Roaring into Indy; MotoGP racing will provide thrills at the Brickyard in '08

by Bill Center

When Nicky Hayden started hearing the rumors last season he dismissed them as "too good to be true."

The international MotoGP tour racing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway?

MotoGP is the motorcycle equivalent of Formula One, except that MotoGP regularly has more passes in a lap than Formula One sees in a season. To this observer, MotoGP and the hybrid American Superbike series are the most exciting forms of racing. And I'm far from alone.

"But the Indianapolis Motor Speedway has meant cars," offered Kentucky native Hayden. "No way did I think we'd be racing at Indianapolis."

Way.

Less than four days after telling Formula One czar Bernie Ecclestone that IMS wasn't interested in hosting a ninth straight United States Grand Prix in 2008, Tony George announced MotoGP was coming to Indy.

You don't suppose George had this all mapped out before slamming the door on Ecclestone?

Of course, motorcycles have a history at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The track's first two races in 1909 and 1910 featured motorcycles. Four-wheel novelties didn't arrive at Indy until 1911.

"I think this is going to be big," said Hayden, who last year won his first MotoGP World Championship just two seasons after Honda promoted the factory rider from the Superbike series.

"It is huge, so big for our series. A lot of our riders and their crews think they have been to America. But wait until they see the Speedway and the crowd."

IMS officials believe the MotoGP will draw a larger crowd than the 125,000 that turned out for last month's last Formula One race.

The tour is actually in the United States this week for Sunday's annual race at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca near Monterey, Calif. More than 75,000 fans are expected to pack the facility.

Next year there will be two American races on a 20-event schedule, the mid-summer stop at Laguna Seca and the Sept. 14 debut at Indianapolis.

"Indianapolis is going to do much to change the perception and acceptance of our sport in America," said Hayden. "We wouldn't be at Indy unless we meant something in the world of racing.

"And to be invited to run at Indy shows America now knows who we are. Everyone in the world, whether they be on two wheels or four, knows about Indy and what it is to racing. And we're now a part of that legacy."

CBS this summer is televising four MotoGP races - the tour's first appearances on network television in the U.S. But MotoGP has long been a staple of the Speed Channel.

If you are flipping the dial and trip upon a MotoGP race, watch a few laps. You will be hooked if you are a racing fan.

I quote no less an authority than Mario Andretti: "In my opinion, MotoGP is the most exciting form of motorsports."

Or Sam Hornish Jr.: "I have a tremendous amount of respect for the riders. ... It's unbelievable what these guys can do, taking corners and laying the bikes down. It takes a lot of skill and courage."

At top speed, MotoGP bikes reach 215 mph. But the MotoGP is contested on tight-turned road courses. IMS will rebuild the Formula One track with the MotoGP riders racing in the same direction as the Indy 500 through the first turn.

"I'm sure this is going to be a monster event," said John Hopkins, a MotoGP tour rider who earlier this season secured his first top-three finish.

The new infield course for the Red Bull Indianapolis GP will have 16 turns with a 2.601-mile distance.

There are five Americans - Hayden, Hopkins, 2000 world champion Kenny Roberts Jr., Colin Edwards and Kurtis Roberts - on the MotoGP tour.

"I think this could open doors for more American involvement from riders as well as sponsors," said Hayden.

"We're now at two great American venues, maybe the most scenic course (Laguna Seca) and to be sure the most historic."

It was suggested to Hayden that perhaps all MotoGP was lacking was to be part of Bikes Week at Daytona Motor Speedway.

"I'm not sure the Europeans are quite ready for that," he said.

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