

Preview

Champ Car Challenge

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Championship Auto Racing Teams or CART, was formed in the late seventies, and since its inception in 1979 it had gone from strength to strength, including more and more race-venues over the years.



In the early and mid-nineties, IndyCar was all the rage. Nigel Mansell had gone to conquer the American equivalent of Formula 1 and he drew the European audience with him. Races were being broadcast live on Eurosport and when Mansell secured the PPG Championship in '93, for a short while he was reigning Formula 1 Champion *and* IndyCar Champion.

The racing was intense, competitive and drivers like Emerson Fittipaldi, Danny Sullivan, Mario Andretti Jr. and Al Unser Jr. continued the winning traditions established by stars such as Johnny Rutherford, Rick Mears, Al Unser and indeed Mario Andretti himself.

In '97 and '98 Alex Zanardi drove himself into the hearts of racing fans all over the world with his "never give up" attitude and spectacular driving.

Papyrus released revolutionary racing titles like IndyCar and IndyCar 2 in the latter half of the nineties, and in 1998 Microsoft released its Cart Precision Racing.

These sims still have their fans. However, to get the most of IndyCar2, or Cart Racing, as the simulation was later renamed, you really need to have a Rendition Video Card, and that type of video card, as well as a copy of ICR2, are very hard to find these days.

Personally I lost a bit of interest in CPR, when I found out that the best way to set a new lap record on the superspeedways was to knock off the front wing including the nosecone section, and then just go around the oval putting the pedal to the metal! It did have a great garage and setup area with a personal crew chief who explained all the settings of the car, as well as a driving school featuring video's from real races to illustrate the theories of race car driving.

In the real racing world tensions rose between factions in the open wheel racing community in the U.S. — and ultimately these tensions led to a competing series being created. The owners of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway decided they wanted to run their own series, and IndyCar became CART, then Champ Car, and the Indianapolis-based competing series was first known as The Indy Racing League, then as IndyCar.

The fight between the two series led to hard times falling on both series. Decreasing spectator numbers were reported by some, refuted by others, and broadcasters must have been in some confusion as to which series they should broadcast from, and if they should broadcast any races at all.

The only sim, or racing game for PC depicting American open wheel racing we have seen since CPR, was Codemaster's IndyCar Series.



More recently there was a bit of a stir in the simracer's pond when someone calling themselves SE Games were rumored to be working on a Champ Car sim. So far, there's been very little new information to support or sustain those rumors.

With the advent of EA's Formula 1 series; first F1 2001, then F1 2002, and finally F1 Challenge, the fate of CART, or Champ Cars on our PC's has been in the hands of capable modders. To Champ Car fans it seems as if the real life hardship that plagued the series spilled over to the PC versions.

A fine Champ Car mod was made for F1 2001, but for a long time after the release of F1 2002 it was as if mods featuring Champ Cars were jinxed. The planned, new mod for F1 2002 never lived, and a conversion of

the existing mod for F1 2001 was finally released. It was skillfully done and a very good mod, but nevertheless it was basically a conversion.

Formula 1 Challenge is hardly new anymore, in fact it is becoming increasingly hard to find copies of that title these days, Ebay might be your best chance to obtain a copy. The other option is to secure a copy of rFactor when that comes out; I'm pretty convinced that many of the mods that are currently available for F1 C will find their way to the rFactor platform.

Countless attempts at reviving a Champ Car mod for the F1 C platform seemed to be doomed by bad luck, difficulty in getting the right people together at the right time, as well as technical difficulties.

A ray of hope fell on Champ Car fans when Torn8oAlley released their open wheel mod for NASCAR Racing 2003 Season. And it was as if the fortunes had finally changed for the better, when Prairie released his Champ Car 2003 Mod late in 2004. Here at SimHQ we mentioned the mod in a recent feature dealing with some of the **mods for F1 Challenge**. We also learned that the iDT team was working on a huge Champ Car mod spanning all the seasons from the year 2000 to 2005. Finally great news for fans of Champ Car racing!



By good luck, I found myself being invited to a private spring-test of some of the prominent Champ Cars that have run in races in this, the 21st century. iDT asked me to test some of the cars, amongst them the 2001 Penske's of Gil de Ferran and Helio Castro-Neves, the 2002 Team Green cars driven by Paul Tracey and Dario Franchitti, and the 2003 Newman-Haas race cars of Bruno Junquera and Sebastian Bourdais.

Naturally I jumped at the opportunity.

First, I checked out the cars, some of them had not been raced for 5 years, and I wanted to make absolutely certain that nothing could go wrong. I made sure all driving aids were switched to off, and then I booked track-time at some of the famous and great North-American racetracks.

