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THE LAST DROP

Motorsports and the Energy Crunch

by Gary L. Witzenburg

You're driving the 1974 Indianapolis 500 this Memorial Day. The race is nearly over and you're in the lead. You've made your last pit stop for tires and the few remaining drops of your fuel allotment.

If you had time, you could count the number of laps between you and the checkered flag on the fingers of one hand. A. J. Unser went out several laps ago after spinning with a cut tire—debris on the track from one of the few engines blown all day.

Now you spot Mario Allison coasting into the pits, apparently out of gas, and the final threat to your first Indy win and everlasting glory is gone. You're driving very carefully now. There'll be no excuse for making a mistake or getting caught by surprise lapping a slower car.

Your pit crew is signaling "E-Z" and you carefully turn down the boost on your turbocharger to conserve the precious fuel. Oil pressure is below normal but holding steady. Everything else looks OK, but the fuel gauge is vibrating on both sides of the "zero" mark. Now it's all in the hands of an even greater power than William E. Simon, and you wish you'd gone to church more often as a kid.

Fuel allotment? Turn down the boost? Fuel gauge?

What's happening to racing? Well, so far it seems to be hanging in there in spite of the fuel crisis—and

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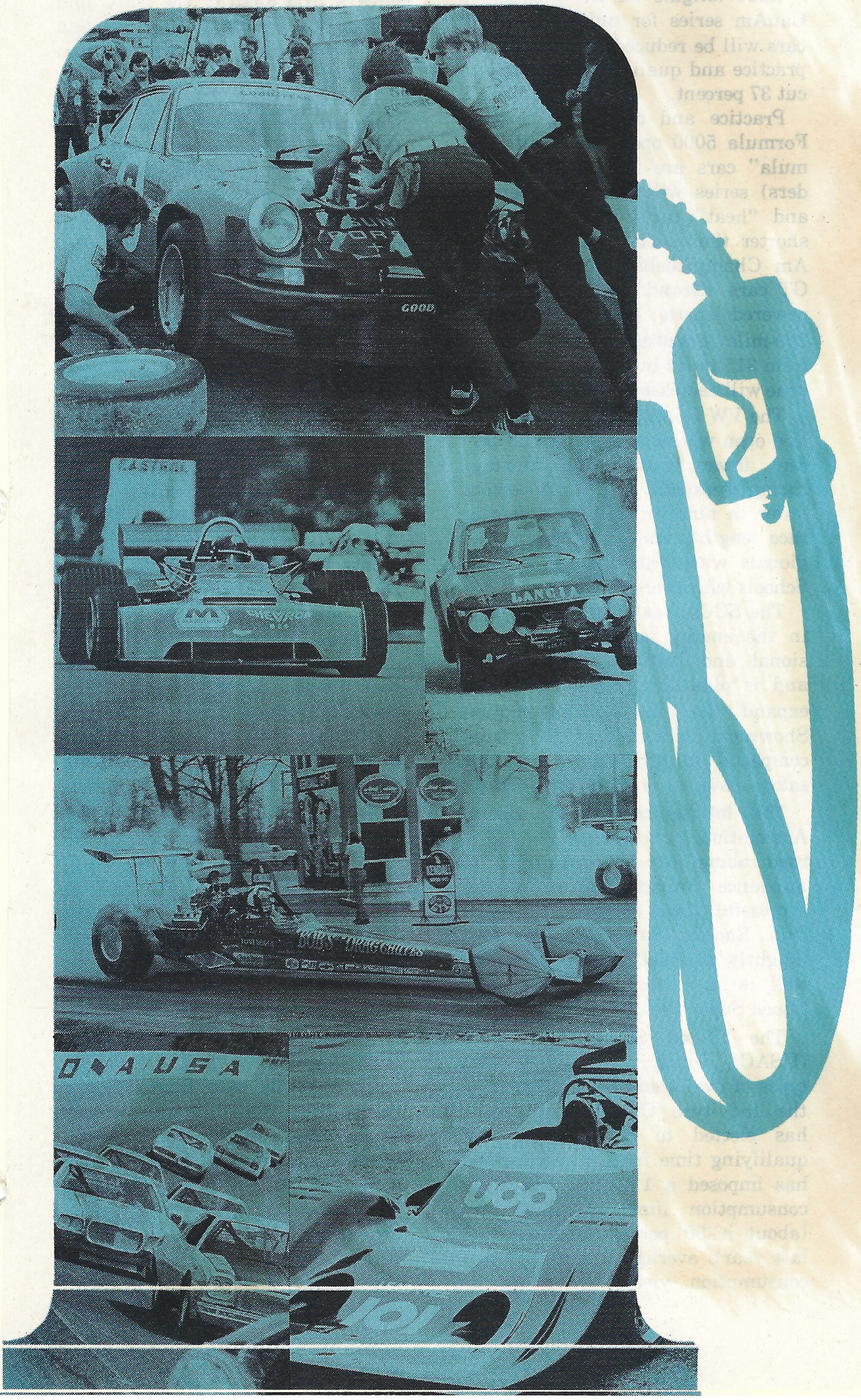


