

Formula 5000—An Idea for Today?

by Pete Lyons



The late news—very late—that U.S. open-wheel racing's long uncivil war has finally staggered to its hemorrhagic conclusion, fell with less than seismic impact in the motor sports world at large. As someone emailed in to SpeedTV's "Wind Tunnel," the only reason for many fans to bother talking about IRL's muffled victory over Champ Car in February was their boredom with the rain delay in that weekend's NASCAR event.

I think it was host Dave Despain who opined that two-time Indy 500 champion Helio Castroneves is better known to the public for his ballroom dancing than his Speedway driving.

Sad, sad, sad. Fifteen or so years ago, Indy cars put on what I thought was the best racing on the planet. Truly, it often

brought me out of my chair in excitement. But that was a long, dreary time ago.

All things change and that's why we can harbor some faint hope that the reunification hasn't come too late. Perhaps, working in resolute harmony, those tuning-up Indy racing's future can devise some combustible mixture of cars, stars, and significance that can be sparked into a revival—before they lose the last person who cares.

Achieving this goes way beyond what kind of racecar they come up with, but IRL is indeed devising a new one for the 500's centennial in 2011. Very little has been revealed so far, but as an outsider, just waiting, I keep thinking back to the old Formula 5000s of the late sixties.

Formula America—that's what I thought it should have been called. The idea sprang from the same giddy, experimental fecundity as the Can-Am, but instead of being virtually unrestricted, the stock-block Detroit V-8s were limited to 5.0 liters, the same as in the contemporary Trans-Am. GM, Ford,

Chrysler, and American Motors all were players, because the engines were so available. The chassis strongly resembled both the F1 and the Indy cars of the era—in some cases (McLaren, Eagle), they were the same basic designs.

F5000s were a powerful and pragmatic answer to the question: How do we establish professional, open-wheel road racing in North America?

I guess "establish" isn't the right word, because the formula faded and died in the mid-seventies, following my beloved Can-Am into oblivion. But then "oblivion" doesn't express it either because, disgustingly to me, the cars actually lived on under pseudo sports car bodywork for a second-generation "Can-Am." In the indelible words of series driver (and future F1 champ) Alan Jones, they were "Eff-five-thousands with overcoats."

If the SCCA hadn't called them "Can-Am" cars, I wouldn't have been bitter about it, because with or without fenders they were pretty impressive and entertaining racing machines. And, like

This Lotus-Ford, shot at Elkhart Lake in 1970, was just one of numerous chassis-engine combinations fostered by F5000. Though some stock car pundits say the type of vehicle doesn't matter, to many enthusiasts an interestingly experimental diversity of machinery is a huge part of racing's appeal. We can only hope IRL keeps that in mind for its next-generation Indycar.





Pete Lyons - www.peteilyons.com

Wing things at Lime Rock 1970, the last year F5000 allowed high, suspension-mounted airfoils. Running from 1968, when they were called Formula-As, the brawny open-wheelers lasted through 1976 and made champions of Lou Sell, Tony Adamowicz, John Cannon, David Hobbs, Graham McRae, Jody Scheckter and Brian Redman (three times).

any successful series, F5000/center-seat "Can-Am" attracted and showcased superb road racers: Andretti, Donohue, Follmer, Redman, Sullivan, Unser....

So, I'm wondering, could such a marriage work again? How about stepping back from the super-sophisticated, super-pricy, pure-blood racing engines we've seen developed just for IRL (Honda) and Champ Car (Cosworth), and instead try plugging in a wider variety of production-based power plants?

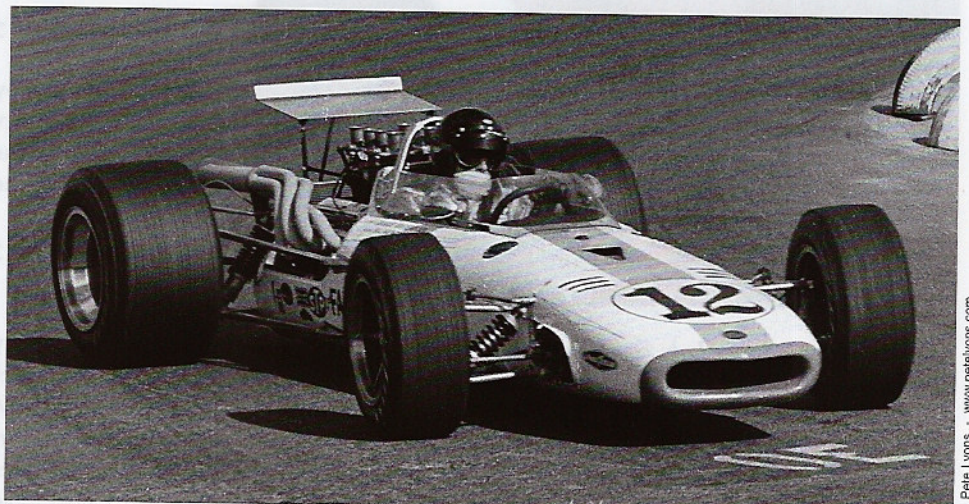
Grand-Am does it with its Daytona Prototypes, which are pig-ugly vehicles to my eye, but they do offer an interesting spectrum of different engine types, sizes, and brands. Good racing, too.

Or, what about just plugging in stock car motors? Supply certainly is no problem! Maybe their power would be—today's incredible small-blocks happily pump their pushrods well beyond 9,000 rpm and dyno more hp than the best of the old, big-block Can-Ams ever did. They'll push a bulky brick of stock car through 200 mph, so their potential in a single-seat missile on a banked speedway is a daunting thought.

But that could be handled with rev-limiting sonic orifices, as in ALMS or F3.

Either of the engine types I'm suggesting offers the potential of broad manufacturer support, plus a chance of more entrants being able to afford Indy car racing.

Yes, we would lose the sweet scream of the purebred racing engine. But what good is that if nobody comes to listen? 🏎️



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Based on the 1968 Indy-winning Gurney Eagle design, the F5000 version was one of the most successful—and prettiest—in the SCCA road race series. But as seen here at Laguna Seca in 1971, that year's high-airfoil ban set some teams back to powersliding. Whee!



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Long Beach 1992 shows what we'd like IRL to get back to: intense and nationally important racing on road courses and street circuits as well as ovals, with all the great names in lots of appealing cars.