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## Vegas Grand Prix preview

**View from the topside**

by Rick Benjamin

March 31, 2007

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One week to go before the excitement begins for real. Champ Car teams, some of them still without driver lineups complete, are about to load up the new DP01 race cars for the first time in the new season and head to the race track to begin one of the toughest stretches in memory.

For the first time in years, Champ Car opens with three straight events, all on temporary circuits. And the series has the honor of opening up what should be one of the strongest venues in racing on the streets of Las Vegas next week.

It'll be the toughest stretch for these teams in the new era of Champ Car, about to begin its fourth year.

While we await the announcement due from China, Champ Car officials, and Forsythe Championship Racing, we do know a good bit more about the team configurations that will open 2007 on the streets of Las Vegas next Sunday. The new Newman/Haas/Lanigan group will field the tour's dominant driver and its brightest new hope, a rookie who just happens to be an American and who carries one of the most famous names in open wheel racing. FCR will field a returning former champ in Paul Tracy and a returning former pole and race winner in Mario Dominguez. PKV is all set with a very experienced rookie in Neel Jani and an unknown from France in Tristan Gommendy.



The Vegas GP lights up the Fairmont Street sky in downtown Las Vegas

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Pacific Coast brings a very capable newcomer in Ryan Dalziel and an American blessed with plenty of attitude and desire in Alex Figge.

There are high hopes as well at Team Australia, with sophomore Will Power about ready to capitalize on his pole run last fall at Surfers and stake his claim to stardom. And his stablemate, Atlantic champ Simon Pagenaud, should have a smooth learning curve, though the transition from 300hp Atlantic cars to 750hp Champ Cars is never easy.

And the new Minardi USA team, created from the base built by HVM's Keith Wiggins, could be strong by midseason. I'm really pleased Minardi was able to work out a deal with Dan Clarke, who brings passion, speed, and an element of wildness that equals high entertainment value. Robert Doornbos carries an F1 pedigree, and here's hoping he'll prove to be as strong in Champ

Car as has Justin Wilson at RuSport.

Speaking of RuSPORT, now half of RSPORTS with the former Rocketsports squad of Paul Gentilozzi, one of the most interesting things to observe over the next few weeks will be how that newly-merged operation fares in the warm West Coast sun of the season opening run. It's certainly true in contemporary motorsports that bigger teams have a better chance of success. The economies of scale and the stronger engineering effort that follows a growing team are qualities worth nurturing. But this newly amalgamated team may, I think, have a tough road ahead as crews from both squads try to determine the best ways to meld into a single unit and help their capable drivers win races.

Alex Tagliani is surely able to do that; his sole career win was also Rocketsports' only victory, at Road America 3 years ago.

Justin Wilson, meantime, has some of the series' best backing in CDW and has been a championship contender the past two seasons. Seeing how RSPORTS can support his run this year will be most interesting.

We've yet to hear from Dale Coyne and Eric Bachelart's Conquest team. Based on testing I'd say it's fair to expect Coyne to field Katherine Legge and Bruno Junqueira; that has the potential to be one of the year's surprise teams. As of the Laguna Spring Training test a few weeks ago Conquest appeared set to run one car. Eric is one of the tour's good guys, and I'm hoping some last minute backing will emerge that will allow him to bring aboard Nelson Philippe, Oriol Servia, or even Jan Heylen and Charles Zwolsman, all quality pilots who add depth and excitement.

It's good to keep in mind that the economy remains strong, the motorsports economy in my view is particularly strong, and that all concerned are working non-stop to locate the backing needed to continue to grow the Champ Car field. But the laws of economics haven't been repealed and it takes considerable quantities of cash to go racing. Any names missing from the entry list next week will have fallen victim to that reality. That is one part of big-league motorsports that hasn't changed.

See you in Vegas.

The author can be contacted at [feedback@autoracing1.com](mailto:feedback@autoracing1.com)

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