Auto racing is squeezed by limited fuel. Shown here (top to bottom, from left): FIA endurance races of highly modified GT sports cars were canceled this year at Daytona and Sebring; Formula 5000s and others lose Marathon backing as oil company 'redirects' advertising; SCCA's Pro Rally Series limits number, length of events; NHRA drag racing popularity grows, but events and final fields are cut; Daytona 500 NASCAR race still makes profit on 30% less fuel; and UOP plugs lead-free fuel in both CanAm (shown) and Formula One competition.

adapting to it rapidly, as crisis-threatened industries tend to do.

In this country, the defensive action was timely and decisive. The National Motorsports Committee (NMC) was incorporated under the auspices of the Automobile Competition Committee for the United States (ACCUS), stateside branch of the Paris-based international racing organization, Federation Internationale de l'Automotobile (FIA). John R. Cooper, former president of Ontario Motor Speedway, was chosen to head NMC.

The NMC gathered statistics from all major sports and published a report ranking leisure-time activities in terms of their annual fuel consumption. The figures used were as carefully compiled as humanly possible; and where estimates had to be made due to lack of available data, those estimates were weighted *against* racing.

Mr. Cooper knew his report would be liable to attack by other special interest groups, and he constructed it to be totally defensible and bulletproof.

The assembled data brought some interesting comparisons. For one thing, the category of "Vacation Travel" accounts for 66.1 percent of the total amount of energy usage attributed to leisure-time activities. For another, by far the major portion of the energy consumed by spectator sports, including auto racing, is consumed by the spectators traveling to and from the events—not by the participants themselves. As Mr. Cooper told the January meeting of the International Motor Press Association: "Putting on the show is a minor part of the consumption for any sport."

Motor racing in all its diverse forms ranked seventh in energy consumption.

Of the 93 million gallons of fuel attributed annually to auto racing, less than 10 percent (about 9 million) is consumed on the track in practice, qualifying and during the actual events. And that 93 million gallons, or 2.2 million barrels, represents a paltry 1.1 percent of the total annual leisure-time use.

It is important to point out that racing was not seeking any special favors—only to be treated fairly along with all other sports and activities. "Tell us what you want us to do," said the NMC, "and we'll do it." And when the Federal Energy Office asked for voluntary 25 percent cutbacks in all non-essential energy-consuming areas, motor racing was ready.

The Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), sanctioning body for four professional road racing series as well as its National and Regional amateur road racing and all types of rallying events in this country, was one of the first to respond.

Race lengths for the prestigious CanAm series for unlimited sports cars will be reduced 10 percent, and practice and qualifying time will be cut 37 percent.

Practice and qualifying for the Formula 5000 open-wheel (all "formula" cars are built without fenders) series will drop 42.8 percent and "heat" races will be slightly shorter than last year. The Trans-Am Championship for sedans and GT cars—Grand Touring, or high-powered sports cars—will feature 200-mile endurance contests, cut from 315 miles in 1973, and practice time will decrease by 20 percent.

The VW Gold Cup Formula Super Vee open wheelers will have 33 percent fewer events; and amateur racing weekends will be 25 percent fewer in number, will have shorter race lengths, and will combine Regionals with Nationals or Drivers' Schools whenever possible.

The SCCA has made similar cuts in the energy usage of its professional and National Rally series, and is planning to emphasize and expand its low-fuel-consumption Showroom Stock racing classes (subcompacts unmodified except for safety devices) in the near future.

