

Baltimore prepares for Grand Prix auto race

By Liz Clarke, *The Washington Post*, August 3, 2010

Few sporting events match the glamour of the Monaco Grand Prix, with exotic Formula One cars whipping along Monte Carlo's glittering harbor, past the legendary casino and around the famed hairpin turn as jet-setters look on from multimillion dollar yachts and seaside grandstands.

For decades, American racing promoters have tried replicating European street-circuit races with mixed results. Only one event has demonstrated genuine staying power - the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach, now in its 36th year and regarded as the gold standard among U.S.-based street races.

This time next year, Baltimore puts its allure to the test as host of the inaugural Grand Prix of Baltimore, among the latest additions to the IRL's 2011 calendar. The event will bring open-wheel racecars piloted by stars such as Danica Patrick and Helio Castroneves full tilt down West Pratt Street at nearly 180 miles per hour. They'll snake through the Inner Harbor, screech into the pits for fuel and tires across from Camden Yards and make a tight U-turn near the Ravens' stadium and repeat the circuit at a deafening pitch for nearly two hours.

City officials are banking the race will succeed where other municipalities have sputtered, signing a five-year deal (at a cost estimated at \$7.75 million) to stage an event that Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake has said "will change the way the world sees Baltimore" and councilman William H. Cole IV predicts "will do as much for Baltimore as the Preakness has in the last 100 years."

But if the experience of other U.S. cities is a guide, sustaining the buzz of Baltimore's Grand Prix will be a challenge. Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Houston and Las Vegas are among the cities that launched street-circuit races in recent decades amid great fanfare only to see them fall victim to political squabbles, bureaucratic red tape, waning financial support and resentment from local businesses and residents.

Nonetheless, Baltimore Racing Development, the group that has worked for two years to bring an IRL race to the city, is bullish about the event's prospects. Its Economic Impact Report projects the race will lure 100,000 visitors over a four-day span, pump \$70 million into the local economy, result in \$6 million in direct tax revenue and bring national exposure that's eclipsed only by the Olympics.

"An event like the IRL coming to Baltimore just helps build a higher profile platform as a sports destination," says Terry Hasseltine, director of Maryland's Office of Sports Marketing, citing the city's recent international soccer friendly and its bid to be named a host city if the United States lands the 2018 or 2022 World Cup. "We are now becoming a true international sports destination, where our name now resonates outside the geographical region. And the IRL helps with that identity."

The Indianapolis-based IRL is equally enthused about adding Baltimore to its portfolio - particularly after the 17-race series lost its only foothold in the mid-Atlantic when Richmond International Raceway bowed out after a nine-year stint hosting a race on its three-quarter-mile oval, citing a drop-off in attendance and less than compelling competition.

"We think this is a huge and improved upgrade, to take our product right into the greater Baltimore-D.C. area and really attract a lot of new fans," said Terry Angstadt, president of the IRL's commercial division.

The date of the race isn't set, though officials announced in June that it would be held Aug. 5-7, 2011. It may be moved to Labor Day weekend or another weekend in late summer, provided the date doesn't conflict with the Ravens' and Orioles' home schedules.

Similarly, the precise route and distance of the course - unveiled at 2.4 miles - may be tweaked further, insiders say, although signature landmarks such as Baltimore's Inner Harbor will anchor the race.

But successful street races take more than a telegenic backdrop.

"Having a street race is very tough, particularly dealing with the many social and political issues," says veteran motor sports journalist Gordon Kirby. "In any city there's going to be opposition to having a street race. You've got to prove that it makes good economic sense for the city."

Nonetheless, Long Beach has made it work since the late 1970s, thanks to a visionary, energetic promoter who got the event launched; the serendipity of a string of high-profile victors such as Mario Andretti and Al Unser Jr.; major renovation of formerly blighted areas along the circuit; a well-heeled title sponsor; and the cachet of the wildly popular celebrity pro-am companion race that has lured such stars as Patrick Dempsey, Keanu Reeves and Ashley Judd.

Baltimore lawyer Jay Davidson, chief executive of the Baltimore Racing Development Group, has studied that business model closely and hopes to achieve something similar.

Davidson says the group is close to landing a title sponsor for the race. He's heartened by what he says has been an enthusiastic response from Baltimore's business community, as well as nearby residents. And given the population density within driving distance, Davidson says he believes the race will draw far more than the 100,000 fans projected.

Kirby, who has built a career covering open-wheel racing, is rooting for Baltimore's long-term success, as well. "It can be a great thing," Kirby says. "And it can help spread the word that there's more to racing in America than NASCAR, by having successful urban events. But it's a very difficult thing to do. It's about having an event of high standards. If they don't, it won't work."