually - pole-day qualifying for the Indy 500 and the Indy 500. Pole day now draws far less than a third of the 150,000 who turned out when the Indy 500 ruled.

But George has supplemented the Indy 500 with the Nextel Cup race and a Formula One race.

The Brickyard 400 now rivals the Indy 500 in terms of fan popularity inside Indianapolis.

"There is one difference," said a waitress at the Outback Steakhouse just north of the track. "We're still more crowded for the Indy 500 than the NASCAR race. And Indy 500 fans seem to tip better."

An extra 10 percent on a dinner tab, however, doesn't figure to carry the day.