

The Fast and the Furious

by Mike Unger, *Baltimore Magazine*, August, 2011

Seconds before the green flag drops on the inaugural Baltimore Grand Prix, one of the most famous female athletes on earth will steer her bright-lime-and-black race car onto Pratt Street, then hit the gas.

As Danica Patrick crosses the start line, she'll flatten her size-seven right foot onto the pedal, propelling her No. 7 GoDaddy.com Indy car to speeds most of us only fantasize about while in bumper to bumper Beltway traffic.

Turning onto Light Street, Patrick's 3.5-liter, eight-cylinder engine will slingshot her down the straightaway at 180 miles per hour, the roar of her vehicle eclipsing an eardrum-rattling 105 decibels. Wondering how loud that is? Snuggle up to a jackhammer for a few minutes.

Once the cars streak toward Federal Hill, it won't take them long to get there. Indy cars can go from zero to 100 mph (and back to zero) in just five seconds. They produce 5,000 pounds of force at 220 mph, enough to allow the car to run upside down if that speed is maintained.

For spectators it's a visceral, exhilarating cocktail of speed and sound that rumbles through the veins.

With the eyes of tens of thousands of fans lining the course—and millions more watching live on national and international TV—Patrick and her competitors will traverse the Inner Harbor's maze of streets unimpeded by clueless tourists in minivans, wayward pedestrians, and, perhaps, most miraculously, potholes.

But the road from concept to reality hasn't always been smooth for the Baltimore Grand Prix, the Labor Day Weekend motor sports festival—highlighted by an IndyCar Series race—that promoters claim could pump as much as \$70 million into the region.

Establishing an event that costs millions to produce and relies heavily on municipal cooperation would be dicey under any circumstances. Doing so in the midst of a still sputtering economy, when that event is a niche car race and that city is Baltimore could be described as . . . well, let's let the man driving the effort speak for himself.

"Frankly, I thought it was kind of crazy to bring a street race to Baltimore," says Jay Davidson, CEO of Baltimore Racing Development (BRD), the company staging the Grand Prix. "It's a motorsports event, it seems kind of radical to be in the city. But the more I saw how INDYCAR was interested in Baltimore, the more interested I got. I think when people see it, nine out of 10 will like it."

But in the months leading up to the race, Grand Prix-related road repaving and curb reconfiguration on major thoroughfares including Conway and Pratt Streets began seriously irritating many white-knuckled commuters snarled in downtown traffic. As temperatures rose and speeds slowed, people began wondering (and grumbling): Will the payoff be worth the price?

"Not to me," Locust Point resident Stuart Satosky said as he took respite at Nick's in Cross Street Market on a June day. "Trying to get across town is a real nightmare. It's hard for me to imagine that all the inconveniences will be worth it. I'm a taxpayer. How am I going to reap the benefits of this supposed windfall?"

As Davidson and other BRD investors have learned from INDYCAR drivers, there's seldom reward without risk. The group and two intrepid politicians—Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and City Councilman William H. Cole IV—are convinced that despite short-term hassles the Grand Prix can be a long-term winner by making Baltimore a preeminent Labor Day destination, whether you're a gearhead or not.

They've laid their cars—and quite a bit of cash (upwards of \$10 million)—on the table. At this point, just one thing is clear: Like the seemingly far-off blur of a race car, the Grand Prix will be here—and gone—before we know it. Only time will tell if we'll be glad it came.