The International Motor Sports Association, another major U.S. road racing body, also was quick to announce cutbacks for its highly successful Camel GT and B. F. Goodrich Racing Stock Sedan series (slightly modified subcompacts), as well as its half of the jointly sanctioned Super Vee circuit.

The United States Auto Club (USAC), which sanctions various types of oval track racing including the Indy-type Championship cars, has elected to cut practice and qualifying time from its events and has imposed a 1.8 mpg upper fuel consumption limit on Indy cars (about a 50 percent change from last year's average). Restricted fuel consumption yields lower speeds, closer and safer if slightly less spectacular racing, and such novelties as driver-adjusted turbocharger boost and maybe even fuel gauges. The Indy cars burn methanol, a non-petroleum-based fuel, but USAC is showing that it is willing to do its part for the overall shortage of energy.

Mighty NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing), firmly entrenched in the fuel-starved Southeast, was a major force in the birth of the NMC and also one of the first to announce and put into effect its conservation plans.

Practice time for the Grand National Stock Cars was cut by three days and each car was allotted only 23.6 gallons of fuel for practice and qualifying at Daytona. In addition, race lengths were cut by 10 percent, so the Daytona 500 became a 450-mile race. Union Oil, which supplies the special racing fuel (not pump gas) for the NASCAR stockers, showed its good faith by cutting its allotment by 25 percent for the whole season.

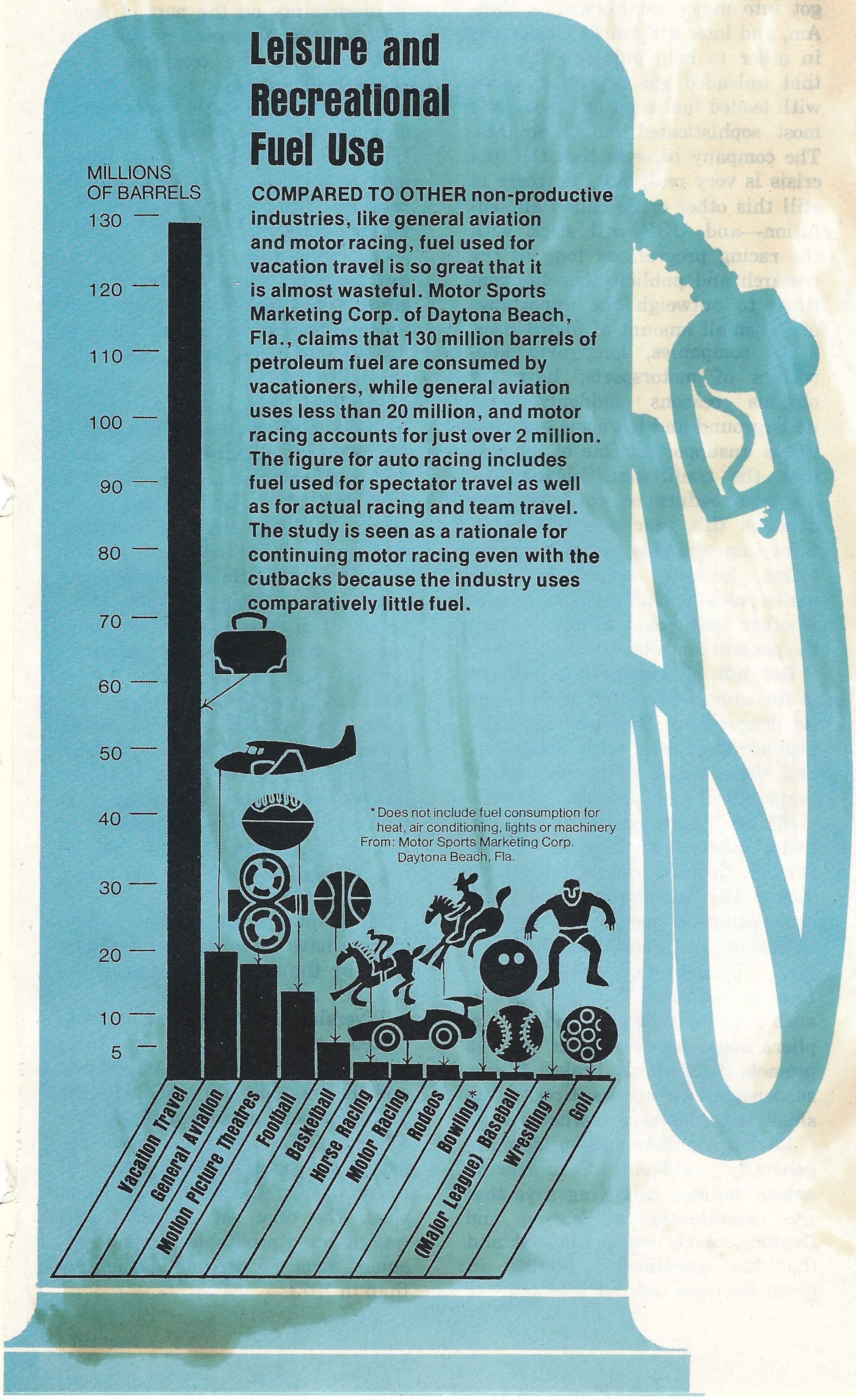
The National Hot Rod Association (NHRA), which sanctions drag racing events nationwide, has announced that it will conserve fuel across the board.

