Autos

Racing and the Fuel Crunch: The Real Story

BY GARY WITZENBURG

Now that it's May, that means racing buffs around the world are beginning to rev up for the biggest event on the sports calendar: the Indianapolis 500. With more than $1.25 million in prize money at stake and an estimated single-day attendance of over 375,000 people, the Indy ranks as one of the year's top spectacles. And this year—as in 1974—a lot of people are wondering about the ethics of a flock of racing cars going round and round on the way to nowhere and burning up fuel along the way.

During the 1973-74 Arab oil embargo there was talk of limitations, even outright bans, of motor sports. "Why," people asked, "should they be using up fuel when I might not be able to get enough to drive to work next week?" At the height of the crisis, a handful of countries with shortages more critical than ours actually did ban racing for a short time. But the various major United States racing organizations quickly banded together to face the problem. They formed a National Motorsports Committee (NMC) in 1974 under former Ontario Motor Speedway president John R. Cooper and conducted an objective and scrupulously accurate statistical study to determine how much fuel racing really used in comparison to other leisure-time activities. The bottom line was eye-opening, to say the least.

The study showed that nearly two-thirds (66.1 percent) of the "recreational" fuel used in the United States was for vacation travel. About 10 percent was used in private flying. Next on the list were activities that people have to drive to, thus burning fuel for transportation: movies (at about 9 percent), followed by football, basketball, horse racing and in seventh place (at just over 1 percent) motor racing. Rodeos, bowling, baseball, wrestling and golf completed the rundown.

The fact is that vast amounts of fuel are used by people (mostly spectators) traveling to and from an event. "Putting on the show," says Cooper, "is a minor part of the consumption for any sport." For the typical auto race, the fuel actually used on-track by the race cars amounts to less than 10 percent of the total fuel-usage picture.

Racing's problem, then, is high visibility. "Of all the major professional sports, only motor racing is a conspicuous consumer of petroleum products," says *Car and Driver* magazine executive editor Mike Knepper. "A football team may consume considerably more fuel jetting from New York to Los Angeles than forty or fifty race cars will consume in two 500-mile races, but the public doesn't see that jet flight. It does see and hear those race cars."

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Like any other professional sport, racing is a big business that involves the livelihoods of many people. For every driver and car there is a large supporting cast of car and engine builders, mechanics, managers and so on; for every racing facility there are dozens responsible for management and maintenance. Each major event brings thousands, even millions, of dollars into the economies of the surrounding areas. Shutting down racing to "save fuel" would make no more sense than shutting down any other industry, recreational or otherwise.

The racing industry can—and has—cut back its fuel usage by cutting race lengths, practice time and even the number of events. The United States Auto Club (USAC), which sanctions the Indianapolis 500 and many other events throughout the country, imposed a fuel-consumption limit on its Indycar competitors in 1974 that still stands—even though those cars burn methanol, a nonpetroleum alcohol fuel. The point is that racing asks only to be treated fairly, the same as any other leisure-time activity. "If it comes to a ban," says TV commentator and *National Speed Sport News* editor Chris Economaki, "then you're going to have to take away everybody's outboard motor."

Another important consideration is that auto racing has always been a sort of proving ground for ideas and concepts that eventually find their way into production cars. Virtually every trick that racers use to increase lap speeds is now being used by carmakers to make new models more fuel efficient: shaving weight, reducing rolling resistance, improving engine efficiency and body aerodynamics. Indianapolis racers tune their engines and drive for minimum fuel consumption at a given speed because they're allotted only so much fuel per event. If they run out, they don't finish. Long-distance racers are consumption conscious because each stop to refuel costs them precious time.

"Of all the users of fuel in motor sports," says International Motor Sports Association President John Bishop, "only auto racing is constantly striving to make its machines more efficient, both aerodynamically and mechanically." And there is a groundswell within the sport supporting a serious move into alternate fuels—to set an example and provide testing and development for the public and the auto industry—as well as to offset future fuel-availability headaches. Organizers of the famous LeMans twenty-four-hour race in France, in addition to setting limits on tank capacities and refueling rates, have announced that any fuel will be acceptable for the June 1980 events: