



Team Moore Indy Light Dallaras ready to race

# Indy Lights

With a title sponsor on board, improved TV coverage on the horizon, and an impressive prize fund that can help reduce the budget needed for talented drivers, Indy Lights is re-establishing itself as a leading feeder championship for wannabe single-seater hotshots

WORDS BY JAMES WALLER

➔ Today, Firestone Indy Lights is the subcategory to the headline Indy Racing League (IRL) – but like almost all top-level single-seater racing in the USA, it has been through the mill in recent years.

Originally set up as a feeder category for CART, it was known as the American Racing Series from 1986 to 1990, and as Dayton Indy Lights from 1991 to 2001. Then, with CART suffering financially following the schism between it and the IRL, the championship was abruptly canceled. However, underlining just how evocative it is, the Indy Light name was then adopted by the IRL for its own feeder

category when it acquired the rights to Champ Car in 2008. Until then, the IRL's subcategory, set up in 2002, had been called the Infiniti (later Indy) Pro Series, and struggled for entrants.

Now, the same 425bhp V8-engined, Firestone-shod Dallaras are used by competitors, but the numbers have risen dramatically, with at least 20 cars in every race. Although the use of the Indy Lights name is credited for some of that turnaround, so too are a generous prize fund, decent TV coverage and the chance to support the IRL on a variety of road and oval courses.

## Prize money

The Indy Lights Championship organizers put up almost US\$4 million in prize money this season, divided up based on finishing positions and standings in the championship. A top-four driver at the end of the season can expect to have earned around US\$250,000 in prize money – around a quarter of the annual budget for contesting the championship. “Recent history shows that the rise in race entries is equivalent to the rise in prize money,” says Mark M. Moore, boss of Team Moore Racing. “It is shared through the field, helping teams lower down the finishing order. In contrast, most of the rival series are basically racing for trophies.”



## Lights vs Atlantic

After dropping Indy Lights from its schedule, Champ Car gradually adopted Formula Atlantic as its feeder category from 2002 – and it still runs today. Drivers compete in identical Swift chassis powered by a 300bhp 2.4-liter Cosworth engine badged by Mazda. With similar performance levels, it inevitably vies with Indy Lights for teams, drivers and fans.

Costs are similar: a top-level 15-race season in Indy Lights costs around US\$1 million, in contrast to the US\$750,000 it costs to contest Formula Atlantic's 11-round championship.

This season, 40 drivers contested Indy Lights events, and 28 entered Atlantic events. Better prize money and a place on the IRL support card undoubtedly make Indy Lights the more attractive of the two at present, although Atlantic officials insist the series can be revived. It is now under the stewardship of IMSA, and Formula Atlantic hopes that support slots at ALMS and Grand-Am events will help to develop interest in the series.

## The calendar

In 2008 the championship comprised 15 races divided among seven ovals, four temporary street circuits, and three permanent road courses. “There is no other motor racing series in the world that requires so much diversity – for drivers, mechanics and teams,” says Moore.

All races are held on the same weekend as the headline IRL events, including the Freedom 100 on the Friday before the Indy 500, meaning that some Indy Light squads have been able to team up with the likes of Andretti Green or Rahal Letterman to share data and provide garage tours and hospitality to sponsors.

“The IRL organization is second to none, the service it provides is exceptional”

Dan Andersen, Team Andersen

## TV and publicity

Due to its slot on the IRL support package, crowd figures dwarf the relatively meager television coverage of Indy Lights. In 2008 an estimated 1.2 million race fans attended events, while 100,000 households are estimated to have watched the championship's half-hour midweek slot on ESPN2, according to the latest 2007 figures. That looks set to improve in 2009, however, when the series will be screened on Versus. “They have promised us shows of up to an hour, with the possibility of some same-day and live coverage,” says Dan Andersen, boss of Andersen Racing. “Improved TV coverage is key to championship growth.” The IRL has a dedicated team of marketing and media personnel working to improve the TV package, as well as trying to link teams and drivers with sponsors. “The IRL recognizes that the health of its race teams is also at the foundation of its series,” adds Mark Moore. Indy Lights is shown on Motors TV in Europe, although viewing figures are not available.

## The cars

The chassis is built by Dallara and costs US\$137,900. It is a bespoke design, although it is having to evolve with the championship calendar. “It was designed for when the championship was ovals-only,” says Andersen. “That means it's highly responsive to changes on those tracks, but it could do with a little work for use on street or road courses. This year new wing flaps have helped, making the cars more tuneable and drivable on road courses, and that gets the team more involved and helps the drivers to develop. We're a training ground, and the cars need to reflect that.”



## The last word



DAN ANDERSEN, OWNER, TEAM ANDERSEN

“I ran US Formula Ford 2000 for 10 years as the series promoter, but the way the IRL runs this championship brings a whole different perspective to events. The organization is second to none, and the service it provides to back up the teams in terms of information, access to facilities, and sponsorship support is exceptional.”



ROGER BAILEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FIRESTONE INDY LIGHTS

“Driving in front of big audiences is great for our drivers, teams and sponsors, but you have to keep in mind that TV coverage and crowd figures are really secondary to our primary purpose, which is to develop future drivers and teams for the IndyCar Series. That's why we're here.”



MARK MOORE, TEAM MOORE RACING

“I am surprised that more drivers from Europe are not here racing, as I believe the exchange rate makes our series fantastic value. When you look at where the IRL is and its rules, why wouldn't a driver want to race in our series? This past season the Firestone Indy Lights series had 10 different winners in 16 races. That is competitive, and that is how you make great drivers.”



AL SPEYER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRIDGESTONE FIRESTONE MOTORSPORTS

“Competing and winning on the racetrack means we can see our product in action, plus it offers Firestone Racing the opportunity to form great relationships with up-and-coming drivers, team owners, engineers and mechanics. Those relationships carry through the years, and we are proud to continue our association with former Firestone Indy Lights champions such as Scott Dixon, Tony Kanaan, Oriol Servia, and Eric Bachelart.”