It will cut the lengths of its events (a three-day drag meet uses 25 percent less fuel than a four-day meet, since only so many runs can be made in a day); decrease the number of events (28 vs. 32 last year in the World Championship Series); reduce the number of qualifying runs allowed at some events; trim final fields in national runoffs by as much as 50 percent; and in some cases even accept fewer entries.

Off-road racing, represented by Mickey Thompson's fast-growing SCORE International (which includes 4-wheel-drive vehicles, pickups, dune buggies and motorcycles), will also cut its usage by the requested amount, primarily by reducing the lengths of events and practice time allowed.

Momentarily safe from unthinking political discrimination, thanks to the efforts of the NMC and the various sanctioning bodies, the next challenge the sport must face is to obtain (and in many cases *retain*) the sponsorship necessary for most teams to go racing at all. Early in the season at least, the prospects for some looked pretty dismal.

In the words of Mike Knepper of *Road & Track* magazine: "Of all the major professional sports, only motor racing is a conspicuous consumer of petroleum products. A football team may consume considerably more fuel jetting from New York to Los Angeles than 40 or 50 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."



Leisure and Recreational Fuel Use

COMPARED TO OTHER non-productive industries, like general aviation and motor racing, fuel used for vacation travel is so great that it is almost wasteful. Motor Sports Marketing Corp. of Daytona Beach, Fla., claims that 130 million barrels of petroleum fuel are consumed by vacationers, while general aviation uses less than 20 million, and motor racing accounts for just over 2 million. The figure for auto racing includes fuel used for spectator travel as well as for actual racing and team travel. The study is seen as a rationale for continuing motor racing even with the cutbacks because the industry uses comparatively little fuel.

So the problem is not so much that the sport uses energy but rather that it does so in such a conspicuous manner—often on nationwide TV in front of millions of viewers.

It's understandable, then, that many corporate executives whose companies had supported racing in the past, or might have in the future, are now looking at the situation in an entirely different light.

A sponsorship crisis thus poses a much more serious threat to motorsports than the availability of fuel. All the fuel in the world won't do a racing team much good if the support money which allows it to build and maintain the cars, pay salaries and travel expenses, etc., becomes unavailable.

Of course, a shortage of sponsorship money affects the smaller teams first and most, and many will be forced either to quit or to seriously curtail their budgets and field uncompetitive efforts. But some big name efforts have been hurt as well. The Patrick Petroleum team of '73 Indy winner Gordon Johncock and Ontario 500 winner Wally Dallenbach has lost the support of perennial angel STP.

Patrick has purchased a pair of brand new Eagles from Dan Gurney's All American Racers shop and reportedly will press on with or without major support. STP Corp. is still backing Richard Petty's NASCAR Dodge, and may well get back into the USAC Championship program before the Indy race. But should its pullout become permanent, it would certainly hurt the sport that helped make STP the second most recognized trademark (after Coke) around the world.

Roger Penske is still busy with a one-car USAC effort and the AMC Matador NASCAR campaign—both for driver Gary Bettenhausen—plus a Formula One development program which should yield a competitive effort by the time the World Championship circuit reaches these shores in the fall.

