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**Through The Esses - Dressing Up That Old Gal Daytona
11/30/04 - © Andrew S. Hartwell**

“We are putting a new dress on an old lady.”

It is called the Daytona International Speedway because Bill France envisioned hosting races for American Stock Cars and European sports cars within its borders. And over the years the old gal has hosted a pair of annual classics for each form of racing. NASCAR has the Daytona 500 and sportscar racers have the Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona. And it is the endurance of this 45 years-young facility that has prompted parent company, the International Speedway Corporation (ISC), to invest in an expansive and complete renovation of the infield area.



Over the years the on-track content of the Rolex 24 has been controlled by various sanctioning bodies and interests but the facility itself has remained constant. The same buildings, garages, sheds, gas pumps and so on have been used time and again. And while there is an argument for the sportscar racing no longer having an international flavor, there will be no argument that Daytona International Speedway will look like a brand new world-class gal come the 2005 racing season.

Major infield renovations have been underway for some time now and we wanted to get more information about the makeover to pass along to our readers. What was in? What was out? What was new? We found the best person to ask in David Talley, the Director of Media Relations for Daytona International Speedway.

“We left up the media center and the existing Gatorade Victory Lane but for the most part we leveled everything else in the infield. The speedway opened in 1959 and while there have been some changes over the years, there really haven’t been any major projects. We added seats here and there and a new Nextel tower, but for the most part, this is really the first major infield renovation project the track has ever seen.”

There are photos of the ongoing construction effort posted on the DIS site. <http://www.daytonainternationalspeedway.com/> Daytona Speedway. We asked Talley to tell us about some of the major changes that will welcome fans next season.

“For starters, there is going to be one multi-level building in the center of the infield, located right at the start finish line, that we are calling the Daytona 500 Club. It will be a special place for fans to really enjoy their Daytona experience. There will be a bar and a wide viewing area, overlooking victory lane. It will have rooftop viewing and corporate suites as well.

“I should clarify that it will overlook the new Gatorade Victory Lane. We have left the old building that stands behind the current victory lane for use by the TV studios and our broadcast partners. But we are building a whole new victory lane right in front of the Daytona 500 Club. The old checkerboard area will remain but it will now be used for television as a backdrop.

“We will have new Nextel Cup garages. You will be able to walk behind the garages in what we call the “fan zone”, and view what is going on in the garages through a large glass window. You will be able to see the mechanics and the drivers at work in there. The Rolex cars will also use the NEXTEL Cup garages.

“There will also be a little grandstand area overlooking the NASCAR inspection stations. We hope to have NASCAR officials come out and explain to the fans sitting there what they are doing during an inspection.

“We will have brand new Busch Garages too. We are also expanding the recently constructed media center. We have taken down the old Benny Kahn media center and expanded the newer one. We added two additional areas to the back and side of the newer media center to replace the space lost with the destruction of the old building.”

Getting into and out of the infield of the circuit was limited in the past to one of two options (We aren't counting helicopters here because, well, there aren't too many of us who use them. Although they would be a tremendous advantage over following some of those Florida drivers!) You either drove through an ancient underground tunnel beneath turn four, or you crossed the track coming out of turn four. Obviously the latter option was only available before or after the race cars were in action. If you were piloting a motor home or other large vehicle that didn't fit through the tunnel, you had to plan your entrance and exit times to coincide with the break in race action. That could mean you were trapped in the infield for a long time.

But that issue has been addressed. Big time.

“We have a brand new tunnel in turn one. We are really excited about it. As you know, in past years once a race started there was no way for a large vehicle to get in or out of the track. The only way was through the tunnel by turn four and there was no way a big trailer, or even a square ambulance could fit through there.

“The old tunnel is so small; we had to put ice for the concession stands on golf carts in order to bring it in during race events! With the new tunnel we have a state of the art passageway. It can accommodate two tractor-trailers going in opposite directions! With the new tunnel, when someone falls out midway through the Daytona 500, and wants to pack up and get an early start on their trip back to California, they can. They no longer have to hang around until the end of the race.

“The tunnel is open to everyone. There will be a sidewalk to handle foot traffic as well. There will also be trams running through there during event weekends. “

Talley tells us that once fans are inside the infield they have several new areas to explore.

“We have specialty vehicle parking available in turns one and two. We have reserved vehicle parking in turns three and four. In turn four we have what we call Tent City. People bring out old recliners and sofas and set up tents. When the race is over they tend to leave the furniture behind and head back home.”

While you might be able to bring the old Lazy Boy (husband or chair, your choice) out to the facility with the lake in the center, you can't bring a boat or a fishing pole. Talley 'filled us in' on what is planned for Lake Lloyd, the body of water that fronts the back straight.

“We filled in one-third of Lake Lloyd and will offer premium parking along the banks. We made it kind of a beach atmosphere. Fans can see water shows, and ski shows and play volleyball along the shore. That is all new and we are very excited to be utilizing Lake Lloyd as we really did not use it in the past. You will see piers that go out into the water. People who use that parking area will also have the use of a community center located right by the water. There they can go in and check their internet and email, or play pool or ping pong or get a bite to eat.

“If you look at the lake from the start finish line, we filled in one third, from front to back. We never really took advantage of it before. Fans won't be able to actually go into the lake itself however.”

Other plans include making the insider's view of the action more accessible to more fans. Talley explains:

“What we are trying to do is make what we call the “Fan Walk” exciting. We want the TV crews to come in there and do fan interviews and stage their shows from the infield. We will have concession stands and Americrown souvenir stands, and we will be selling Daytona International Speedway goods and driver goods. We will have concerts going on and more.

“We are still working on what kind of space we will have available for other vendors, if any. We have a huge area allocated outside of the track, for the NASCAR driver trailers that set up to sell driver-specific merchandise. We have the space to handle all of this for a typical NASCAR crowd and some of that space will be available for other uses when we have the Rolex Series running events here.”

We wondered if any new structures or areas would be named for any particular person or organization.

“Right now the only building we are looking at naming is our Legends of Daytona area. It will honor Daytona's greatest racers in a unique area designed to pay tribute to their racing history. It will be located between the two Nextel Cup garages. The new Victory Lane will still be called Gatorade Victory Lane. And we will have the Daytona 500 Club facility.”

Construction has been going on for several months now. The recent spate of hurricanes to hit Florida passed through Daytona as well, but did little to cause damage or delay the renovations.

“We fared very well for having four hurricanes in six weeks. At the time that they came through we really didn't have any of the new structures erected yet. We did have some water and drainage issues during the excavation of the new tunnel area but we were able to take care of them. In fact even with the bad weather, we are still a week ahead of our projected completion date. We expect to have about 90% of all the work to be done completed by Christmas day. Some of the buildings, which won't be used during our go kart events that start after Christmas, will be finished up by the end of January.

The speedway is indeed looking to dress up the grand lady. Talley feels it is time for DIS to reclaim her title as the 'Queen of the racing scene'.

"We are very excited. You look at Daytona International Speedway and it is the premier facility on the NASCAR circuit. When you look at the newer facilities on the circuit like Chicagoland and Kansas you see they have amenities that we simply did not have and we were envious of those tracks. We wanted to be able to show off what Daytona has to offer and I think that by getting the commitment of our board of directors and senior management at ISC we have taken the steps needed to return Daytona to its place as the premier race track on the circuit."

The 2005 Rolex 24 Hours at Daytona, sanctioned by the Grand American Road Racing Association, for the Rolex Sports Car Series, will introduce the new Daytona to race fans next February. So get your recliner, or your motor home, or your sneakers ready because this old gal is getting all gussied up and she is planning to have a good time. A world-class time, actually.