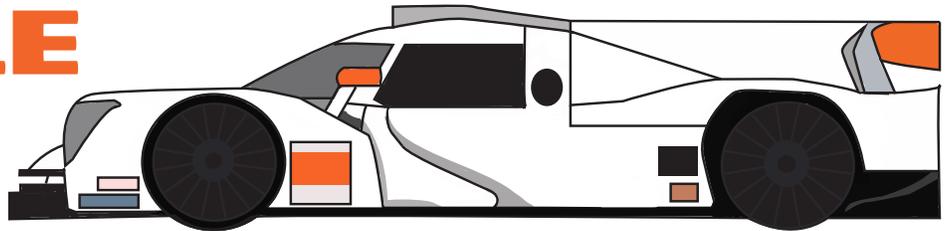


LOCAL DRIVERS TAKE ON PETIT LE MANS

By Ethan Greene
Design by Aiden Dowling
Art by Marcus Welch



Each fall for the past 25 years, the relatively quiet town of Braselton plays host to one of the biggest automotive events of the year. Starting on Sept. 28 and continuing through Oct. 1, the internationally acclaimed 2.5 mile racing facility Road Atlanta welcomed over 150,000 fans for a weekend of racing, festivities and on-track action. Sanctioned by the International Motor Sports Association (IMSA), Petit Le Mans is one the most prestigious races in America. Named after the famed 24 Hours of Le Mans, Petit (“Little”) Le Mans is a 10 hour test of endurance and speed with some of the biggest names and brands in motorsports.

Mixing in with the big guys: Tyler Maxson and Andrew Davis

Drivers and teams from all racing disciplines around the globe flock to the small Georgia town for the weekend, with notable names like seven-time NASCAR Champion Jimmie Johnson, four-time Indy 500 winner Helio Castroneves and former Formula 1 drivers Kamui Koybayshi and Brendon Hartley of Japan and New Zealand mixed in with local talents and heroes.

The weekend starts out with numerous support

series races consisting of young drivers looking to prove themselves alongside more experienced veterans. The most notable series, the Michelin Pilot Challenge, featured two local drivers this year: Athens native Andrew Davis and 17-year-old Tyler Maxson.

Davis currently races for McCann Racing, driving the No. 8 Porsche Cayman GT4. Davis won the 2011 Grand-Am championship, driving with legendary team Brumos Racing, one of the most successful Porsche racing teams in America.

“I’ve finished on the podium multiple times at Petit Le Mans. Getting to spray champagne after a hard day’s work is something special,” Davis said. “I’ve dreamt of driving at this circuit (Road Atlanta) since I was 4-years-old, so racing there now is quite literally a dream come true,” Davis said.

A University of Georgia graduate and a resident of the area, Davis commutes to Road Atlanta instead of staying in a hotel like other drivers.

“It’s always a slight advantage racing on your home turf. I’m able to sleep in my own bed and the general familiarity keeps me ultra focused. It’s also energizing to have additional friends and family at the track as a cheering section,” Davis said.

The same can be said for Bogart native Maxson,

who started out his racing career in karts at the age of 5 and hasn’t looked back.

“I tried a lot of different sports when I was younger, but I didn’t really enjoy any of them as much as I liked racing. My family and I decided to buy a go-kart and I just got hooked from there,” Maxson said.

Maxson attained his IMSA racing license at age 16, meeting the age requirement by two days. Maxson then raced multiple times in the Michelin Pilot Challenge, a junior series with shorter races and slower cars.

In 2019, Maxson signed with highly acclaimed Indy 500 winning team Bryan Herta Autosport. He is now finishing his third season in the Pilot Challenge, accumulating multiple poles and victories.

This year, Maxson also competed in the highlight of the weekend, the 25th running of the Motul Petit Le Mans. In the Pilot Challenge, Maxson drove his No. 77 Hyundai Elentra N to an 8th place finish. Maxson also finished 8th in his class for Petit Le Mans, where he competed in the No. 38 Performance Tech Motorsports LMP3.

In endurance racing, multiple classes or groups of cars compete on the track. For Petit Le Mans, these classes are; LMP3, GTD, GTD Pro, LMP2 and DPi.

The classes have varying shapes, sizes and speed. This creates lots of traffic, with the faster classes weaving between slower cars, creating a unique challenge for the drivers.

“The closing rates are huge. In the Pilot Challenge, there are just two classes, the Grand Sport GT4s, and the class I race in, the Touring Car or TCR class. With these two classes the speed differential isn’t huge. Whereas in the WeatherTech Series, you’ll have DPis and LMP2s which are ludicrously faster than you, going past you 20 mph faster than you,” Maxson said.

The cars fight for an overall or outright victory while competing within their classes.