But super driver Mark Donohue has retired and the Penske machine has dropped from the SCCA CanAm, which it won last year with the invincible TurboPorsche 917/30, and the Formula 5000 series, which it didn't win with an AMC-powered Lola—as well as the U.S. rounds of the FIA International Championship of Makes.

Sunoco, which has been with Mr. Penske for as long as anyone can remember, has at least reduced its visibility—if not cut its support—since the shortage struck. Mr. Penske was optimistic but still buried in negotiation by mid-March, a time when racing contracts are traditionally long-since settled.

Sears apparently will remain a strong supporter, Sunoco may come back with an entirely new project, and the Norton Co.—a supplier

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of machine tools, abrasives and other products—will help pick up the tab for at least one race event at Penske's Michigan International Speedway and perhaps for part of the Indy program as well.

One of the best professional road-racers in this or any other country, '72 CanAm and twice TransAm champion George Follmer, has turned to the NASCAR circuit this season in a Bud Moore-prepared and RC Cola-sponsored Ford.

Mr. Follmer was quite candid in revealing that there were some problems in negotiating with RC at first, not so much because the company was reluctant to be associated with a fuel-burning activity, but because it was concerned that people might not be able to get out to see the races if the fuel situation remained tight.

After all, racing sponsorship is expected to pay for itself in product exposure just like any other form of advertising. But so far, the company has been very pleased with its decision to go ahead, according to Mr. Follmer.

Crowds have remained at near capacity, the effort has been competitive enough to attract attention, and the icing on the promotional cake has been the extensive TV coverage given the NASCAR races by ABC Sports.

In SCCA amateur road racing, where meaningful financial support has always been a problem for the stalwart weekend racers, things have tightened up even more than before.

Marathon Oil, long a friend of both amateur and professional racing, has stopped all involvement in order to "totally redirect" its advertising program.

The budget-easing product sponsorship programs, where serious competitors receive free oil, filters, spark plugs and sometimes even racing tires from companies such as Valvoline, STP, Champion and Goodyear in exchange for promotional considerations, will likely not dry up but will be somewhat reduced.

Professional road racing in all its many forms may suffer this season as a result of both the fuel shortage and some organizational problems as well.

Without major TV coverage, road racing—no matter how good it may be—is unfortunately still not a happy hunting ground for promotional money. Some generous former supporters, like RC Cola which has successfully fielded a CanAm team for the past two years, have been lured into more lucrative areas of the sport.

Others, like L&M cigarettes, which supported the SCCA's excellent Formula 5000 Series plus several team efforts in the recent past, have simply faded away into other promotional avenues.

Universal Oil Products (UOP) got into major racing with a CanAm, and later a Formula One effort, in order to help publicize the fact that unleaded gas was competitive with leaded fuel even in the world's most sophisticated racing engines. The company believes that the fuel crisis is very real, but that there is still this other crisis called air pollution—and UOP will stick with the racing program as long as the research and publicity benefits continue to outweigh the importance of the small amount of fuel it uses.

Oil companies, long avid supporters of motorsports, have for obvious reasons suddenly gone underground and left some excellent teams unsupported. One of the reasons the traditional Sebring and Daytona endurance contests were canceled this year was the uncertainty among many major European teams, formerly helped by companies such as Gulf and Shell, as to whether they could afford to cross the pond to compete.

But not all racing has suffered to the same degree. The NHRA says its drag racing programs are more popular than ever with spectators, and there seems to be no lack of competitors and product sponsors.

Mickey Thompson paints an even rosier picture of off-road racing. Product sponsors and "contingency" money (for competitors who place well using a company's product) will be in great abundance this year, Mr. Thompson says—probably because off-road racing provides such a fertile testing ground for suppliers eager to develop as well as promote their wheels, brakes, filters, suspension components, tires, windshield wiper blades and whatever.

Racing suppliers and builders are generally confident. Road racing engine builder Bill King says that the cancellation of Sebring and Daytona nearly wiped him out and that his operation is $40,000 in gross business behind last year at this time, but that things should improve in the spring as some of the undecided sponsorship money begins to loosen up.

