

NASCAR

The largest sanctioning body of motor sports in the United States is NASCAR, which oversees a number of racing series, the largest among them being the NEXTEL Cup, the Busch Series, and the Craftsman Truck Series. In all, NASCAR

(2007, <http://www.nascar.com/races/cup/2007/data/schedule.html>) sanctions more than fifteen races per year at more than one hundred different tracks in thirty-eight states, Mexico, and Canada. The article "NASCAR Evolution: Survival of the Fastest" (*Sports Illustrated*, February 19, 2007) notes that thirteen million NASCAR fans regularly fill twenty-two tracks in nineteen states and that licensed NASCAR products bring in \$2.1 billion per year. Once merely a regional diversion in the South, NASCAR has exploded into a nationwide phenomenon, rivaling baseball for the number-two spot behind football for the hearts and viewing hours of American sports fans, though attendance and television viewership both slumped in 2006 after a decade of impressive growth.

Stock car racing evolved out of bootlegging in the rural South. Alcohol runners would modify their cars to make them faster and more maneuverable. It was natural for these drivers to start racing their souped-up autos against one another.

NASCAR was founded in 1948 by William France Sr. (1909–1992) and Ed Otto (1908–1986) as a way to organize, standardize, and promote racing of unmodified, or stock, cars for entertainment. The first NASCAR Strictly Stock race took place at North Carolina's Charlotte Speedway in June 1949. Over time, modifications were allowed into the sport, and by the mid-1960s only the bodies of the cars looked stock; the innards were specially built for speed.

NASCAR's rapid growth began in the 1970s, when R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company began to sponsor racing as a way to promote its products after they had been banned from television advertising. The top series, formerly known as the Grand National Series, became the Winston Cup. At about this time, television networks began to occasionally cover stock car racing. Columbia Broadcasting System's broadcast of the 1979 Daytona 500 was the first time a stock car race had been aired nationwide from start to finish.

In 2004 Nextel assumed sponsorship of the series formerly known as the Winston Cup. The Nextel Cup remains the most prominent and lucrative NASCAR racing series. That year, NASCAR established a new ten-race playoff system called the Chase for the Cup, in which the

top ten drivers (according to NASCAR's point system) after twenty-six races compete for the series championship. In 2008 the Nextel Cup becomes the Sprint Cup Series to reflect the merger of Nextel Communications with the phone company Sprint.

Open-Wheel Cars

The two major open-wheel series, the Indy Racing League (IRL) and the Champ Car Series, have been struggling since 2000, as millions of fans have flocked to stock car racing. The reasons for this are complex, but it is reasonable to attribute the situation in part to the acrimonious relationship between the IRL and the Champ Car. Neither has done well financially in recent years, although the success of the rookie Danica Patrick (1982–) breathed some life into IRL in 2005.

Indy Racing League

The IRL is the top circuit for single-seat, open-wheel racecars specially designed for high-speed racing on oval tracks. The IRL was formed in 1994 by a group of drivers breaking away from the Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART; now known as the Champ Car Series), which had coordinated Indy car racing since breaking away from the U.S. Auto Club (USAC) in 1979. The IRL consists of two series: the IndyCar Series, which is virtually synonymous with the IRL, and the Indy Pro Series, which functions as a developmental series for drivers aspiring to join the IndyCar circuit.

Before 1979 the term *IndyCar* was generically used to refer to cars racing in USAC events. By the 1980s IndyCar was a term commonly used to refer to CART, which by that time was the preeminent sanctioning body for open-wheel racing in the United States. The name "IndyCar" became the subject of fierce legal battles in the 1990s. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway, home of the Indianapolis 500, trademarked the name in 1992 and licensed it to CART, which in turn renamed its championship the IndyCar World Series. Two years later, Tony George (1959–), the president of the speedway, started his own racing series called the Indy Racing League. In 1996 CART sued to protect its right to continue using the IndyCar name. The speedway countered with its own suit. The two groups eventually reached a settlement in which CART agreed to stop using the IndyCar name after the 1996 season, and the IRL could start using it after the 2002 season. The IRL's premier series has been called the IRL IndyCar Series since the beginning of the 2003 season. The 2007 IndyCar Series (<http://www.indycar.com/schedule/>) featured sixteen races from March to September.

Champ Car Series

The USAC was formed in 1956 to take over coordination of the national driving championship from the American Automobile Association, which had launched the championship in 1909. The USAC controlled the championship until 1979, when a group of car owners formed the Championship Auto Racing Teams that they hoped would give them power in negotiations with the USAC over media contracts, race purses, promotion, and other issues. The two entities immediately clashed, and CART soon separated from the USAC to establish its own racing series. Most of the top teams defected from the USAC, and CART quickly became the dominant open-wheel racing circuit. The USAC held its last National Championship in 1979, before reluctantly handing the reins over to CART.

The IRL's split from CART threw open-wheel racing into a tailspin from which it has not yet recovered entirely. The rivalry may have helped pave the way for NASCAR's rise, as both competing organizations struggle for control over the sport's available pot of money. In 2003 CART declared bankruptcy, and its assets were liquidated and put up for sale. A group of CART car owners bought the company and opened the 2004 season under the new name Champ Car Series. Since 2005 Champ Car ran both the Champ Car World Series and the Champ Car Atlantic Championship, which functions as a developmental circuit for drivers trying to get into Champ Car. The Champ Car series (2007, <http://www.champcarworldseries.com/Event/EventSchedule.asp?Year=2007>) included sixteen races in 2007, which took place between April and December.