

ALMS series goes green with alternative fuels

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The green machine is turning laps on the racetracks of North America.

Like much of the rest of the world, the drive to reduce the environmental footprint, or in this case, tread mark, of cars has arrived in the world of motorsports.

While the Honda Racing Formula One team was arguably the first high-profile racing operation to declare a concern for the environment in 2007 — a multimillion-dollar effort that was embraced by some fans and dismissed by some critics as merely “green-washing” — a green message is now being preached by racing teams, drivers, sponsors and, in some cases, sanctioning bodies.

But it was the American LeMans Series (ALMS) that threw down the gauntlet to other major racing series earlier this year. ALMS president and CEO Scott Atherton announced at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit that beginning with the 2008 season — which got under way last month in Florida with the 12 Hours of Sebring and hits Mosport International Raceway in Bowmanville, Ont., in August — the ALMS series was going green.



The two Corvette C6.Rs in the GT1 class are powered by E85 fuel.
(AMERICAN LE MANS SERIES)

Despite his tough talk that “most forms of racing have lost their way” and they risk becoming irrelevant, Atherton says he wasn’t overtly calling out other racing series for their perceived lack of concern for the environment.

“If it was a challenge, it was a challenge in that if it’s successful for us, the byproduct would be pressure [for other series] to do the same, or something similar,” Atherton says.

So far, no other major racing series has made such an ambitious and public move. “If we can effectively demonstrate that green doesn’t have to give up anything and doesn’t have to be boring ... if you can do all that, why wouldn’t you?” Atherton says.

The ALMS has some high-powered help with its green initiative. It joined with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy and SAE International to get the project off the ground, Atherton says, after the EPA approached SAE about using racing as a platform to spread the gospel of environmentally friendly fuels and reducing the role of the car in climate change.

Atherton says because of the high degree of manufacturer involvement — cars from Acura, Audi, Aston Martin, Porsche, Corvette, Ferrari, Mazda, among others, race in the series — he thought all the organizations could work together on going green.

The centrepiece of the greening of the ALMS includes the use of alternative fuels such as E85 ethanol, zero-sulphur “clean” diesel fuel and E10 racing gasoline.

The two Corvette C6.Rs in the GT1 class (one of which is being driven this season on a part-time basis by Canadian Ron Fellows) are powered by E85, as is the Aston-Martin Vantage of Drayson-Barwell Motorsport in the GT2 class. Audi Sport North America, the 2007 LMP1 champions, compete with their diesel-powered R10 prototype. The Lola B06/10-AER of Intersport Racing is the first prototype team to run an E85-powered car.

While no hybrid-powered cars compete yet, that could change in the next few seasons. Atherton says he has a manufacturer — that he won't name — entertaining the possibility of competing with a gas/electric hybrid race car.

Atherton says ALMS is keeping its options open when it comes to green fuels. “There's not one single [fuel] solution,” he said. “A collection of solutions will solve the problem. Each manufacturer is pursuing their own best approach.”

The ethanol used in the series, he says, is cellulosic-based ethanol that is not sourced from food products. The production of grain-based ethanol has been blamed in part for contributing to rising food prices around the world.

Atherton acknowledges that he's also being prudent when it comes to green racing — adopting a green platform when most auto manufacturers have some sort of focus on the environment simply makes good business sense.

That fact was echoed by Doug Fehan, the head of GM's Corvette racing program. Describing the Corvette's switch to ethanol as an “enormous accomplishment,” Fehan added that it also fit with GM's goals as a company. In order for him to find the corporate funding to keep the team going, he had to “find things of interest to the corporation.”

If there's one racing series that's aware of what its corporate backers want, it's NASCAR. Its approach to the environment has less to do with fuel than the ALMS's does, but more to do with working with its main sponsors and suppliers to reduce its impact on the environment.

Sprint, the series title sponsor, has introduced a phone recycling program in which fans are encouraged to recycle their old cellphones at race events; Coca-Cola has a program to encourage bottle recycling among race fans and NASCAR works with Goodyear on its tire recycling program and helps ensure used racing tires get recycled and eventually turned into material to build playgrounds. As well, Safety Kleen has implemented oil recycling and returning services at each NASCAR race event. Safety Kleen also ensures that brake fluid, transmission fluid and other liquids and fluids from race cars are put to another use or recycled.

Ramsay Poston, managing director, corporate communications, at NASCAR, says the stock-car series is also constructing a new office building in Charlotte, N.C., that will be built to Leadership in Environmental Energy and Design (LEED) standards, a third-party designation for efficient green buildings in the United States.

But the cars on the track are still remarkably similar to those driven by many NASCAR fans — 5.0-litre V-8s powered by unleaded racing gasoline. Unleaded, incidentally, replaced leaded fuel in 2007.

“The transition [to unleaded fuel] was not an easy transition,” Poston says, adding that series president Brian France would like to see the United States wean itself from its dependence on foreign oil. “This is important to us, but what is the fuel of the future? There are questions about different forms of fuel that we continue to look closely at.”

Poston said NASCAR fans are concerned about the environment as well as the rising cost of gasoline, and have begun to worry about the cost of filling their cars and RVs in order to travel to NASCAR events. While the series is aware of all those concerns, he’s not convinced that a greater, greener strategy for the stock series will help prevent further damage to the climate.

“Whatever NASCAR does will have little or no effect on the environment,” Poston says. “We use 150,000 gallons of fuel a year. American drivers use 350 million gallons a day. What NASCAR does is highly symbolic.”

The ALMS season

The 2008 American Le Mans Series schedule:

March 15: 12 Hours of Sebring, Fla.

April 5: St. Petersburg Grand Prix, Fla.

April 19: Long Beach Grand Prix, Calif.

May 18: Utah Grand Prix, Salt Lake City

July 12: Northeast Grand Prix, Lakeville, Conn.

July 19: Acura Sportscar Challenge of Mid-Ohio, Lexington, Ohio

Aug. 9: Generac 500, Elkhart Lake, Wis.

Aug. 24: Grand Prix of Mosport, Bowmanville, Ont.

Aug. 30: Detroit Sports Car Challenge

Oct. 4: Petit Le Mans, Braselton, Ga.

Oct. 18: Monterey Sports Car Championships, Calif.