Bob Farmer, owner of Bob's Drag Chutes, a major drag racing supplier, says that business went down at first but that dealers ordered optimistically and he's actually ahead of last year at the moment.

A. J. Foyt's Indy engine builder, Howard Gilbert, told *Ward's Auto World* that orders for new engines had suffered somewhat as a result of uncertainty on the part of sponsors, but that the new 1.8 mpg limit had improved the competitiveness of the Foyt engines.

Dan Gurney's AAR car-building organization has already sold 11 Indianapolis Eagles ("about average" at this time, they say) and has retained Olsonite support for Bobby Unser's Indy car; has picked up full sponsorship from Earle M. Jorgensen Steel Co. for a two-car F-5000 effort; and (like Roger Penske) is proceeding with the development of its Formula One car to be ready this fall.

At least one individual seems to have benefitted from the crisis: Jim Kinsler, of Kinsler Fuel Injection in Birmingham, Mich.

In fact, Mr. Kinsler may have come up with a breakthrough that could make him the most popular man in racing. He has designed a new fuel injection system that he says can develop 5 percent more power than anything presently in use—and get 10 percent better fuel economy at the same time.

An experimental model was on Al Unser's Eagle at the Ontario 500-mile race in February, and Al Unser lost to his brother Bobby by only 0.58 seconds after an afternoon of racing. But when the flag fell, Al had 30 gallons of his 280-gallon methanol allotment left!

Most race track promoters and owners have been generally encouraged by the first few events of the season.

Riverside and Ontario, Cal., reported normal crowds at their early NASCAR and USAC events, and the Daytona 500 NASCAR race lost only about 10 percent attendance compared to last year due to a shortage of gas both in Florida and all up and down the East Coast. And when the dust settled, the event was not only profitable but had consumed some 30 percent less energy than in 1973.

Most event promoters are looking into charter bus plans and encouraging car pooling among spectators. The NHRA has even taken the commendable step of publishing fuel economy tips for its traveling competitors—and some are reportedly getting 12 to 14 mpg with their towing rigs vs. 6 to 8 previously.

Some racing courses are fairly far removed from civilization and may lose attendance if gas for traveling is severely limited.

Watkins Glen in upstate New York, for instance, will adjust its schedule to host as many as five professional events in one busy weekend. Roger Penske foresees no major problems at Michigan International Speedway and is planning two NASCAR and two USAC events on the oval track.

A spokesperson for Road America in central Wisconsin was also optimistic, and Dave Arnold of Mid-Ohio stated that over 80 percent of the Lexington, O., track's spectators came from within the state, and most of the rest are within a tank of gas for the round trip.

So the sport has suffered in some areas, but is nowhere near ready to go belly-up just yet.

