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Baltimore Grand Prix surprises veterans and first-timers

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LAT PHOTOGRAPHIC

Fans filled the stands for Labor Day Weekend racing in Baltimore.

By: Eric Tegler on 9/07/2011

People in the packed grandstands around the two-mile, 12-turn temporary street circuit in Baltimore's Inner Harbor last weekend cheered as cars--and not even race cars--circulated the track *pre-race*. Such was the enthusiasm that people went bananas at the sight of pace cars and VIP cars as they came by on laps just prior to the IZOD IndyCar Series and American Le Mans Series races. In fact, from my on-site perspective, that enthusiasm pervaded the inaugural Baltimore Grand Prix, a race many critics opined would never work. Well, it did.

"The fans have packed the place and there's a great energy," KV Racing Team Lotus principal Jimmy Vasser said. "I think this has the makings to be one of the premier races on the [IndyCar] circuit. It's one of the best first-time events I've ever seen."

Dyson Mazda Racing team principal Rob Dyson called the fan support "staggering." Eventual IndyCar podium finisher Tony Kanaan said he needed 45 minutes to walk the Baltimore streets to dinner between signing autographs and posing for pictures. He compared the event's atmosphere with IndyCar's street race in his native Brazil.

Evidence of the event's popularity was seen during Friday practice for the IndyCar, ALMS, Indy Lights, Star Mazda and US F2000 series. Open-wheel and sports-car veterans claimed they had never seen a larger crowd for practice anywhere outside of the Indianapolis 500. Baltimore Grand Prix organizers put attendance at about 20,000 on Friday and the total weekend figure at 150,000. Like most announced attendance numbers, someone will probably find a way to dispute that figure, but no one will argue that Baltimoreans and fans from the mid-Atlantic region turned out in major numbers. One estimate put race-day attendance alone at 60,000.

"Baltimore shows up for a big event, and they did again," commented Jay Davidson, president and CEO of the Baltimore Grand Prix.

"From a team standpoint, every driver and owner I've talked to has been impressed," said John Doonan, Mazda's director of motorsports. "The kids in Star Mazda and F2000, they've never raced in front of crowds like this."

The city spent an estimated \$6.5 million on preparations; ticket sales/overall revenue numbers are not in yet, but the first-year event likely will be in the black. The turnout surprised local officials and motorsports analysts in a region known for adherence to stick-and-ball sports and one that weathered both an earthquake and a hurricane the week before the races.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, whose support for the event in a re-election year had been questioned repeatedly by local critics, said that Baltimore had grasped an opportunity to shine nationally and internationally. Polishing the shine was a crowd with diversity--economic, racial, geographic, hard-core race fans and first-timers--unequaled by all but a few racing events. So too was the civility.

"I think that's the measure," Baltimore Police commissioner Frederick Bealefield III observed. "You can talk to [fans] all over this venue and they're having a wonderful time. We've had a few issues, but they're generally minor."

Baltimore police reached out to race fans in person and through social media such as Twitter and Facebook to update them on bottlenecks and delays. Access to the venue and to the various paddocks inside the course were

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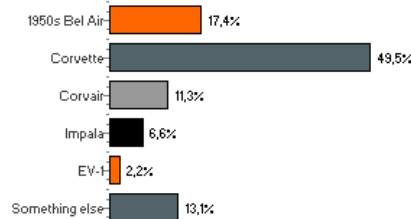
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overhead bridges resulted in long lines at times, and the threat of lightning on Saturday forced fans from the grandstands temporarily. Likewise, problems with temporary chicanes set up to slow race cars on the long Pratt Street straight were among a few issues hampering the drivers. Nevertheless, most registered their approval.

"I think the track was very nice for the first year," ALMS Jaguar RSR driver Bruno Junqueira offered. "Half of the track is very exciting, turns eight to 12 are very fast and smooth. The [Pratt Street] chicane is slow but it makes going over the [light-rail] lines no problem."

As with most street races, significant portions of the crowd were as focused on the attractions of the Fan Village, live music, food and beverages as they were on the race itself, but a gratifying number of newcomers paid real attention, and the grandstands remained full through the last laps of the weekend.

Race organizers and the city are already discussing next year's race and keeping the Labor Day weekend dates. As with many such events, year two will test both improvements in the operation of the race and the likelihood of first-time fans returning.

Regardless, Baltimore, IndyCar and the ALMS appear to have caught a little bit of lightning in a bottle. As one first-time fan said during the IndyCar podium ceremonies, "Baltimore doesn't know how lucky it is."

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