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The Versatile Race Car Driver

Nine IZOD IndyCar Series drivers made the long trip to Australia last week to compete in the Gold Coast 600 round of the V8 Supercars championship. Staged on a street course in the resort town of Surfers Paradise, the event included Indy cars through 2008, and it was one of the most popular races in the series despite the long journey there.

IndyCar maintains a presence during the Gold Coast weekend in the battle for what has become known as the Dan Wheldon Trophy. International drivers from IndyCar and other racing series from around the world are teamed with the V8 Supercars regulars. Dragon Racing's Sebastien Bourdais won the Wheldon Trophy for the second consecutive year, teaming with Jamie Whincup to win one of the two rounds and taking second place in the other.

The ability to drive an interesting alternative race car like a V8 Supercar is part of the draw for IndyCar drivers who compete at Surfers Paradise. Other than the very occasional sports car outing in the GRAND-AM Rolex Series or the American Le Mans Series, most Indy car drivers these days are specialists who focus on one unique – albeit very diverse – form of competition.

With its combination of street circuits, road courses, short ovals and speedways, the IZOD IndyCar Series schedule provides much more variety than most forms of racing. But it's a far cry from the crazy Indy car schedules of 40 years ago, when the USAC championship featured paved and dirt ovals, road courses and even the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb!

Plus, drivers weren't restricted to just Indy cars. Even top shoes like Mario Andretti ventured outside their comfort zone to pad their paychecks.

In 1968, Andretti competed in Indy cars, NASCAR stock cars, Formula One and Can-Am sports cars. He drove 37 races in five categories, in 12 different race cars.

“I’d go from Argentina to Du Quoin, Illinois, from Monza to the Hoosier Hundred! You know, from Formula One to a dirt car,” Mario marveled to me one day a few years ago. “How opposite is that? And I used to love that opportunity. I wouldn’t trade that part of my career for anything, quite honestly.

“But there are a lot of reasons why that doesn’t happen anymore. As the sport became more commercialized and more sophisticated, the owners became a lot more proprietary. They pay some pretty big contracts to some of the drivers, and they don’t want them to get hurt doing anything else.

“The bottom line is that I would be inspired by Foyt, by Dan Gurney, by people like that who would move around and do other things and I loved my driving so much that I just wanted to be driving. I didn’t look forward to a weekend off.”

Andretti vividly remembers some of the crazier aspects of trying to cram two (or more) races into a single weekend.

“I won the 1967 Sebring 12 Hours with Bruce McLaren, and up to that point, we were flying back and forth to Atlanta to qualify for the 500-mile stock car race,” he said. “The race ended at Sebring at 11 o’clock at night, and we were knackered. Got to Atlanta around 1:30 with a 500-mile race the next day. Nobody wrote about that. One thing for sure is that I had to stay at a hotel until Wednesday with my wife feeding me water, trying to get hydrated again.

“But we used to do that as a matter of course. I used to do a doubleheader with Formula 5000 and Can-Am at Watkins Glen. You had to shift gears so much in your own mind as far as the job at hand, and sometimes it almost isn’t fun like it should be. You feel really drained. You want to do as well as you would have in both races as if you didn’t have anything else going. That’s what made it really tough. It’s not an easy undertaking, believe me.”

Andretti won three of his four Indy car championships between 1965 and ’69, when the USAC Championship Trail still included dirt tracks but also started adding road courses like Indianapolis Raceway Park (where Mario scored his first Indy car race win) and Sonoma.

“That was awesome!” he said with a grin. “I look back very fondly on those championship years when USAC started going road racing and they still had the dirt tracks. The Hoosier Hundred, Du Quoin, Springfield, Sedalia, Sacramento ... I used to love that part of it. In ’69, I won on the dirt, on pavement, on a road course, and I even won at Pikes Peak on the way to my National Championship.

“Those were glory days to a certain degree because that will never be duplicated, to have that many really different cars to drive for the same championship. I used to thrive on that, personally.”

Then there was the period in the 1970s when Mario concentrated on F1, culminating in his 1978 World Championship. He continued to make occasional Indy car appearances, especially at Indianapolis.

“Bad weather was nerve-wracking more than anything else,” Andretti said. “That killed me several times at Indy. If I needed to qualify the first day, sure enough, the first weekend it would rain both days. That’s what happened both times when I had to have the car qualified for me (1978 and ’81).

“Another time, in 1976, I was the fastest qualifier, but I started 19th because I had to qualify on the third day. I remember being at Monaco for the first weekend, and I was really anxious to hear who was on pole. I remember it was Johnny Rutherford, and I looked at the time he ran, which I think was 187. I’d been running 189, so I figured I could go faster than that. So I came back and set quickest time, but I started 19th.”

Andretti admitted he occasionally woke up and forgot where he was.

“You had to be able to just switch everything off,” he said. “I remember I woke up one morning, and it was raining. I thought: ‘Oh, great! I can sleep.’ If you wake up and it’s raining in Indianapolis, you can sleep another hour. Then all of a sudden I figured: ‘Shoot! I’m in Belgium!’”

Andretti has no doubt the very best modern drivers could adapt to a wide variety of race cars – if they were allowed.

“They would be right there,” Mario said. “I’m certain that the top drivers of yesteryear would be at the front today and vice-versa. The top drivers of any era would have dealt with what is thrown at them and would be at the front. Historically, you always had that.

“There is no reason Juan Fangio or Stirling Moss wouldn’t have adapted to paddle shifting and all that, and you put a guy like Michael Schumacher in a Mercedes 196 or a Ferrari of that era, and he would deal with that. I’m a great believer in that.

“There was never any great magic, and there isn’t any magic today. The human element adapts to whatever is thrown at them, and special talent will always rise to the top.”

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