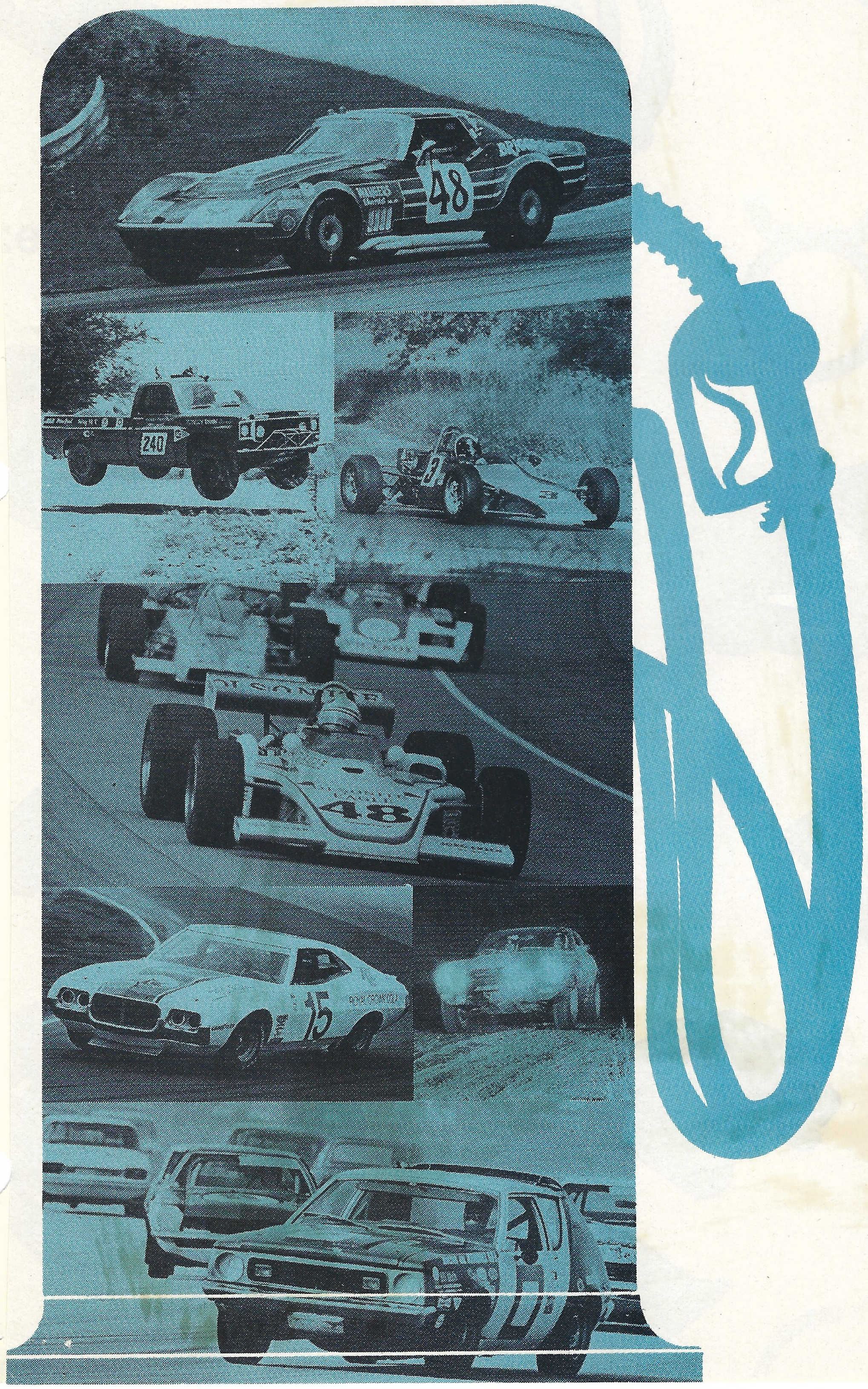
John Campbell, 1972 and 1973 chairman of the SCCA's "Press On Regardless" International Championship Rally reports that some sponsorship support has been lost and some competitors will be driven out by the increased cost of competing, but European-style rallying in this country will definitely survive.

Other challenges will be faced by motorsports in the coming months, local noise and air pollution legislation among them, but racing has emerged from the first phases of the energy crisis not entirely unscathed—but better organized and stronger.

For the first time, rival organizations are cooperating like business partners instead of bickering like spoiled children, and a strong and energetic lobbying group, the NMC, has been formed in Washington to present a united front.

The figures are in and the public is beginning to get the message. Once the people in general come to accept racing as a legitimate industry and pastime, no different from any other leisure-time pursuit, the sponsor money will flow as before and the sport will continue to grow.

George Follmer makes the point that the entire NASCAR season burns less gas on the track than most corner gas stations pump in a year. And British Leyland Motors/Quaker State-backed Bob Tullius, a professional "amateur" SCCA racer with several national championships to his credit, sums it up for everyone involved: "We have a perfect right to use energy to make a living." Besides, it's good entertainment.□



Response to fuel crunch varies with racing classes shown here (top to bottom, from left): John Greenwood hunts sponsors for GT Corvettes for SCCA TransAm, IMSA Camel GT, SCCA CanAm; Mickey Thompson's off-road program is in great shape; SCCA Formula Super Vee driver 'Howdy' Holmes seeks 1974 backers, hopes things will improve in spring; Dan Gurney's AAR Eagles sell despite tight sponsorship money (Bobby Unser will drive No. 48 at Indy); champion road-racer George Follmer enters NASCAR Grand National Stock Car Racing for RC Cola because 'that's where the money is'; rising costs may force some teams out of events like Detroit Region SCCA Press On Regardless; and B.F. Goodrich-sponsored IMSA Racing Stock Sedans hint at fuel-short future market for subcompacts.