

## **Baltimore Grand Prix fans flood city for practice runs**

by Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 2, 2011

Some pressed against chain-link fences, straining for a better view of the hurtling cars. Others mingled in white tents, struggling to be heard over thundering engines. And an elderly woman perched on the edge of her car, craning for a better view of the unfamiliar spectacle.

After years of planning, months of street-clogging roadwork and days of elaborate construction, the inaugural Baltimore Grand Prix roared into reality Friday.

Gleaming low-slung cars ripped around the two-mile track near the Inner Harbor, while racing celebrities scrawled autographs and posed for photos with fans in the Baltimore Convention Center, which was transformed into a paddock area.

"Did you imagine this would look like this?" said Councilman William H. Cole IV, a longtime champion of the race, as he motioned to the massive trucks and dozens of race cars that filled the convention center. "There's a big sense of relief right now. It hasn't been an easy journey."

Race organizers grappled with financial limitations, a monumental construction project, and, most recently, a pair of lawsuits from early backers as they set up the three-day racing festival. A final hurdle remained before the first cars sped around the track in Friday's practice laps — construction work along the course triggered a five-and-a-half-hour delay.

But fans who navigated the labyrinth of metal fences ringing the course said the thrill of seeing a race in downtown Baltimore made the hassle worthwhile.

"Every race has its teething, and that's what we're going through here," said Dave Ryder, an Ellicott City engineer. Ryder, who has traveled around the country to see IndyCar races, chatted with race crew members near Light Street as he waited for the practice laps to begin.

The racing festival will continue throughout the weekend. The American Le Mans Series Race will be the highlight of Saturday's program, and the IZOD IndyCar race will cap the festivities Sunday.

Denise Sprenkle and Tim Huff left their York, Pa., home at 7 a.m. Friday to watch the practice. Despite the lengthy wait, they were thrilled to meet two of the sport's best-known drivers — Simona De Silvestre and Scott Dixon — and enjoyed watching the crowd from a grandstand along Pratt Street.

"It's a day off from work," said Sprenkle, a bartender.

But for hundreds of city police and firefighters, the first day of the Grand Prix weekend was anything but a day off. Firetrucks, hazardous material trucks and ambulances were parked around the perimeter of the course in case of an emergency.

Police officers, meanwhile, were warning spectators to stay off the roofs of tall buildings.

Police said they would "gain access to these buildings and remove spectators if needed to ensure safety" and were using surveillance cameras to "monitor the area for improper standing or sitting on unsecure rooftops."

Police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi declined to say where the rooftop spectators had been spotted. He could not say whether standing on a roof is a crime, but stressed, "It's a public safety issue."

The spokesman said the request does not apply to rooftop decks on private homes or elevated portions of private buildings designed for people to be on. He said police are concerned with commercial buildings with flat roofs that are "not equipped to handle people."

In the end, it appeared that the day's only snag was the construction delay, during which organizers closed and reinforced the metal fences surrounding the race course.

Baltimore Racing Development President Jay Davidson said that last weekend's hurricane and a late-running Orioles game on Thursday caused the delay, which would not significantly affect the racing schedule.

"Being a first-time event ... we're going to have bumps," he said. "We'll weather them as they come and roll with it."

Davidson said the threat of rain would not interfere with the weekend's races. "As long as we don't have a hurricane, we're OK. Both these series [IndyCar and American Le Mans] run in the rain."

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who has strongly advocated for the race since she came into office last year, toured the paddock area with aides Friday morning.

She has invested significant political capital in the race's success, which comes less than two weeks before the mayoral primary. Her challengers have criticized her for dedicating funds to the race despite the city's persistent budget shortfalls.

At an early morning news conference in Northwest Baltimore, Rawlings-Blake touted roadwork initiatives, saying that the city had repaired a record 235 miles of roadway in the past year. The city had allocated \$7.75 million to prepare downtown streets for the Grand Prix, but the project ultimately cost \$6.5 million, she said.

Meanwhile, some downtown business owners complained about the roadblocks and increased traffic from the race.

Amy Mutch, who owns Amy's Boutique in Federal Hill, said that the race course construction has hurt her business for about a year. Business in August, usually one of the strongest months for women's retail because of the arrival of new items for fall, was down at least 40 percent from 2010, she said.

Dr. Timothy Skane closed his office for three days because patients did not want to come to the Inner Harbor during the race. Skane, an endodontist, has two employees at his office near the intersection of South Charles and West Lombard streets.

"No one asked us when this was in the planning stages. Maybe they should have asked the small guys," said Skane, who estimated a 10 percent to 15 percent monthly loss because of the race. "Even with the blizzards, I was only closed one day."

But inside the paddock area, fans said they were delighted that city officials had brought a street race to Baltimore.

Ronald Randolph of Perry Hall, who toured the area with his twin 5-year-old grandsons, said, "It's another attraction for Baltimore. It's another attraction for our area and after a couple of years, we're going to be number one."

Young Derrick and Joshua Randolph were entranced by the sleek cars, scrambling underneath the chassis of one for a better view.

Randolph said Joshua — already well-versed in the intricacies of engines — had told him a few months ago that he wanted to be a NASCAR driver when he grew up.

"I don't see a whole lot of drivers of color," said Randolph, adding that he hoped his grandson would be a pioneer in the racing world.

Along the race course, residents of an apartment complex for seniors took in the spectacle. Dottie Donaldson, 86, a retired singer and ukulele player, said she could view the course from both sides of the Hanover Square apartment complex.

She ate a crab cake in a beer and food garden on Conway Street and called her sister in Kansas so she could hear the thundering race cars. "As long as no one gets hurt, I'm fine with it," she said of the race.

Nearby, Clarice Rayfield, 80, stood on the driver's seat of her car, craning for a better view of the course.

"This is fascinating," said Rayfield, also a resident of Hanover Square. "This is going to go on all weekend?"