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# A race to bridge the border

By Larry Edsall - photos by Randall Bohl

"Our dream was always to be able to come to the United States and to race against the guys who are really good," Mexican racing driver Hugo Oliveras said of the stars of NASCAR stock car racing. "Now, in March, it's not only the drivers [who will showcase their talents], but the mechanics and the engineers and the cars who get to come and show that we are all very professional."

Oliveras not only drives the No. 11 Monster Energy Toyota in the NASCAR Mexico Toyota Series, but he owns the three-car HO Speed Racing team. On March 1, 2013, Oliveras, his teammates and competitors will be racing not in their native country but at Phoenix International Raceway, a track they will share that weekend with the stars of the major NASCAR series.

The Mexican series will be making its US debut with a 75-lap race that will be the feature event that Friday night next March.

In announcing the visit, PIR president Bryan Sperber noted that Arizona has become known in recent years for the "turbulence" around its immigration policies and politics.

"Sports," said Sperber, "is a great way to bring people together. This event will showcase what a great state Arizona is, and that's its warm and welcoming."

The announcement of the race was deemed so important to Arizona's image that US Congressmen Ed Pastor was among those participating in the announcement.

"Arizona does not have the best image," the congressman said, "but it will welcome the teams and their fans."

Rep. Pastor also noted the significant economic impact the race can have on the Arizona economy, and Arizona/Mexico Commission president Larry Lucero echoed those comments, saying the race will bring together international businesses and cultures.

Sperber also noted that the race will be televised not only in the United States and Mexico, but throughout Central and

South America, and thus will expose Phoenix and Arizona to a full hemisphere of potential visitors.

But, Sperber reminded, "first and foremost, this is about sports"—and not just motorsports, as three-time world boxing champion and former US Olympic team fighter Fernando Vargas will be the honorary pace car driver for the race.

Mexico has a long history of motorsports, but primarily on public roads and purpose-built road courses with turns to the left and the right.

It was at the famed Mexican road race, La Carrera Panamericana, that the gull-wing Mercedes-Benz SL first gained fame, and the Mexican Grand Prix was part of the Formula One circuit from 1963-92. Famous Mexican racers have included the Rodriguez brothers, Ricardo and Pedro, and F1 racer Hector Rebaque.

Indy-type cars have also raced in Mexico and, while still a teenager, Mexican Josele Garza was Rookie of the Year at the Indianapolis 500 in 1981. Adrian Fernandez, Memo Gidley, and Michele Jourdain Sr and Jr are among others from Mexico who have gained fame in racing in the United States.

In 2002, a group began a stock-car-style series for pickup trucks (similar to NASCAR's own truck racing series). Eventually the series moved from trucks to cars and has been sanctioned by NASCAR since 2007. In 2008, NASCAR appointed stock car racing veteran and former Nationwide Series runner-up Chad Little as director of racing development, Mexico.

Little, a Washington state native who lives in Charlotte NC, said he typically makes 10 trips a year to Mexico to work with the Toyota series and its competitors.

Little said the series involves 14 races, two at each of seven tracks. Six of those tracks are ovals, and five of those ovals have been built within the last five years, he said, adding that they range from a half mile to 1.25 miles in length.

The cars are much like what Americans



(From top): Drivers Hugo Ontiveros, Jorge Goeters and Daniel Suarez, with director of NASCAR Toyota Series Enrique Contreras, meet the press. The drivers are joined by champion boxer Fernando Vargas and PIR president Bryan R Sperber. Vargas with Keith Dahl, Toyota national motorsports and engagement marketing manager. NASCAR Mexico general director Federico Alaman González and Sperber sign and seal the deal. US Representative Ed Pastor and Arizona/Mexico Commission president Larry Lucero look forward to next March.



know as late-model racers and are identical except for the stickers that identify them as Chevrolet, Dodge, Toyota, Ford or Mazda racers. All cars are powered by identical V8 engines based on the Chevy 604 racing motor.

Little said that even with the economic setbacks of the last two years, racing fields average 34 cars and that the action is close and exciting.

The announcement of the PIR race for 2013 was made with two races left in the 2012 NASCAR Mexico Toyota Series, with 20-year-old Daniel Suarez, driver of the No.3 Dodge, currently leading series veteran and former champion Jorge Goeters and his No. 31 Mazda by only two points in the standings. ■

