

# Acura Motorsports Program Set to Take Its Next Step, to ALMS Series Title

The Acura American Le Mans Series sports-car program started with a bang in 2007.

With 10 hours gone in Acura's debut event, the grueling Mobil 1 12 Hours of Sebring, many in the pit area were asking the same question, "Where did the Acuras come from?" Even executives from Audi and Porsche had walked down the pit wall to take a closer view of these upstart teams who were racing wheel to wheel for the overall race win.

At the 12-hour checkered flag, the Andretti Green Racing-prepared Acura ARX-01a had won the LMP2 class and finished second overall to the more experienced and more powerful (LMP1) Audi machine. In fact, the Acura cars had finished second, third and sixth overall in their first-ever Sebring classic, and 1-2-4 in their class.

It was a dramatic debut and established the three Acura teams, AGR, Lowe's Fernandez and Highcroft, as contenders in their first season of ALMS competition.

Acura executives John Mendel and Robert Clarke stood smiling on the Sebring winners' podium with Bryan Herta, Tony Kanaan and Dario Franchitti, the winning drivers from Andretti Green Racing. No one had expected the Acura to even finish, let alone win.

But the hard work of the Honda Performance Development engineers and staff, along with the development of a new Acura chassis from Wirth Research, had changed the learning process for Acura into a winning one.

"Winning the first time out at Sebring was the highlight for me," said Clarke, whose racing career as president of HPD included Indy 500 wins, CART championships and IndyCar titles.

"It represented everything I put into this company and made me so proud."

HPD had worked in engine development and supplied open-wheel teams with their power plants since 1994, but the 2007 Acura program was different. So, victory was even sweeter.

"HPD did it on our own with no help from Japan or Ilmor [HPD's technical partner in open-wheel competition]," said Clarke, who retired as HPD president at the end of last year. "We designed, sourced, developed and maintained the engine. It was totally ours and it won the first time out, competing against world-class manufacturers. That is so indicative of where HPD is today."

Even a veteran automotive executive like Mendel had difficulty absorbing what really happened at Sebring.

"Robert and I looked at each other on the victory stand and just said, 'Wow, what a great way to start this sports-car program for Acura'," said Mendel, executive vice president, auto operations for American Honda.

Acura had entered the 2007 ALMS season hoping to learn about the rigors of sports-car racing. It was a completely different animal from the flat-out, sprint-type competition in CART and IndyCar open-wheel racing.

The rest of the 2007 American Le Mans Series was not as successful as Sebring for the Acura teams, which seems strange since the first race of the year is the longest. But the competition was extremely fast and the sports-car learning process was steep for Acura.

Developing both an engine and a chassis during the 12-race season was a difficult chore, as Porsche, Audi and other manufacturers had established factory-backed racing programs.

"Sebring was a huge surprise," said Clarke. "Our goal was to simply finish. We feel that our three unique single-car teams, each focused on a particular aspect of our program, paid off."

The Highcroft team was charged with the development of the Acura ARX-01a chassis, a modified Courage cockpit with many new components designed by HPD and Wirth Research in England.

The Lowe's Fernandez squad had a proven Lola chassis and was the engine-development team. Andretti Green Racing, a superb IndyCar team with series championships and numerous race wins, received the information from the other Acura teams in an effort to get results, and the Sebring win realized this goal.

Now, in 2008, the three Acura teams return with a few modifications to personnel and equipment, and they'll be joined by a fourth entrant before the season reaches its midway point.

In addition, Clarke has turned the HPD reins over to longtime Honda associate Erik Berkman, who became HPD president at the first of the year.

"Erik has a passion for motorsports," said Clarke. "He completely supports the long-term plans that HPD and American Honda have in place for the future."

That future includes a strong bid for the 2008 American Le Mans Series championship.

Among the changes to the Acura program will be the utilization by all three teams of the newly-designed Acura ARX-01b chassis, along with the normally-aspirated 3.4-liter V-8 engine.

The Andretti Green organization fields the No. 26 XM Satellite Radio Acura ARX-01b, with Herta and veteran open-wheel star Christian Fittipaldi as regular drivers and Kanaan as the third driver for the longer races.

