

Q&A: Tony Cotman on 2015 Indy Lights car

According to Indy Lights series boss Dan Andersen, IndyCar's top training series is just days away from selecting its new chassis vendor, and should be announced soon after contracts are signed.

The process of shaping the overall concept for the new-for-2015 car and car has been given to Indy car veteran Tony Cotman (ABOVE), who led a similar process for the IndyCar Series and its 2012 chassis and engine package, and the Kiwi sat down with RACER to give an inside look at the project.

MARSHALL PRUETT: We went through a new-car proposal process around this time last year, which ultimately went nowhere. Have you simply picked up where the IndyCar Series left off with those Indy Light vendors, or started from scratch during your search?

TONY COTMAN: There've been a lot of people who've been through the bidding process on many different things, several times. So while Dan Andersen may come at things from a slightly different perspective or look at them in a slightly different way, I think he really needs to understand there are other people out there that have done it and it's a time-consuming and expensive process to bid, whether you're on chassis or wings or different components on the chassis.

And when you're trying to stand out, which is what we want to do with the new Lights car, there are some vendors that probably don't want to go through the process again but we need to be very clear that we want to go about this process in a different way than when IndyCar did it, and then we need to make sure we portray that.

The reality is, 80 percent of what they have already proposed probably won't change. There's some details that will change for sure; everybody bidding on a new chassis needs to understand that, hey, it's going to change. And there are some things that I don't need to go all the way back to the beginning on because questions that were asked a year, two years ago, are really the same questions. But there are a few things that will have an impact on the new car. Tires, new engines, the architecture for the engines--those kinds of things have a very direct impact on the chassis and the manufacturer, obviously. And I think on the side, we just ask for their understanding that it's a new group doing this, a new company in charge of the series and the car it chooses, and there's new questions.

MP: I know Dan has been speaking with multiple engine manufacturers about powering the 2015 car " do you foresee picking one provider, or could we see more than one engine solution in play? Possibly a bit of rivalry like we have in IndyCar between Chevy and Honda?

TC: Well, it's really a two-part answer. One is you need to ask yourself first and foremost: what are we trying to do? And what we're trying to do is develop teams, drivers primarily. For example, if we had a single engine manufacturer and we had the opportunity with that partnership to push for, or have a good program where the champion goes through the next year and gets a direct path to IndyCar and so on, then it's a heckuva good deal and it's what you want to do. If there is an opportunity for multiple manufacturers and it can benefit the series and it can benefit teams and drivers, then why not evaluate it?



But it inevitably comes back to dollars and cents, and I'm not sure if there's enough money out there to do multiple engines at this level.

So as much as I would like to see multiple manufacturers personally, I would be surprised if it goes in that direction just due to the reasons that I've stated. It generally doesn't work out that way, and in Indy Lights if you're supplying a team of 12 cars per manufacturer, it generally doesn't make business sense for the manufacturer. But if it ends up that there's two manufacturers that want to do it and there's business sense for what or for what makes business sense to them, then it's something I'll take to Dan for sure. He can decide what he wants to do. But I'd be quite surprised if it goes that route.

MP: I had a conversation with Penske Racing president Tim Cindric earlier in the year about the next Lights car. He raised a great point that could solve some of the issues the series has faced with limited car counts: Why not drop the oval training aspect from Lights? Many of the great " Mansell (RIGHT, in 1993), de Ferran, and so on " turned their first oval laps when they landed in Indy car. Why make a car that requires a special build just to accommodate a few oval races each year? Without that requirement, using

an existing, top-tier training series car from GP2, World Series by Renault, Super Formula becomes an option, which would seemingly be more attractive for young drivers throughout the world to come over and race in Lights.

TC: It's a really good question. The first part of that answer is Dan said he's going to run on speedways on two levels. So if we're going to produce a chassis that is not capable of running on speedways and short ovals, then he's not going to be able to succeed very well on achieving his goal.

And while it's intriguing, we also have to understand that there's a lot of cachet that comes from the Indy 500 or the Indianapolis Motor Speedway worldwide " a lot of people might not know a lot about American motorsport or the ladder series or what have you, but everybody knows what the Indianapolis Motor Speedway is. And if the intentions of Indy Lights is to continue to race at the Speedway, then the car has to be capable of it.

Having said that, that doesn't mean we haven't been and we're not going down the path of evaluating those options you mentioned because, quite honestly, you know, there are some good merits to it. There are some good options, there's some good cars out there, there are some cool cars out there. But at the end of the day, at least currently Dan said he's going to run ovals then that does limit us a little bit on some of our requirements.

MP: So where does the importance of making the new car appeal to an international mix of drivers " something that has always been part of the series' foundation " fall in what you're asking for from chassis manufacturers? The more specialized it is for the North American market, the less interesting it might be to the rest of the world.

TC: This is going to be a fast car that's pretty cool-looking. You need to be attracted to it, number one. Not going to end up with a cloned IndyCar that weighs the same, looks the same and is just a knock-off version of that car. I just don't see the point of that. They need to have their own identity that needs to be relevant. Dan's been very clear. You're going to see something quite, quite different. Sexy is obviously high on the priority list as well. This car's going to be about performance, safety, and reliability and all these other costs of operating the vehicle will be factored in, and these kinds of things will kind of be merged into one. I think you'll see something a little different.

MP: Having some of the Dallara DW12 manufactured in America was presented as a major factor in that company being awarded the 2012 IndyCar contract. With the finalists for the 2015 Lights chassis in mind " Dallara, Mygale and Multimatic " where does that importance rank for you and Andersen Promotions?

TC: It's important to evaluate the manufacturers in the USA, but I don't think you should go into the project and say, "OK, the only manufacturers I'm going to use on this chassis have to be within the USA or have to be within the state of Indiana." We need to evaluate it based on business sense. And when it comes back to the target budgets or what the budget's going to be for operating the car for the season, it plays into it. And it doesn't just play into it from price; everybody thinks you go out and you do bids and you take what's in your interest. No way. You've got to weigh out the product, you've got to weigh out the price of the components. When you do have to purchase components, what are they going to cost? How much you're spending per month. All these kinds of things come into consideration.

So I don't think that we should go in with an absolute closed minded that every component in this car is going to be built in the USA. If companies in USA can provide competitive pricing, competitive bids for the same product, then why wouldn't you? It's right under your nose.

But I think they need to also understand that, hey, I don't understand a lot of times why you get bids within the USA and you get bids within Europe or other parts of the world: how on earth can something come from Europe and be cheaper than the U.S.? You wonder. But I'm telling you it happens all the time. I'm definitely not going to sit here and say every part is going to be made in America because there's just no way it will be.

MP: The Lights contract, according to some, is guaranteed to be given to Dallara. Any truth to that claim?

TC: I think it's important to say that while Dallara is obviously a well-recognized chassis manufacturing company, there are many others that are also capable of doing the job. Often it comes down to the profile of the series that you're in. If we sat here today and said, ah, it's going to be Dallara, I know everybody thinks that already, if everything is Dallara, why are you wasting your time? If I knew it was going to be Dallara I wouldn't be wasting my time. But I can tell you today that we absolutely do not have a bias toward any manufacturer, and due to the recent acquisition of Lights, on behalf of Andersen Promotions, we need to do our own evaluation. And at the end of the day, if Dallara wins based on all the criteria we're looking at, then so be it, but it's fair to mention Dan does not have a pre-existing relationship with them. That was IndyCar and this is a different company, a different organization that's conducting this search.