

Race series finds advantage in ethanol

American Le Mans Series uses alternative fuels

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ELKHART LAKE — Ben Devlin looks at the wooded surroundings of Road America near Elkhart Lake as one of the reasons he's now driving a prototype endurance race car fueled by E10 fuel.

A driver for Saukville-based B-K Motorsports, Devlin — along with other teams and drivers in the American Le Mans Series — has adopted new challenges and alternative fuels in the last two seasons aimed at not only greening the race series but keeping racing relevant to what is happening in the production car scene.

“There’s a little bit of an advantage running the ethanol. You feel a little more power,” he said Thursday, prior to testing at the track. “We get to see these fantastic places ... and Road America is one of the nicest places in all of North America, so it’s nice to know we’re doing something ... It’s nice to know we’ve helped these manufacturers develop these fuels.”

The American Le Mans Series runs three “fuels (zero-sulfur synthetic diesel, E10 and E85 ethanol)” in four classes of cars that compete in the 11-race series.

Fuels are similar to what’s available to consumers.

The series also announced earlier this year that next season it will include a “Green Challenge” as part of the competition.

In its most basic form, the challenge (done in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency) will reward teams through a points competition for the cars that go the furthest and fastest with the least environmental impact, according to information from the series.

The challenge will debut in October during the 10-hour Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta.

“American Le Mans has always been a racing series that has a welcome mat to manufacturers, with nothing spec, that allowed manufacturers and teams to bring innovate engineering and



Crew members Gary Young, left, and Jason Ladd prepare an American Le Mans Series Chevrolet Corvette GT1 race car Thursday during testing day at Road America in Elkhart Lake. H. Marc Larson/Press-Gazette



Race teams are using E85 ethanol race fuel for the American Le Mans Series at Road America in Elkhart Lake. H. Marc Larson/Press-Gazette

Generac 500, presented by Time Warner Cable

Where: Road America, Elkhart Lake

When: 4 p.m. today

What: American Le Mans Series Race

On TV: Delayed coverage Sunday beginning at 1 p.m. on Speed.

American Le Mans Series: www.americanlemans.com/home/ALMS

Home.aspx

Road America: www.roadamerica.com.

new technology into the racing environment,” Scott Atherton, American Le Mans Series president and chief executive officer, said. “Not necessarily to make a better race car, but to ideally have that technology developed in racing that can then be applied to a production or road car. That is what this series has always stood for.”

The American Le Mans Series, and a number of others, are at Road America this weekend.

Atherton points out the E85 ethanol used by the ALMS is cellulosic ethanol derived from wood waste. The series opted three years ago to use fuels available to consumers and manufacturers.

“This was a reflection of where the automotive industry was headed,” Atherton said. “It was our perspective that these three fuels ... we’re going to the three choices we would all face at the gas station.”

One of the key words Atherton and the series use is “relevance.”

Doug Fehan, Corvette Racing program manager, said while ethanol is not necessarily a panacea for alternative fuels, it is a step toward the development of other alternative fuels.

“Ethanol is part of a bigger solution,” he said Thursday. “Ethanol is serving to cause companies, research scientists and entrepreneurs to think about alternative fuels.

“Ten, 20 years from now, who knows if we’ll be using ethanol. We very well may as part of a program, but it causes you to change your mindset and gets the consumer comfortable with the changes that are inevitably coming,” Fehan said.

Teams and series organizers say what they do on the track can have a direct carryover to vehicles the public uses on a daily basis.

“It’s developing alternative fuel technology. It’s developing fuel efficiencies. It’s developing equipment that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions,” Atherton said.

“These are all efforts being put forth by the manufacturers who are racing with us that will, in the not distant future, be applied to their production car technology.”

For instance, Audi took its TDI (turbo direct injection) technology from its dominant R8 and R10 ALMS cars and has incorporated it in production cars, including the new Q7 diesel SUV that is expected to hit the American market early next year, according to Audi.

Atherton said the TDI concept provides greater fuel efficiency and performance and a diesel vehicle that runs at a substantially lower volume and emission level than the diesel engine most people are familiar with.

Audi says the TDI diesel consumes 35 percent less fuel than the average engine in the United States.

Involvement with racing not only serves as a bed for technology development, but gives manufacturers another marketing avenue.

“What it really does is build awareness,” said Rod Bymaster, manager of Audi Sport North America.

“It puts our name on the shopping list and really gives an image of technology, sophistication and styling.”

Fehan points to the C6 street version of the Corvette and the Z06 and ZR1 as vehicles that are direct descendants of the race program and incorporate designs — aerodynamic changes like flush-fit headlights — that came off the track.

“When you look at the ZR1 and see the carbon splitter on the front, the full spoiler on the back ... those are all directly from the race track,” he said. “Racing is a struggle between engineering and marketing. The idea is to balance those two things and meld them into something that moves forward in a common direction.”

He noted the Green Challenge also has teams and manufacturers looking at ways to maximize efficiencies, from ceramic wheel bearings to lubricants and greases that can enhance fuel mileage.

Fehan doesn't expect it to end there, with teams and manufacturers looking at ways to capture energy from brake heat and capturing and using inertia generated by the car.

Atherton said their series is in one of the more unique positions in motor sports.

“In recent times I think most of racing has kind of lost its way ... and the focus has been all on entertainment and not on any developmental aspect or engineering development,” Atherton said. “That's what separates us from just about everyone else.”

While the greening of the series has garnered quite a bit of national media exposure, Atherton is quick to point out at the end of the day the American Le Mans Series is still about racing.

“The Green Challenge and the green initiatives we have are not the new race,” he said. “The racing will continue to be our primary calling card.

“The fact we're able to race, and at the same time assist manufacturers and educate consumers about alternatives, becomes an incremental added benefit,” Atherton said.