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Nothing Can Prepare You For Driving The 840-Horsepower Brix/Comptech Indy Car

By Mac DeMere
Photography by Wesley Allison

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Digg From behind the wheel, all but the puniest race cars accelerate ferociously. Yet from the spectator seats, many race cars look not much faster than street cars. Yeah, right. Not this beast. On a crisp, clear Arizona morning, one car left no doubt about its might, seeming to reach hypersonic velocities in a half breath. Data acquisition confirmed the impression: 60-120 mph in a mind-boggling 2.7 seconds and, given enough room, just 7.4 additional seconds to reach 190 mph. That's the product of more than 800 (perhaps as much as 840) turbocharged, alcohol-burning horsepower in a 1550-pound carbon-fiber-and-aluminum honeycomb chassis. Above 100 mph, the car produces enough downforce to run upside-down on the ceiling-if you could find a ceiling long enough and a driver crazy enough. This force allows it to decelerate at an eye-out 3 g and corner at a rock-on-a-string 3.97 g. And I was supposed to step out of my rental car and control this thing.

Although at the time it was the team's only race car, Brix/Comptech Racing let us sample its Motorola-sponsored Reynard 951-Honda, the car that Parker Johnstone used to blast around the Michigan International Speedway at 231.659 mph, scoring Honda's first PPG Indy Car World Series pole position and Firestone's first Indy-car pole in more than 20 years. Counting only chassis and engine expenses, it costs about \$400 per mile to run an Indy car-a full-season Indy-car effort runs about \$7 million!-which means Brix/Comptech principals Doug Peterson, Don Erb, and Harry Brix spent more than \$6000 so we could get the "in-car" photos featured on these pages. Our playground was the kart-track-like Firebird West: With a trio of 40-mph corners and a top speed of just 150, it was like testing an F-16 in Liechtenstein airspace.

Getting into an Indy car requires a gymnastics routine that would cramp up Cathy Rigby. First, step into the seat, being careful not to head-butt the crewman holding the safety harness aside. Next, place both hands on the cockpit surround, lift your legs up and extend them toward the pedals while lowering yourself into the car. Turn your shoulders 90 degrees to clear the cockpit surround and slide back into the seat. Next, because an Indy driver's safety harness must be tighter than that of a skydiver whose chute has opened at terminal velocity, make certain nothing is trapped between the antisubmarine straps and your inner thighs. Now, allow the crewman to buckle your harness-there's not enough room to do it yourself-and then yank them as tight as an embrace from your 300-pound aunt.

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Once in, I was startled that my entire forward vision was occupied by the Pi Research digital instrument panel, though the cowl curves down at the sides to create openings just where you'd look going into Turn One at Indy or the Carousel at Road America. My eye level was below the tops of the Firestone Firehawks! Just as I was preparing to ask for a pillow to sit on, Johnstone placed his hand on the radio antenna mounted on the front cowling and asked if I could see the top of his fingers. "I can see below the bottoms of your fingers," I replied. "Slide down," he commanded. I snuggled down as far as possible, but could still see his fingers. "Remove some padding," Johnstone ordered. With this modification, from Firebird West's elevated pit road all I could see was the instrument panel, sky, and the tops of Johnstone's fingers. Imagine driving your car while seated on the floorboard, having to crane your neck to peek over the top of the steering wheel; Reynard drivers can't see that well straight ahead, but their helmets don't mess up airflow to the rear wing-a vitally important detail.

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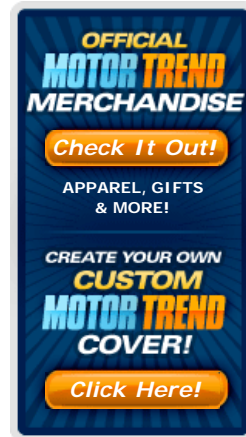
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