Studying abroad

Born in Atlanta, Dylan Murry races with Dutch outfit Racing Team Nederland. Murry turned 22 this year, and is in his first season with Team Nederland. The team fields an LMP2 prototype and has been competitive all season long.

“It’s really been great because it’s my first time working with a European team. It really allows me to expand my knowledge of different team cultures, car setups and what is expected of the driver,” Murry said.

Unfortunately, Racing Team Nederland pulled their entry for the race just



AMONGST THE STARS: A fan talks to Corvette Racing star Jordan Taylor (left) during the Fan Walk. Taylor is a 2-time Petit Le Mans and IMSA champion, driving for his father’s team Wayne Taylor Racing. “Our team particularly works to elevate the fan experience. We try to interact with fans when we can, answering questions and taking photos.” Murillo Racing crew member Navaz Hussain said. Photo by Ethan Greene.

days before the event due to its owner's involvement in a money laundering scandal.

The fan experience

Besides the on track racing, Petit Le Mans offers a unique fan experience, a staple of IMSA events.

"It's super cool, when you walk around (the track) and there are thousands of fans everywhere and it's not a big facility," Maxson said. "You really realize how many fans are there."

Fans can get up close and personal with the drivers and the teams for no extra cost. The paddock, or garage, remains open to all ticket holders throughout the weekend, allowing fans to take pictures and watch the work being done to the cars. There are also no assigned seats at Road Atlanta, providing free access to the many vantage points and locations across the facility. On Friday, fans have the opportunity to access the paddock and get autographs from their favorite drivers and teams.

"We love that the fans can get close and interact with the teams and drivers. It can leave lasting impressions, especially on the young fans. I'm always happy to make time to stop and chat with those interested," Davis said.

Before both the Michelin Pilot and WeatherTech Championship races, fans were allowed onto the front straight for the Hagerty Fan Walk, just minutes before pre-race ceremonies. Fans sign their

names on cars (team permitting), talk to the drivers, take home free shirts and souvenirs, and watch the teams make final adjustments on their cars.

This activity caps off with pre-race ceremonies, starting with the French national anthem, a tribute to the 24 Hours of Le Mans, one of the most historic and prestigious races in the world.

Once the race starts, fans flock to spectator hill, an area located toward the middle of the track. There, fans set up canopies and lawn chairs as they watch the cars attack Road Atlanta's sweeping esses.

"Spectator hill provides a great opportunity to sit in the grass, have a snack and observe the amount of speed the cars can carry through the corners," Navaz Hussain, a crew member for Murillo Racing, said. This is Navaz Hussain's 6th year working with the team, hosting team meetings, helping with pit stops and repairing the decals on cars. He has attended Petit Le Mans several times in the past.

Terrace seating can be found by turn 10, also known as the chicane. There, fans watch the cars sail down a hill, slamming hard on the brakes for a tricky left-right complex. Turn 10 is a prime passing zone for drivers and a great spot to view constant action.

"Moving around is the best way to get different perspectives of the action. There is no assigned seating, but make sure to find a great spot to take

in the opening laps of the race. It's a sight to see for sure," Davis said.

It just means more

Petit Le Mans serves as the season-finale for all IMSA series, meaning championships are often decided throughout the weekend. This year was no different, with the championship battle between Wayne Taylor Racing and Meyer Shank Racing coming down to the final hour of the race. The duo fought back and forth throughout the race, but late contact with less than 30 minutes to go took the Wayne Taylor car out of the race, handing the title to the Meyer Shank team.

Bringing in an audience 12 times the size of Braselton's population, Petit Le Mans offers something to everyone. Navaz's brother Nick Hussain attended with his family this year.

"Sometimes we feel intimidated when we don't know about a sport or a topic. The fans were great at encouraging new people to enjoy the sport, and it was a really welcoming atmosphere that puts you at ease, even if you don't know a lot," Nick Hussain said.

Attending for the first time, Nick Hussain enjoyed all Petit Le Mans had to offer.

"It's not like you're going to a football or baseball game where you're in bleachers the whole time. When my family and I went up to the fan zone and there were bouncy castles and things for the kids, it made me realize the race organizers do a lot of things to make the races family and kid friendly. I would definitely go again," Nick Hussain said.



UP AND DOWN: A pair of Daytona Prototypes work their way through slower Grand Touring traffic over one of the many crests of Road Atlanta. The track features the most elevation change per lap on the IMSA calendar. "The most unique element about Road Atlanta is the drastic elevation change, there are multiple blind corners. The track uses the local topography to create a thrilling layout. It provides a little bit of everything and puts driver's skills on display," driver Andrew Davis said. Photo by Ethan Greene.

