

by Tim Reed

Alphabet Soup: SCCA, NASA, What's the difference?
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When the checkered flag fell on the 25th and final race of the three-day weekend-the GT1 class competition at the 45th Annual SCCA National Championship Runoffs at Heartland Park Topeka-it also ended the SCCA's three year stint at the track, less than a mile from the Sports Car Club of America's national headquarters.

While there are plenty of things the SCCA racers will miss about Topeka-cheap hotel rooms and restaurants, roomy pits, a serviceable gentlemen's club (Baby Doll's, just about 2.3 miles from the track entrance)-it was clearly time to move on. Next year, the Runoff's head north to Road America.

Car count at the 2008 SCCA Runoff's was down about 130 compared with last year, and the SCCA staff was terrified that the overall count would drop below 500. It didn't, but it was pretty lonesome in the pits compared with 2007. And even then, there was a substantial drop-off from 2006, when Topeka seemed thrilled to host the races, throwing a big dinner for SCCA brass at the nearby governor's mansion the first night of the races, with the governor herself, Kathleen Sebelius, showing up the next day at the track to sing "Happy Birthday" to veteran motorsports journalist Chris Economaki.

This year, there was no governor, no Economaki, and the average number of media members attending press conferences countable on one hand.

The economy? Sure, that played a part. The been-there-done-that lack of love for the final year at Heartland Park? Yes, that, too.

But the rising success of the upstart National Auto Sport Association, arguably the biggest direct challenge to the SCCA since the latter group was formed in 1944, can't be overlooked. Three years ago, the SCCA moved the Runoffs from Mid-Ohio, and NASA jumped in, booking the group's first National Championships at Mid-Ohio, attracting a lot of SCCA racers who didn't want to make the trip to Heartland Park, regarded as a featureless road course incidental to the NHRA drag strip that made up the front straight.

Attendance at the mid-September NASA National Championships was down only about 1 percent this year, says Jerry Kunzman, who co-founded NASA in 1991. He claimed about 450 cars this year, which is impressive, since, unlike the SCCA, NASA has no open-wheel formula classes at the National Championships. It does, however, have more classes of cars than the SCCA, and some NASA classes consist of just a handful of entries, while other classes are downright enormous. Also, unlike the SCCA, NASA is more than willing to toss multiple classes together on the same track, meaning that you'll

see relatively stock four-door Spec Ford Focus race cars to wheel-to-wheel with Porsche 968's and 944 Turbos.

One class that is directly competitive in each series is Spec Miata, featuring Mazda Miatas that are eligible to run in the SCCA and NASA with the most minor changes. The SCCA race had 29 Miatas, and the NASA race had 60.

So, what's the difference between the SCCA and NASA? For starters, the SCCA is, as the name suggests, a club, while NASA is a for-profit business. The home office is in Richmond, Calif., but there are regional NASA groups that are "licensees," sort of like franchises. There is very little leeway given to SCCA regional clubs, but regional NASA offices have quite a bit of freedom to serve the market as they see fit.

Both the SCCA and NASA have substantial interests outside club road racing, ranging from rallies to autocrossing, but the heart of the business is road racing, and programs end their seasons with the one big race, drawing from all regions.

The SCCA is much bigger, still boasting a membership of more than 50,000, while NASA claims more than 10,000. And you'll still find a handful of well known professional racers at the SCCA Runoffs, this year including sports-car legend Jim Downing, General Motors factory hot shoe John Heinricy and Trans Am veteran Amy Ruman. The list of past SCCA Runoffs winners is a who's who of racing: Mark Donohue, Bob Tullius, Scott Sharp, Jim Fitzgerald, Jim Trueman, Bobby Rahal, Graham Rahal, Skip Barber, Jimmy Vasser, Jacques Lazier, John Fitch, Randy Pobst, Elliot Forbes-Robinson, Don Yenko, Jerry Titus, Jerry Hansen, Parker Johnstone, Boris Said, Phil Hill, Roger Penske, Briggs Cunningham and, of course, the late Paul Newman, who won four championships.

