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American Le Mans Series goes green

Motor sports column: The Green Racing Challenge encourages teams to be creative with alternative fuels.



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The American Le Mans Series is cleaning up its act, and the American consumer might benefit because of it.

If what's happening in the ALMS catches on, who knows, engines could run on old pine cones and dead twigs.

This weekend, during the Utah Grand Prix at Miller Motorsports Park in Tooele, ALMS officials will meet with its teams to discuss the rules and regulations of the Green Racing Challenge, which puts an emphasis on increasing fuel mileage and decreasing emissions, especially those that contribute to global warming.

The Society of Automotive Engineers International, the EPA and the Department of Energy are working in concert with the ALMS to turn this idea of environmental friendly racing into something that can actually work on the track.

“Innovations like alternative fuels are at the forefront of the racing industry and they can also help reshape the entire automotive landscape,” said Roger Penske, who fields Porsches in the ALMS.

To qualify for “Green Racing” series, the SAE has determined that certain protocols must be met, focusing on performance, fuel efficiency and ecological impact. They include:

- The use of renewable bio-based fuel or fuels
- The use of multiple engines, fuels and powertrain configurations
- The use of regenerative energy powertrain technologies
- The use of fuel allocations based on well-to-wheel energy and GHG analysis
- The use of emission control strategies and systems



FUELED WITH PURPOSE: The Corvette GT1 team, along with several other smaller privately owned programs, will use E85, a new type of ethanol that is made out of branches, pine cones and leaves. **AMERICAN LE MANS SERIES**

The EPA has stated that one of the things they want to do through its alliance with the ALMS is create an award that would be so prestigious that all of the major car companies would want to bring in their best technology to try and win it. And from that came the Green Racing Challenge.

“The auto manufacturers competing in the American Le Mans Series have made it very clear that this is a direction and an overall initiative that is important to them,” said Scott Atherton, president and CEO of the Series.

This new rules package, developed by the EPA, DOE and SAE, will be implemented once this season, during the 1,000-mile Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta in Braselton, Ga., in October. Next year, though, there’s talk of awarding a separate “Green Racing Champion,” which will honor the team that can find a way to go fast while getting more out of a tank of fuel and decreasing greenhouse gas emissions.

“This is still motor racing,” said Doug Robinson, the executive director of IMSA, which sanctions ALMS events. “And the idea is still to win, so speed has to count for something”

At the Petit Le Mans, the winning team must incorporate three of the five “Green Racing” elements stated above. In 2009, ALMS officials want the victors to go 5-for-5.

The goal, Atherton said, is to make motor sports relevant, “providing a platform of solutions for our nation’s automotive and transportation needs.” Green racing, Robinson said, will help manufacturers speed up the delivery of cutting-edge emissions technology to the showroom floor.

But the ALMS isn’t stopping at developing alternative fuels. Rules allow hybrid cars to compete, and Peugeot, Robinson said, has expressed an interest in bringing this drive train into the series in 2009.

This year, though, all of the series’ competitors are powered by fuel only. Most all of the cars on the grid this weekend will use E10, which is 10 percent ethanol and 90 percent unleaded gas, virtually the same blend we buy at the pump. The Audis will use a clean burning zero sulfur diesel.

And the factory Corvette GT1 team, along with several other smaller privately owned programs, will use E85, a new type of ethanol that is produced through a process that does not use grains. Instead, E85 is made out of branches, pine cones, leaves and all of the other stuff that collects on the floors of national forests. This cellulosic fuel is produced by KL Process Design Group in Rapid City, S.D. Right now, it’s the only plant producing fuel in this manner.

According to the DOE, a recent study conducted by Argonne Laboratories of the University of Chicago, cellulosic ethanol reduces green house gas emissions by 85 percent over reformulated gasoline. And that’s an important statistic for the ALMS.

Robinson said that part of the series Green Racing Challenge includes putting the energy consumption of the engine in British thermal units into a DOE computer modeling program to determine the environmental impact the car had while racing toward the finish.

