

OPEN-WHEEL WEEKEND AT PIR

DESERT DIAMOND WEST VALLEY PHOENIX GRAND PRIX

INDYCAR / SILVER CROWN / VINTAGE / .25 MIDGETS

Phoenix Raceway expanded year two of the Phoenix Grand Prix into a diverse, action-packed open-wheel weekend in April, including the fourth race of the 16-race Verizon IndyCar Series; race two of the USAC Silver Crown Championship; USAC .25 Midgets; and a new Vintage Desert Classic.

QUARTER MIDGET SERIES

The USAC .25 Midget Series Phoenix Mini Copper Cup had 16 classes of young racers, ages 5 to 16—a chance to watch stars of tomorrow—in heat and feature races on a special 1/20th-mile track on the DC Solar Power Pavilion (the Midway) behind the straightaway grandstands. Classes are divided into junior and senior drivers (5-8 and 9-16 years old), as well as light and heavy classes (below and above 100 pounds). Tucson native Alex Bowman and 2015 NASCAR K&N Pro Series West champ Chris Eggleston got their starts in

Quarter Midgets at Phoenix. AJ Foyt, Jeff Gordon, Sarah Fisher, Brad Keselowski and Joey Logano also started in Quarter Midgets.

USAC SILVER CROWN SERIES

The 100-lap (102.2-mile) Phoenix Copper Cup, the second race of the 11-race USAC Silver Crown Championship, marked a return to Phoenix. USAC last raced here in 2009, with current NASCAR driver Cole Whitt winning the Silver Crown Series. The highlight of the season for many fans, the series would generally hold their season opener at Phoenix, to crowds of up to 31,000 fans. Some of PIR's most legendary drivers got their start in the Series, including current team owner and three-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart, broadcaster and four-time NASCAR champion Jeff Gordon and AJ Foyt, IndyCar team owner and winner of the first-ever race held at Phoenix Raceway, in 1964.

VINTAGE DESERT CLASSIC

The inaugural *Classic Racing Times* Vintage Desert Classic had a series of exhibition runs for vintage Indy cars, many with significant ties to Phoenix. The event—their first visit here—featured two on-track sessions ahead of IndyCar on Saturday. Some of the most legendary open-wheel racecars in history were displayed, on and off track, including the No. 4 TrueValue/STP March Indy car driven by Roberto Guerrero that won at Phoenix in 1987 (and the Indy 500 that same year); and the last Indy car Jim Clark ever drove in competition, the 1967 Rolla Vollstedt 67B Bryant Heating and Cooling Special Ford. Phoenix local race legends Tom Sneva, Lyn St James and Arie Luyendyk were special guests, along with Derek Daly and Max Papis.

VERIZON INDYCAR SERIES

The 250-lap (255.5-mile) Desert Diamond West Valley Phoenix Grand Prix, the fourth race of the 16-race Verizon IndyCar Series, saw Helio Castroneves take pole position in qualifying on Friday for his second straight year, setting new one-lap (18.8701 sec, 194.975 mph) and con-

(At left) IndyCar winner Simon Pagenaud in Turn 4. // (Right) USAC Silver Crown, Quarter Midgets and Vintage racers augmented the busy open-wheel weekend. // Beach Whiskey girls. // The Boy Scouts held their Pinewood Derby at the track for the first time. // Fan Pogo shows off her nails. // 3TV's Scott Pasmore with "Speed King" Helio Castroneves.

secutive two-lap (37.7538 sec, 194.905 mph) records, for another "Speed King" crown. Seven cars this year broke the speed record Castroneves set a year earlier. Penske teammates Castroneves, Will Power (2nd), Josef Newgarden (4th) and defending Verizon IndyCar Series champ Simon Pagenaud (5th) took four out of five spots, with Ed Carpenter Racing's JR Hildebrand in third.

In Saturday's race, 33-year-old Frenchman Simon Pagenaud, 2016 Verizon IndyCar Series champ, was dominant, taking the lead on lap 137 and winning at a record average speed of 144.058 mph, the first time any driver has averaged over 140 mph in a race at the tricky one-mile oval. The key moment came on lap 138, when he had been running a close third behind Penske teammates Power and Castroneves, as that lead pair dashed into the pits for fuel and tires. Pagenaud stayed out and inherited the lead when Takuma Sato (who won the Indianapolis 500 a month later) drifted wide coming out of Turn 4 and made contact with the outside wall. While under caution, Pagenaud was able to pit for service and still retain the top position. Pagenaud, Power, Castroneves and Newgarden ran in close quarters at times during the final 113 laps, but Pagenaud dodged, weaved and kept the rest at bay. It was the second consecutive year the defending Verizon IndyCar Series champion won at Phoenix; last year was Scott Dixon.

This was Pagenaud's second career start at Phoenix Raceway. His first was in last year's Phoenix Grand Prix, where he finished second. It's the tenth win of his career, and his first oval track win, conquering a configuration that has challenged him throughout his career.

Phoenix Raceway demonstrated it can run two major races on the same day, perhaps paving the way for the return of NASCAR Mexico next year (NASCAR took a year off in México, as well), this time on Saturday to a bigger audience, back to back with regular NASCAR 500 on the same day. We hope so.

NASCAR returns to Phoenix Raceway in November 2017, March 2018 and November 2018. The Desert Diamond West Valley Phoenix Grand Prix returns in spring 2018.

We look forward to all of the above. ■



Quarter Midgets photo: Phoenix Raceway

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PHOTOS BY RANDALL BOHL

