

# IMSA Hits the Accelerator Heading into Its 50th Anniversary Season

## In the Beginning

In 1969, IMSA, the International Motorsports Association, was born from the vision of John and Peggy Bishop, together with Bill France Sr. Although John Bishop was executive director of the Sports Car Club of America, he was not pleased with the direction the sport was headed. France, the founder of NASCAR, wanted to bring the same level of professionalism to sports car racing that he had already brought to stock car racing.

Shortly after the founders' first meeting, IMSA held its first event in October 1969, for Formula Fords on the 3/4-mile infield oval at Pocono Raceway. There were 348 spectators.

## Evolving over Time

Over the past five decades, IMSA has gone through a variety of forms and names. The IMSA GT series became the Camel GT in 1972 when R.J. Reynolds Tobacco became the first title sponsor of the series. The series thrived through the 1980s and featured such racing legends as Hurley Haywood and Geoff Brabham, along with other legends, including Mario Andretti and A.J. Foyt. Hollywood stars such as Paul Newman, Gene Hackman, Tom Cruise and Patrick Dempsey have also raced in various IMSA series.

The Bishops sold the organization in 1989. The challenging economy of the 1990s proved to be a difficult period for IMSA that resulted in changes to the organization, including its name and ownership.

Don Panoz, an entrepreneur from Georgia, took ownership and returned the organization's name to IMSA. He created a partnership with Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO), organizers of 24 Hours of Le Mans, which led to the formation of the American Le Mans Series (ALMS).

In 1999, a new sports car sanctioning body was founded — the Grand American Road Racing Association. For the next 13 years, the two organizations competed aggressively against each other — for drivers, fans, sponsors, tracks and media.

## The Unification of the Sports Car World

In 2012, Panoz sold IMSA and the ALMS to Grand American Road Racing. This brought sports car racing under one umbrella, with IMSA serving as the sanctioning body.

The current version of IMSA, with NASCAR chairman and CEO Jim France serving as its chairman, began six years ago. IMSA combined the best of the previous two organizations — the best cars and rules — to form a united sports car series.

"We embraced the diversity and different cultures (of the two organiza-



The No. 6 Team Penske Acura DPi leads the field to the green flag.

tions) and truly made a commitment to merge the two into one with a best practices approach," said Scott Atherton, president and chief operating officer of IMSA.

Over the past six years, IMSA has seen tremendous growth. Visitors to IMSA's website have increased by 40 percent year over year (YOY), while 25 percent more people follow IMSA on social media than in 2017. In addition to a 10 percent increase in unique television reach YOY, there has also been a 25 percent increase in the number of hours of live race coverage streamed by fans and a 10 percent increase in earned video views YOY. Along with these gains in the metrics, IMSA boasts a robust lineup of iconic corporate partner brands driving B2B and B2C objectives.

## From WeatherTech to Michelin

In 2015, WeatherTech, known for its premium, custom-fit car floor liners, signed a multiyear agreement as title sponsor of IMSA's premier series, which features four classes of cars. David MacNeil, WeatherTech's founder and CEO, is also a road racer and his son, Cooper, is a successful racer in the series.

"WeatherTech is a great marketing partner, with a line of great premium products and high-quality people," said Atherton.

Michelin, a brand that has become synonymous with safety, performance and excellence, begins as IMSA's "Official Tire Supplier" this year. The multi-year deal, one of the longest in IMSA's history, is the core of Michelin's North American marketing platform.

"Michelin's marketing and activation plan is going to expose our product to an audience, to a population that perhaps has never heard of it," said Atherton. "But we're confident they'll be intrigued and, if history is our

guide, once we get people to sample our product, they quickly become fans."

The additions of WeatherTech, Michelin and other key sponsors have given IMSA a stability it hasn't achieved in many years.

## NBC — The Home of IMSA and Motorsports

In 2018, IMSA and NBC Sports signed a six-year deal that kicks off this season. Every race in the WeatherTech Championship, IMSA Michelin Pilot Challenge, IMSA Prototype Challenge and the other single-make series it sanctions will be televised on NBC or NBCSN throughout 2019.

In total, NBC Sports will present more than 100 hours of IMSA coverage, a 25 percent increase across its broadcast, cable and digital platforms. Additionally, NBC's website and sports app will offer flag-to-flag live streaming coverage of every WeatherTech Championship race, providing a consistent viewing platform for fans and sponsors.

As the "Home of Motorsports," NBC also carries NASCAR and IndyCar races. With the network's practice of cross promoting its properties, race fans of all ages will know when and where to watch IMSA's races, leading to an increase in exposure for its partners.

"This gives us the opportunity to plan long-term strategies and see them through to fruition over the course of many years," said Atherton.

## A Series of One Dozen

One of the unique aspects of IMSA's WeatherTech Championship is the number of races that make up a season. IMSA schedules 12 races a year at some of the most famous and iconic tracks in North America. Limiting the number of races in the series increases fan anticipation. But, with races ranging from 100 minutes to 24 hours, IMSA packs a lot of racing into every season. In fact, IMSA competitors log as many miles/hours of racing in the year's first two events as an IndyCar competitor does in an entire season.

The season opens in January with the "Super Bowl" of sports car racing — the Rolex 24 At Daytona. The series includes three other endurance races — Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring Presented by Advance Auto Parts (Florida), Sahlen's Six Hours of the Glen (Watkins Glen, N.Y.) and Motul Petit Le Mans (10 hours) at Michelin Raceway Road Atlanta. A separate award is presented for the best combined performance in these four long-distance endurance races.