“What we are doing in the American Le Mans Series does help the environment. That is one issue, and that is no small thing,” Corvette program manager Doug Fehan said “The big thing is the marketing of E85. Change is difficult for people. People, who have used gas all of their lives might think ethanol is less powerful or it’s going to hurt their car. But when you put E85 in a Corvette, go race and win, it allays those fears. It educates them on a viable green alternative.”

THIS WEEK IN MOTOR SPORTS

NHRA: Thunder Valley Nationals

Where: Bristol Dragway, Bristol, Tenn.

When: Sunday

Qualifying: Friday-Saturday

TV: ESPN2, Sunday, 3:30 p.m.

2007 winners: Brandon Bernstein (Top Fuel), John Force (Funny Car), Jeg Coughlin (Pro Stock)

Driver to watch: Ashley Force. She has advanced to the final round of Funny Car eliminations in three of her past four starts, winning the first title of her career in Commerce, Ga. In just her second season driving in the extremely competitive class, she has an elimination-round record of 13-5.

Top Fuel driver standings

1. Tony Schumacher; 608

2. Antron Brown; 540

3. Larry Dixon; 469

4. Rod Fuller; 434

5. Cory McClenathan; 418

Funny Car driver standings

1. Tim Wilkerson; 497

2. Ashley Force; 473

3. Cruz Pedregon; 425

4. Robert Hight; 399

5. John Force; 375

Pro Stock driver standings

1. Jason Line; 527

2. Jeg Coughlin; 520

3. Kurt Johnson; 508

4. Greg Anderson; 505

5. Allen Johnson; 426

Pro Stock Motorcycle rider standings

1. Andrew Hines; 405

2. Matt Smith; 349
3. Chip Ellis; 349
4. Matt Guidera; 296
5. Angelle Sampey; 231

American Le Mans: Utah Grand Prix

Where: Miller Motorsports Park, 3.06-mile road course, Tooele

When: Sunday

Qualifying: Saturday

TV: Speed Channel, Noon

2007 winners: Ryan Briscoe/Sascha Maassen (LMP2), Olivier Beretta/Oliver Gavin (GT1), Tomas Enge/Darren Turner (GT2)

Driver to watch: Gil de Ferran. The 2003 Indy 500 winner and two-time CART Champ Car champion will come out of retirement to drive an Acura in the LMP2 class this weekend. It will mark the first time since Oct. 12, 2003, that de Ferran has competed as a driver. He walked away from the cockpit after winning on IRL race that day at Texas Motor Speedway.

Trucks: North Carolina Educational Lottery 200

Where: Lowe's Motor Speedway, 1.5-mile oval, Concord, N.C.

When: Friday

Qualifying: Friday

TV: Speed Channel, 4:30 p.m.

2007 winner: Ron Hornaday

Driver to watch: Rick Crawford. He hasn't finished worse than 14th in any of his five starts this season. His average finish is 8.3 and he has completed 99.8 percent of the laps this season.

Driver standings

1. Ron Hornaday; 775
2. Rick Crawford; 714
3. Todd Bodine; 704
4. Dennis Setzer; 666
4. Johnny Benson; 666
6. Kyle Busch; 645
7. Matt Crafton; 639
8. Chad McCumbee; 633

9. Jack Sprague; 629
10. Ted Musgrave; 627
11. Mike Skinner; 624
12. David Starr; 621
13. Erik Darnell; 606
14. Terry Cook; 605
15. Brendan Gaughan; 586
16. Colin Braun; 573
17. Justin Marks; 560
18. Brian Scott; 538
19. Stacy Compton; 517
20. Phillip McGilton; 491

Also in action

Sprint Cup Series: All-Star Challenge, Saturday, Lowe's Motor Speedway, Concord, N.C., Speed Channel, 4 p.m.

IRL: Indy 500 Qualifying, Saturday-Sunday, Indianapolis Motor Speedway

Speedway Motorcycles: Saturday, Costa Mesa Speedway