But, to many, the SCCA's tradition is what's holding it back. "Quite honestly, NASA probably does a lot better job of saying, 'Welcome, thank you for coming,' versus the old-school SCCA," says Robert Davis, Mazda's senior vice president of product and marketing and the head of the company's racing efforts. Davis was at the SCCA Runoffs in 2007, but he moved to the NASA Nationals this year and will likely race with NASA again next year, when the Nationals move from Mid-Ohio to Miller Motorsports Park in Utah through 2010, before returning to Mid-Ohio in 2011.

One reason Davis likes NASA is the flexibility that comes from being a younger, undeniably more responsive organization. Davis's team has been racing RX-8's for several years with the SCCA, but the organization's ultrastrict rules allow for no real product development. Davis decided he'd like to turbo-charge one of his RX-8s and race it, but the SCCA has no class for that. NASA, however, just put the turbocharged RX-8 on a chassis dyno, measured the horse power and told Davis that if he'd add 50 pounds of weight to the car, it would find him a class to race in. It did.

That is, in fact, the hallmark of NASA: Show up with a safe car that meets the basic requirements, and it'll let you race. "If [NASA officials] had enough forklifts show up

wanting to race,” says Dan Davis, former head of publicity for Kumho tires and a NASA Porsche racer, “they’d probably find a spot for them.”

NASA founder Kunzman says he really doesn’t consider the SCCA a competitor: “Our model has never been, ‘Hey, let’s go take what the SCCA has and bring it to NASA.’” He says he pays little attention to what the SCCA is doing. “Honestly, I don’t follow them. I spend my energy in building what we do. Any energy that I spend looking at what SCCA is doing, and being a competitor to us, is energy wasted. I have no desire to compete with the SCCA, and I certainly don’t want it to go away. If it went away, I’d be really scared, because who’s next? Us, right? They have their programs, and we have ours.”

And if some NASA racers end up with the SCCA, fine. “We’re doing our part in feeding the pool,” he says.

SCCA CEO Jim Julow—who used to run Dodge and spearheaded that company’s return to NASCAR—does pay close attention to what NASA is doing. “Oh, sure, no question,” he says. NASA is “somebody we keep an eye on, and we need to be very cognizant of what it’s doing.”

NASA, Julow says, has built its membership base on accessible, inexpensive open-track events, where almost anyone who has a safe street car and a helmet can participate in simple time trials that start out with the basics and allow drivers to move up as their skills improve. “They make it very simple to engage novice drivers and help them decide whether or not speed is something they can deal with. We’re harder to get onboard with because of the type of racing we do and the level of sophistication.” And since NASA has a “friendlier entry point,” it tends to have a younger membership.

“The people here revel in competition and sophistication,” Julow says. “I think we do very well in maturing people from NASA and other car clubs. But it is not the best plan to allow everybody else to develop the entry-level racers and then count on winning them over as they get older and more sophisticated,” Julow says. “We have to do a better job of that ourselves, and I think we are.”

One irrefutable advantage the SCCA has: a solid Runoffs TV package with Speed and its own dedicated magazine, while NASA makes do with covering the races on the Internet and several pages of NASA-specific coverage in Grassroots Motorsports magazine.

Even so, less than a week after the 2008 Runoffs ended, Julow announced that he is leaving the SCCA at the end of this three-year contract, which is up February 1. In a statement, Julow hinted that his enthusiasm for changes he thinks need to be made to bolster the SCCA’s sagging, aging membership and increase attendances at races may not be shared by the elected management of the club. “Over the last several months,” Julow said, “it has become clear that the board and I disagree on the amount of change the club needs and the pace at which that change needs to occur. For that reason, we differ

philosophically, and it's best for the club and its future to make a change moving forward that will bring the board and its president much more into alignment.”

It also appears that the SCCA board might reduce the power of the next president, giving the new hire the title of COO instead of CEO. Still, names are already surfacing as possible candidates, including John Fernandez, former director of Dodge Motorsports and most recently managing director of Chip Ganassi Racing.

Plenty of racers will continue to participate in both SCCA and NASA races, such as Spec Miata driver Blake Clements of Houston, who raced his 1999 Miata to an eighth-place finish with NASA at Mid-Ohio and fourth with the SCCA at Topeka. “The SCCA and NASA really do feed off each other, whether they like to admit it or not,” he says. “If they could just combine their best qualities, we'd really have something.”