## Not Your Average Racing Fan

Fans of IMSA's sports car racing series stand out in the crowd. IMSA's average fan is highly educated and typically earns more than the average American. When they attend an IMSA race, these avid car enthusiasts get unprecedented access to the drivers and cars. All of the drivers are available



The No. 63 WeatherTech Ferrari speeds through the night at last year's Rolex 24 At Daytona.



IMSA founders John Bishop (l) and Bill France Sr., 1969.



Fans have the opportunity to get close to the cars and drivers at the pre-race grid walk.



IMSA President Scott Atherton and BMW driver and racing legend, Alex Zanardi rang the NASDAQ Closing Bell earlier this month.

for autograph sessions and an open grid walk on pit row allows thousands of fans to take an up-close look at the cars minutes before the start of each event.

At every race, fans take part in IMSA-organized car corrals, where they can display their personal sports cars. Corvette and Porsche, among others, organize their own car corrals for owners of those high-end cars. These activations include dedicated hospitality, new car displays and private race team appearances.

In addition to the automotive displays, there are often lifestyle displays and concerts, providing fans of all ages a multitude of activities to give them a day they won't forget.

### The Cars are the Stars

Like the organization itself, the stars have changed over time. Throughout much of IMSA's storied history, the stars have been the cars. The lineups at the various races have read like a who's who of the sports car manufacturing world — BMW, Corvette, Ferrari, Lamborghini and Porsche.

The 2019 lineup features a record-setting 19 manufacturers. In addition to the five already mentioned, the other 14 manufacturers include Acura, Alfa Romeo, Aston Martin, Audi, Cadillac, Ford, Honda, Hyundai, Lexus, Mazda, Mercedes-AMG, McLaren, Nissan and Volkswagen.

The level of manufacturer involvement is unmatched in the motorsports industry as they are actively involved with IMSA's TV broadcasts, as well as sponsoring both external and onsite displays and activations. In fact, at the Rolex 24 At Daytona, there will be more manufacturers displaying cars than at the Detroit Auto Show.

For 2019, IMSA is at near capacity with 39 cars committed as full-season entries. Most of the cars that compete in IMSA-sanctioned races are premium cars that could be purchased by consumers at a dealership.

In recent years, the drivers have come to the forefront, with recognizable stars such as Hélio Castroneves, a three-time winner of the Indianapolis

500 and the 2007 winner of "Dancing with the Stars"; Juan Pablo Montoya, a two-time Indianapolis 500 champion and ranked among the top 50 Formula One drivers of all time; and IMSA veterans Jordan and Ricky Taylor.

"Having Hélio and Juan Pablo in our paddock has, without question, been a boost to the WeatherTech Championship," said Atherton. "Their household name status has had a positive impact on IMSA."

Making his North American sports car racing debut at the Rolex 24 At Daytona is two-time CART champion Alex Zanardi. A double amputee as a result of a horrific racing accident, Zanardi is a multi-gold medal-winning Paralympian. When given the opportunity by BMW to race at the Rolex 24 or Le Mans, Zanardi enthusiastically chose the race at Daytona International Speedway.

Two-time world champion Fernando Alonso returns to Daytona in 2019 after making his debut in the iconic race in 2018.

### Moving into Pop Culture

The rise of sports car racing has led to a new movie coming out this year. "The Art of Racing in the Rain," from the New York Times best seller of the same name, stars Milo Ventimiglia of "This is Us" fame; Amanda Seyfried, known for "Mamma Mia" and "Les Misérables"; and Kevin Costner.

Patrick Dempsey, best known for his role as Dr. Derek Shepherd on "Grey's Anatomy" and an avid race car driver who has participated in the Rolex 24 At Daytona, is the movie's producer. The movie, slated to debut later in 2019, features IMSA racing throughout and will further introduce IMSA to new audiences.

### Celebrating the Golden Anniversary

In 2019, IMSA will have a season-long celebration of its 50th anniversary. Although the celebration will be featured at every event, there are four special occasions throughout the year that will recognize IMSA's four cornerstone elements.

The season opens at the Rolex 24 At Daytona with a celebration of the drivers and teams, while the Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring will recognize racetracks. The Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion at WeatherTech Raceway Laguna Seca typically features a manufacturer. This year, IMSA will be the featured marque, making it the first time a sanctioning body will be celebrated at the highly regarded event. And, in the season finale at the Motul Petit Le Mans at Michelin Raceway Road Atlanta, the festivities will wrap up with a celebration of the fans.

### The Future Looks Bright

As IMSA becomes more mainstream, the outlook for its future growth is on an upward trend. More fans are being introduced to the sport, leading to increasing ticket sales and viewership.

"IMSA has a strong foundation and as bright a future as it's ever had," said Atherton. "We have a combination of long-term sustainability and an unprecedented level of professionalism. We have world-class teams, drivers, manufacturers, event promoters, and marketing and broadcast partners. We're hitting on all cylinders."





## DAYTONA INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY

<b>SAT   JAN 26</b> 2-5PM ET  NBCSN 5-9PM ET  Sports 9 9-12AM ET  NBCSN	<b>SUN   JAN 27</b> 12-3AM ET  NBCSN 3-6AM ET  Sports 9 6AM-3PM ET  NBCSN
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# #Rolex24


**FLAG TO FLAG COVERAGE**  
 WITH NBCSN AUTHENTICATION