



La Carrera Panamericana

IN THE SPOTLIGHT:

LA CARRERA PANAMERICANA ■ PAN DELTA SUPER RACING FESTIVAL ■ THE NEW CARIBBEAN DRAG RACING ASSOCIATION

La Carrera Panamericana

If contesting a stretch of road called the “Devil’s Backbone” gets your competitive juices flowing, then the La Carrera Panamericana (LCP) is the race and Mexico is the place. Similar to Italy’s 1000 Mille Miglia, but more visceral “wild west” than refined motoring, the seven-day event is an endurance challenge for cars, drivers and support crews attracting cheering crowds as it winds through the country.

“What began as a car rally to mark the completion of the Mexican section of the Pan-American Highway is today considered the longest running open road race,” offered Anthony Cooper, international liaison for the La Carrera Panamericana.

This year’s race is scheduled for October 13–20 and covers some 3000 kilometers (1864 miles) on a combination of federal highways, state roads and paved byways.

Starting in the Huatulco resort region,

With a focus on which motorsports competitions and sanctioning organizations are trending worldwide, PRI’s recurring international column spotlights a revitalized drag racing sanctioning group in the Caribbean, an endurance race on the roadways of Mexico, and a wildly popular grassroots event in China.

where the Sierra Madre mountains kiss the Pacific Ocean with white sand beaches, the route heads northwesterly, finishing 6233 feet above sea level at Durango, but only after negotiating the notoriously sinuous “Devil’s Backbone” with 60 tunnels and more than 40 bridges.

Started in 1950, the LCP ran for six years, took a 33-year hiatus, and was then revived in 1988 with a modern, updated twist that now offers four groups and nine categories.

Group A, called “Panamerican,” features the following categories: stock

tourism, tourism major, sport major and sport minor. Historic represents Group B, and consists of categories: historic A, A plus, B and C. Group C is called Original “Panamerican,” while Group D is Exhibition. Additionally, there is a category for “all others,” which is not eligible for prizes and for whom results are not tallied.

Race entries were once reserved for cars built from 1940 through 1965, but now include modern machinery. Among past luminaries are inaugural winner Hershel McGriff in an Oldsmobile, Argentinian

BY LOUISE ANN NOETH

Juan Manuel Fangio, Piero Taruffi, Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason, Troy Ruttman, Tony Bettenhausen, Mickey Thompson, Karl Kling, Phil Hill, and Clay Regazzoniv.

The 2016 entrants include race dominating Studebaker Commanders and Champions, 1956 Buick Centurion, 1946 Sport Saloon Jaguar, Alfa Romeo Guilletta, 1954 Olds Super 88, as well as a herd of Mustangs, a Daytona Coupe, Mini Coopers (new and old), and plenty of Porsches, including one modified 911 that could also run the Baja 1000.

“Entries arrive from a dozen countries, and Americans show up in good numbers each year,” explained Cooper of the government-backed event. “This year promises another eclectic mix of cars ranging from a slick little Ford Escort MK1 to a flamed Mercedes Benz 220; and we welcome back former class winner Renee Brinkerhoff driving her 1956 Porsche 356A.”

The odd music superstar and a smattering of veteran pros also show up—all in need of support services along the way. Breakdowns are nothing more than elongated pit stops for racers determined to finish each stage no matter the extra time. This requires support crew service that sometimes borders on the miraculous.

Pan Delta Super Racing Festival

When the 4.3-kilometer Zhuhai International Circuit opened in 1996 it became the first permanent FIA-approved racing circuit in China. With passing opportunities plentiful on the clockwise circuit of four left turns, ten right turns and two straights, the FIA Formula One (F1) and FIM Motorcycle Grand Prix (Moto GP) spec designed track quickly gained popularity—it now hosts numerous international race events.

On a local level, however, none of various race series were strong enough by themselves to really wick up excitement among the general public until the debut of the Pan Delta Super Racing Festival.

According to Benjamin Grenon, founder of Hong Kong-based SpeedShare and part of the management team that created the festival in 2005, “The idea was to bring all the various racing championships held

at the Zhuhai International Circuit under a single umbrella while creating an interactive environment for fans and a platform for corporate sponsors. Now, 12 years later, it has grown into a premier regional series and the gold standard for grassroots racing in China.”

Held on the third weekend in March, June and September, the events flourished, and today regularly draw 20,000 spectators while including live national TV broadcasts that cover approximately 200 racers.

“Asian drivers normally dominate the field—even a few women—and you regularly find Americans on the podium,” added Quandarium Associates general manager James Moore. “The biggest draw remains their homegrown series ZIC Superbike, Red Bull Drift Challenge and Circuit Hero, which all draw international entrants.”

Circuit Hero was formed as a platform for grassroots racing. Staged as three separate events, Circuit Hero One is for professional level drivers and teams; Circuit Hero Two is for entry-level participants with limited experience and/or budgets; and Circuit Hero Three is dedicated to vehicles manufactured prior to 2001.

