

MILLER: Nashville is music to IndyCar's ears

Robin Miller

The straightaway is 200 feet longer than either one at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The first turn is as wide as the old one at Burke Lakefront Airport. There is more elevation than at Barber Motorsports Park. And it's going to happen in one of the coolest, busiest and fastest growing cities in the country. So is it any wonder Tony Cotman is excited about the inaugural Music City Grand Prix next August in Nashville?

Cotman is the track designer and was given the green light by the city's fathers and race promoter to get creative so he's come up with what could be the fastest and most competitive circuit in the four decades that IndyCar has been street racing.

"I think it's got a good chance," he says. "We've had tracks with long straightaways before, but the shape is unique and there should be three good places to pass. To me, a good track is defined by one that's challenging for the competitors and provides a good show for the fans and I think this can do both. And it's also easy on the eyes."

The 2.1-mile course traverses the Cumberland River by crossing the Korean Veteran's Memorial Bridge twice, sports 11 turns, runs alongside Nissan Stadium for a stretch and is only a block away from the hub of entertainment – Broadway Street.

Cotman reckons the charge into Turn 1 could reach 190-200 mph and the width certainly will be inviting, but believes it's only one of three good overtaking opportunities.

"Turns 1-2-7 are going to be the best passing spots, and if you don't get through Turn 1 properly you're going to get passed in Turn 2," he says. "If you don't get onto that long straight in good shape coming out of Turn 6, it will cost you all the way to Turn 7 – another hard-braking zone."

He figures the key to the first new street show since Houston in 2013 will be how much downforce a team wants to run.

"Will you want to trim it out for those two long straights over the bridge and risk using up your tires because the car is sliding so much in the corners?" he says. "The first year is always interesting, because there's a big discrepancy in philosophies and that leads to good racing. The cool thing about



Long Beach remains the gold standard for IndyCar street races, but Nashville has the potential to establish itself as a classic. Galstad/Motorsport Images

street circuits is that every single one poses a different challenge to the racing. Not one street course is the same."

Since IndyCar replaced Formula 1 at Long Beach in 1984, the success rate for the series' temporary venues has been a mixed bag. Long Beach is the undisputed king, Toronto started in 1986, Detroit in 1989 and St. Pete in 2003. Strewn along the side of the road were The Meadowlands, San Jose, Surfer's Paradise, Vancouver, Denver (two versions), Houston (three versions), Miami (two versions), Baltimore, Brazil (Rio and Sao Paulo), Cleveland, Edmonton and Las Vegas.

Cleveland and Edmonton were airport courses that opened like gangbusters before losing too much money and going away, while the Gold Coast drew massive crowds in its 17-year run but cost the government millions so it finally got shut down.

Baltimore was a cool layout that packed 'em in for a couple years but crashed and burned in debt. Vancouver's crowds approached 80,000 on race day alone until The Olympics claimed downtown and took away the track after 14 years. The best street course ever, in terms of speed, challenging corners and location, was Chris Kneifel's design in downtown Las Vegas, but unfortunately it ran on Easter Sunday and crapped out immediately.

The key to any street race is good management, sponsorship and deep enough pockets to withstand the staggering expenses of building a track from scratch. The rumor surfaced a few years ago that Firestone might be willing to sponsor a street race in Nashville (the location of its headquarters), and a couple different groups made overtures to the city to race around the home of the Titans because the mayor at that time had no interest in incorporating the city. Cotman figured his original layout was history until a few months ago.

"Anyone that lays out tracks doesn't want to be restricted or handcuffed, and the previous regime refused to consider the bridge, and that made the track too Mickey Mouse, so I didn't want anything to do with it," says the former chief mechanic and team manager for Barry Green, who then became Champ Car's chief steward before starting NZR Consulting while also serving on the FIA Circuit Commission. "You don't hear anything for two years, and then I got contacted about six months ago."

"The current administration said the bridge was in play, and that was the game-changer. I felt these guys were serious and it's got a good chance. Matt Crews (Music City GP CEO) has been working tirelessly for three years, and he allowed us some freedom and I think it's a great opportunity for IndyCar, as well as Nashville."