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Indy 500 weekend fun feeds a need for speed



A race car moves out of the pits prior to the start of the Indy 500.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Spectators at the 500 Festival Parade sport checkered-flag attire.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Fans watch the Indy 500 from the infield.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
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Indy cars purr around the track warming their engines, just a gentle warning of what's to come.

Then the green flag drops and the race is on.

In a millisecond, the noise of the engines elevates to a high-pitched whine. I push foam plugs deeper into my ears as drivers accelerate to more than 200 mph all the while fighting five Gs to stay in control. Standing along the sidelines, I involuntarily step back from the force as the race cars rocket past.

The lead changes dozens of times in the typical three hours it takes drivers to speed 200 times around the 2.5-mile track. Cars crash, tires disintegrate, engines fail and the field of 33 drivers is winnowed down to a precious few. Electronic signs count the laps: 197, 198, 199 and I'm on my feet. At lap 200 the checkered flag waves and the Indy 500 is over.

But the exciting finish is just the climax of a long weekend of thrills in Indianapolis on Memorial Day weekend. Prior to race day on Sunday (May 24 this year, May 25 if it rains), visitors take in concerts, watch a parade, cheer rookies, collect autographs, people-watch and party. Indiana's capital city suspends most serious business for a weekend of racing and revelry that's been a tradition for more than a century.

Friday: Solemn remembrance and Carb Day action

In downtown Indianapolis, the weekend begins on a somber note at the Soldier's and Sailor's Monument. Remembering the reason for the holiday, the 500 Festival Memorial Service pays tribute to Indiana men and women who died in military service. Patriotic speeches accompany a wreath-laying ceremony, cortège and flyover of military aircraft.

In suburban Speedway, Ind., about 40,000 race fans gather at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for Carb Day (short for carburetor, now a thing of the past) to fine tune engines in the Speedway's numbered garages. Race teams vie for favorites garages, indulging superstitions about lucky and unlucky numbers. Fans hang out around the garages and Gasoline Alley leading onto the track, hoping to snag a photo or autograph of their favorite drivers and a close look at the cars. At about half the weight of a family sedan, these open-wheel cars are highly refined machines. Each carries a price tag of about \$1 million and costs about \$2,000 to race -- per lap.

The next generation of drivers takes its turn today on the track during the Freedom 100. This Indy Lights race for up-and-coming drivers goes 40 laps, and competition is fierce.

For rookies, the Speedway is hallowed ground, like Wrigley Field or U.S. Cellular Field to a minor league ballplayer. Each could fit inside the Speedway oval and still have room for Kentucky's Churchill Downs, California's Rose Bowl, Vatican City and the Roman Colosseum. It's so big that four holes of a public golf course, Brickyard Crossing designed by Pete Dye, are played inside the oval. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum is there, too.

At dusk spectators make their way to the infield for concerts, dragging coolers and lawn chairs to wrap up the day with a night of music and picnicking.

Saturday: Parade and party time

The focus today centers on downtown Indianapolis where the 500 Festival Parade draws a crowd of 300,000. Spectators begin staking out their turf early in the morning and by the noon start they are four deep on sidewalks and all seats in reserved stands are full.

Bands march down Meridian and Pennsylvania streets followed by giant character balloons. Celebrities passing by on floats and in cars might be TV and film actors, pro athletes, country music singers and rock stars. The biggest cheers go up for racing legends with names like Andretti, Foyt and Unser.

During the 90-minute procession, all 33 drivers in Sunday's big race ride down the parade route in convertible pace cars. They line up three abreast in staggered groups arranged in the same starting position they'll take on the track.

Tonight, parties break out all over town, informal get-togethers in parking lots and campsites at the Speedway and ticket-only affairs in downtown venues. The most famous, the 500 Festival Snakepit Ball, usually takes over the Indiana Roof Ballroom. Celebrities in formal wear enter on a red carpet as crowds rubberneck and news cameras roll.

Sunday: Showdown on the Oval

The gates to the Speedway open at 6 a.m. and all morning a sea of humanity pours in. It's a people-watching bonanza: dudes with tats peeking from heavy-metal-band T-shirts, diaper tots in strollers, white-bearded grandpas in checkered-flag hats, college kids in flip-flops, middle-age mamas wearing fanny packs. They head toward the stands or the infield, hang out along Gasoline Alley and around the Pagoda, a 13-story tower at the finish line with luxury suites for VIPs.

Just how many people are inside the oval at race time is a guess because the Speedway doesn't disclose attendance. It has seats for 257,325, but unofficial estimates put the crowd close to 350,000, making the Indy 500 the world's largest single-day sporting event.

The buildup to the green flag covers many bases. Prayers are said, the military saluted, balloons launched, "Back Home in Indiana" is traditionally sung, celebrity performers lead the crowd in patriotic songs and the national anthem. Soon the words everyone is waiting for come over the loud speakers: "Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines."

An Indy car can accelerate from 0 to 100 mph in three seconds and top speeds exceed 230 mph. This compares to 74.602 mph, the top speed in the first Indy 500 in 1911. That's just over the legal speed limit on I-65 leading to Indianapolis. Spectators keep their eyes on the pits where races often are won or lost. Tires are changed, fuel pumped, engines adjusted. A good crew does it all in eight seconds.

As racers whip around the oval, a party revs up in the infield, especially in the Snake Pit near Turn Three. In the 1990s, the Speedway clamped down on the Pit's notorious drunkenness and debauchery. To make the Indy 500 more family-friendly, activities like face-painting and bouncy houses replaced hot-bod and bikini contests. Still a degree of Mardi Gras revelry prevails.

Whether watching on monitors on the infield or from the stands, eyes turn to the finish line for lap 200. After a victory lap, the winner climbs out of his car and kneels down to kiss the bricks on the finish line, a yard-wide remnant of the original brick track that gave the Speedway its nickname "The Brickyard." Then it's to the winner circle for the presentation of the trophy and a long swig of milk, a tradition begun in 1936 when the winner requested a glass of buttermilk.

- *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Bureau.*

Indy 500

Information: (317) 492-8500 or indianapolismotorspeedway.com/events/indy500/event-info/schedule

Tickets: From \$40 general admission, \$46 for reserved seats. (800) 822-4639 or imstix.com

500 Festival events: 500festival.com

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