How can American companies plug in? Capitalizing on increasing fan popularity of the drifting held during each festival, the Red Bull Drift Challenge debuted in 2013 with an international driver field. The field nearly doubled, from 8 to 15, the following year, and has remained well supported by local racers.

But title sponsorships are expensive



and may not be an ideal fit. As insiders explain it, pulling the sponsorship trigger confidently requires an in-depth understanding of the local culture to develop profitable long-term relationships.

“Marketing in China should be viewed as a long-term investment handled directly by the brand, and not left up to the distributor or dealer,” said Moore. “The difference is that money in the US is spent reminding people of your brand; in China it is spent introducing people to your brand. Inside of the motorsport level, major brands are widely recognized, but when you get into the much larger street level performance market they have limited knowledge.”

In a country where 30 years ago private car ownership was estimated at only 20,000 vehicles, the Zhuhai Circuit nurtured the motorsports culture through heavy marketing and the creation of a fan interaction area offering food, live entertainment, product introductions, autograph

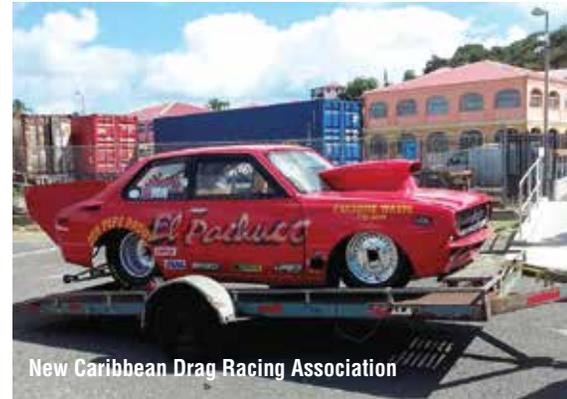
sessions, driving simulators and photo opportunities with umbrella girls.

“Companies like Eibach, Wiseco and Exedy got involved through product sponsorship,” explained Moore. “Value here is highly dependent on picking the right team and getting additional exposure outside of Pan Delta through shows and appearances. This requires companies have local distributors who understand how to get value through the sponsorship agreement.”

New Caribbean Drag Racing Association

“I had the best time at the greatest little race track in the middle of the ocean,” remarked Caribbean Dragway’s most unlikely spectator, John Force. “There were so many families out there. It was a great afternoon at a nice facility. I could see the international future of drag racing.”

During a family vacation to the Caribbean in 2014, the drag racing champion practically stumbled upon The New Caribbean



New Caribbean Drag Racing Association

Drag Racing Association (CDRA), which hosts competitive motor-related activities ranging from remote control cars to performance and off-road motorcycles, in addition to nitro burning machines.

Based on St. Croix, which is the largest of the US Virgin Islands, CDRA is a non-profit organization with a nine-member board, and upwards of 50 local and US mainland members. The facility currently

uses an eighth-mile drag strip, with room to expand to quarter-mile racing.

An estimated 200 race cars and bikes regularly support the sport, with hundreds more that come from various nearby islands and the US to catch the action. Leased from the Port Authority since 1999, the race track does not upset the island paradise tranquility, as it is operated between an airport and a landfill.

“We host bi-monthly ‘Test ‘n Tune’ and car and bike street bracket racing, and a monthly ‘Money ‘n Trophy’ event open to all racers,” described publicist Ramon Cuencas. “Match racing is always a crowd pleaser that brings out the entire community, and our ‘Car and Stereo Competitions’ is hotly contested for bragging rights. On-site we have covered spectator bleachers, a huge concession area, rest-rooms and a performance stage.”

Not long ago the group purchased a new timing system for the relocated check-

ered timing tower, and recently gave the entire place a fresh coat of paint.

Inter-island racing happens twice a year, when CDRA hosts neighboring St. Thomas and St. John islands racers for a “Best of the VI Titles” in Street, 9Sec and Faster, and motorcycles. One popular team is Lady Horsepower Farm, the only all-female drag racing team in the Caribbean that has members on five neighboring islands.

There are also operational drag strips on Nevis, Santo Domingo, Grand Cayman, St. Maarten, Curacao, St. Lucia, Tortola and Grenada, and one on Antigua operated on private land. Unfortunately, racers face eye-popping barge fees to transport race cars from surrounding islands, coupled with port fees, which the volunteer board is working to reduce.

The islanders use social media to publicize their events. With its eye on future quarter-mile competition, CDRA is actively developing sponsors locally and nationally.

The CDRA leadership has identified federal funding that could be tapped if they can convince local government to accept drag racing as a viable community and tourism sport. Other islands that have embraced the idea have triggered new marketplaces for racing parts and service providers.

Fighting the same battle that Wally Parks faced back in the 1950s—to redirect street racing into safe and sanctioned NHRA drag racing—Natalie Nelson Tang How, legal counsel for the new CDRA, told a legislative session of the Virgin Islands Territory, “This is hands down a ‘win-win’ situation if the males in the demographic group ages 16–25 can be engaged on a regular, almost weekly basis with sanctioned drag racing activities. Quite frankly, there will be a dent in the crime rate Territory-wide in addition to the revenues that can be generated for the local economy.”

