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# Indy Racing beats drum

Circuit secures higher profile with the fans

By Skip Wood  
USA Today

For the past several seasons, many track operators whose facilities played host to the Indy Racing League have privately grumbled that the series provided little help in banging the drums to stimulate would-be spectator awareness.

Pre-race publicity, for the most part was left to the tracks. The IRL, now known as the Indy Racing Series, apparently was satisfied that the simple fact its drivers make up the Indianapolis 500 field would be enough to lure the masses.

It didn't. The turnout for many races, compared to the 300,000-plus spectators who annually come to watch the Indy 500, paralleled gatherings at sandlot football games compared to the crowd at the Super Bowl.

Enter Bob Reif, who knows a thing or two about third-and-long situations. A quarterback at

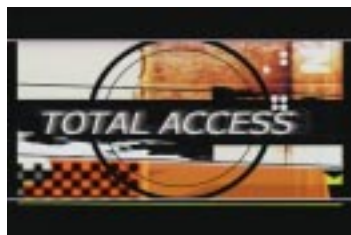
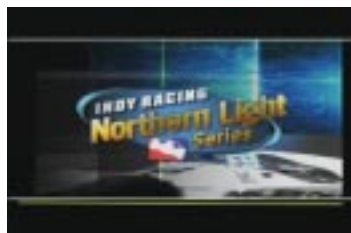
Princeton University in the late 1980s, Reif is a marketing specialist hired by the series before this past season to become a proactive player in boosting the circuit's visibility.

"Not only did we take steps to promote the races ourselves," Reif says, "we also have taken steps to increase awareness and, more importantly,

education, of the series Across the board."

Increased awareness doesn't always mean increased attendance, but the philosophy certainly has been a relative success for the IRL. Crowds at most tracks this past season were noticeably bigger than in previous stops, and the push already is on for 2001. Next year, 13 races have been scheduled, compared to this year's nine.

Reif indicates that anything less than sellouts for stops at newly opened tracks at Kansas City and ,Chicago will be a disappointment.



"What our mission is, is new fans," Reif says. "It's about trial and conversion. People need to have a reason to go to the races, and we want to give them a lot of reasons."

Unlike the custom at NASCAR's Winston Cup series, fans at most IRL races now are granted access to the garage area, where they can watch the drivers and crews at work. The series also has what Reif acknowledges is "an infomercial" to hype the product.

"A year ago at this time," Reif says, "we made it crystal clear that we were committed to the long term."

Which means what, exactly?

"That were here to stay," he says. "I believe that we are going to become the premier racing series in the world - bar none."

Say what?

Bigger than NASCAR? Bigger than CART? Bigger than Formula One?

"Absolutely," Reif says. "Hey, it might take 10 years, but you know what? Without a vision, people will perish."