"We achieved all the targets Acura set out at the beginning of the season," Herta said. "We wanted to finish three cars at Sebring, wanted to win a race and win a pole position. Beyond that, we wanted to learn the tracks, gain data and knowledge about the cars, and improve the chassis and engine. We were pretty competitive in our first season and we gained a lot of knowledge to apply over the winter."

Highcroft Racing, which placed third in LMP2 team points in 2007, sports new paint and a new major sponsor in Patron Spirits. The No. 9 Patron Highcroft Acura ARX-01b machine will be co-driven by David Brabham, last year's overall pole winner at Houston, and former IndyCar and Trans-Am Series champion Scott Sharp. Duncan Dayton's operation put together a superb crew and recorded four podium finishes in the team's initial effort as a full-time race organization.

"For me, the team getting pole position in only our fourth race was huge," said Brabham. "The team had worked so hard just to get to the first race, and to have a pole against such tough opposition was amazing. I have been fortunate to race for a few top teams in my career, but I would have to say that working with Acura, HPD, Wirth and Highcroft has been one of the best, if not the best, experiences of my life."

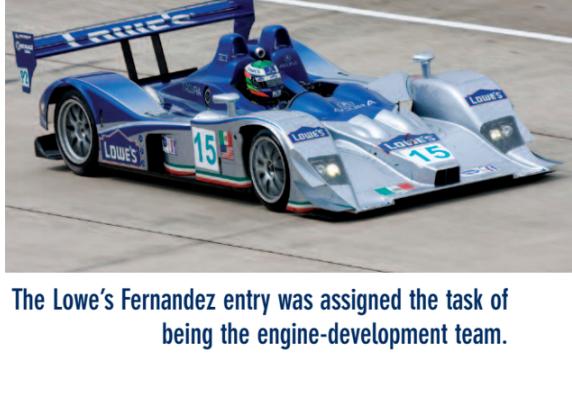
The Lowe's Fernandez team, Acura's engine-development associate, returns its two Mexican driving stars with Adrian Fernandez—team co-owner with Tom Anderson—and Luis Diaz. Competing with a non-competitive Lola chassis in the street races, the Lowe's contingent still performed well enough to take fourth in class points among the teams and recorded a runner-up finish at Sebring and thirds at Mid-Ohio and Laguna Seca. The new Acura ARX-01b will be in the Lowe's stable in 2008 and the team expects big things with the new chassis.

"What Acura has accomplished in their first season of ALMS is remarkable," said Fernandez. "They were strong out of the box with not only a brand-new engine, but the chassis as well. Expectations are even higher for 2008 with the amount of development work planned for the off-season. To become a full Acura effort is something that everyone at Lowe's Fernandez Racing is really excited about, because this will definitely help to take our program to the next level."

Joining the three Acura-powered teams before mid-season will be the LMP2 entry fielded by de Ferran Motorsports, owned and operated by two-time CART driving champion and 2003 Indianapolis 500 winner Gil de Ferran. De Ferran announced his sports-car program in late January, and is working diligently to assemble the components of a competitive team which will serve as a complement to the overall Acura effort.

Acura and HPD executives believe the latest Acura sports car will make another big impression in 2008.

"Now, with our ongoing Acura chassis development program with Wirth Research and the HPD staff, our Acura teams will have the opportunity to work together on the new chassis as we prepare for a very competitive 2008 ALMS road-racing campaign," said Clarke. "We believe the combined communication and cooperation of all of our Acura teams will assist us in our quest for race victories and the 2008 LMP2 class championship."



The Lowe's Fernandez entry was assigned the task of being the engine-development team.



The Highcroft team was in charge of developing the Acura ARX-01a chassis.



Instant contenders: By gathering data from the other two Acura teams' efforts, the Andretti Green Racing team took the 12-hour checkered flag.



With beaming AGR team owner Michael Andretti in the background, Robert Clarke of Acura gets a hug from driver Bryan Herta following their stunning victory.