

# Leader of the Pack

A pit crew wearing Honda colors watches its race-car roar past again and again. Suddenly, the crew springs to life as the racer pulls in unexpectedly.

"What's Wrong?" the crew chief asks, alarmed.

"I'm thirsty," replies the racer.

You can get away with that sort of advertising when your racers seem to be winning every weekend and you've just won the CART engine manufacturer's championship.

It has been only two years since the horror of Honda's debut season in C A R T — A m e r i c a ' s premier open-wheel racing series—with its failure to qualify for the Indianapolis 500 and its continuing debacles as the season went on. But it might as well be decades ago.

Now it is a rarity if at least one of the six Honda-powered drivers is not on the victory podium come Sunday. And Honda wants to make sure everyone knows about it.

Just the same, Honda's approach is not to "win on Sunday, sell on Monday," says Thomas Elliott, American Honda Motors Co. Inc. executive vice president and top man behind Honda's racing effort.

"Our purpose is long-term, to develop the corporate image of the company. Sales gains from winning a race are irregular at best. It's more about relationships," Elliott said.

In its market research, Honda has tracked public attitudes regarding the company's prowess in technology and advanced programs. Since Honda started succeeding in racing, those readings have

spiked. Elliott said he believes such attitudes drive sales.

So Honda is using more of a widespread marketing attack, rather than the traditional philosophy of "We won Sunday. Buy our car."

In addition to the standard national and regional advertising barrage, Honda is providing racing show cars and a video of Honda's 1996 success to display at dealerships as well as regional auto shows. Honda's Internet site keeps statistics on all six drivers. Posters are given away en masse.

But there are other benefits involving vendors and sponsors. Motorola helped develop the engine control system for Honda's race cars; now Motorola supplies the engine control unit for all V-6 Accord engines built at Marysville, Ohio, plant. Long-

distance telephone carrier LCI sponsors driver Andre Ribeiro; Honda gets good phone rates and promotional tie-ins.

American Honda also gets its employees revved up in the racing effort. Before the race in Long Beach, Calif., all six Honda-equipped drivers came to the American Honda headquarters to sign autographs. That day, Honda also presented Jimmy Vasser with an Acura NSX for winning the 1996 driver's championship.

Elliott also sees the global promise for Honda in the CART series. It used to be that Formula One was the only way to reach a global audience. But now, with races in South America, Australia and Japan, as well as a flock of European and South American drivers, CART is rapidly growing on a world scale. And Honda is leading the way.

**Toyota  
and Nissan  
hope to attain  
Honda's  
success in  
motorsports.**

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