As the preview-version I had for testing came with some new tracks and the guys at iDT are constantly developing and refining these tracks, I decided to supplement my testing with some of the tracks I knew pretty well from the 2003 mod. This would also help me comparing lap times and physics.

After a very light breakfast I put on the fireproof underwear, the Nomex fireproof suit, and lowered myself into Oriol Servia's PPI Motorsports drive for the 2000 Season. The cars are wider, and as a consequence look lower and longer than they did in the 2003 Champ Car mod. Perhaps you remember that one of the minor concerns raised about the 2003 mod was that the car width did not quite match that of a real Champ Car. Rest assured that this issue has been addressed.



For a car as big as a Champ Car, the space in the cockpit was surprisingly narrow. Probably I should lose a few pounds before the start of the season, that should go down well with team-owners, show them I'm motivated!

As the engine fired up and I revved the turbocharged machine, I was in no doubt that this car, although it was almost 5 years old was a real race-car. No time for second thoughts though, and I released the clutch and

took her out of the pits at **Mid-Ohio Sportscar Course**.

I would like to tell you that I took it easy the first few laps, but that would be telling you a lie!

I wanted to hear the engine scream, work the wheel through the twists, turns and elevations of the Sportscar Course so I threw all caution to the wind, and of course the car and track bit back at me for not showing them the proper amount of respect. Portland is slippery and in places it is very slippery, and especially so in turn 11, a left-hander sitting on the top of a crest. At the exit the road falls away from you and that's where you need all the grip you can possibly get from the car. The weight of the chassis was partly off the wheels as I jumped sideways over the crest here, and I promptly spun out.

Once bitten, twice shy as they say, and after I had been towed back to the pit area, yes I had even managed to stall the car after my unnecessary and embarrassing 360 degree spin, I took the car out once again and made a clear promise to myself that I would not make the same error twice.



After lunch I decided to have a go in Sebastian Bourdais' Newman-Haas of 2003. The cars feel a bit heavier than I am used to from the Champ Car Mod 2003, and the brakes are not as effective in this incarnation. It's also as if the cars are a bit more challenging to drive, which in my opinion is not a bad thing. It tends to keep you on your toes and makes you concentrate that little bit more. In any case, I was a good second slower in the iDT mod than in Champ03, and in the iDT mod I found myself going off the road more often as well. It's imperative to get total control over that right foot, and bad driving will be punished.

Exiting the Mid-Ohio pit lane I soon forgot about "taking it easy", despite the morning spins. In fact I delighted in applying a little excess power as I joined the track, and I felt the car stepping sideways a bit. It was very controllable; just by lifting off the throttle for a split second I had it reigned back in. And these are the moments in sim racing that are so precious to me, because it's all about how close you can get to the limit in a beast of a race car and still be in control. And you always try to push the limit, because there is always someone who's faster than you.



At Mid-Ohio the short pit straight takes you to a tight right-hand turn which leads on to the long and fast back straight where you should reach top speed in top gear, before getting hard on the brakes for the Esses. Then it's time to negotiate turn 11.

Being careful this time, I went into the crest in 2nd gear making sure not to carry too much entry speed with me - which would have been the case had I selected 3rd gear. Then there's the Chute and the Carousel, which seems to turn in on itself forever. Finally I'm back on the short start/finish straight and it's time for left-hand kink that needs to be taken as fast as possible, as the speed carried through here will benefit the overall lap time. Good luck to you, while you're chasing a sub-one minute lap.

Mid-Ohio is a very technical track where you can lose a lot of time if you get the wrong line going into the technical sequences. Alternatively you can make up a lot of time if you catch the right lines. For the drivers who like to battle for positions there are several areas where it should be possible to attempt passing by taking an alternative line in; say a late braking maneuver on the inside, before going into the turn that leads onto the back-straight. There's also the chance that your exit speed will be compromised to such an extent that you'll be instantly re-passed in a cross-over maneuver.

It's a pity to learn that Mid-Ohio is currently not on the 2005 schedule.

My schedule was a busy one these intense testing days, so I left Mid-Ohio to catch a flight to **Laguna Seca**. There; the two Penske cars from '01 were waiting for me!

As luck, or ill-fortune would have it, Laguna Seca is currently not scheduled for the 2005 season either!



The steering in these cars is precise and direct. What my testing *did* confirm was that even though the physics of the mod I was using for this preview had not yet been quite finalized, it feels to me as if these cars can be saved if you come in a bit too fast in the corners. In the Andretti hairpin I braked too late and was able to release the pressure on the brakes slightly, thereby regaining enough grip to steer harder into the turn. As a result, the rear of the car started to rotate and all four wheels broke traction at one point before I was back in control! Delicious, and I hope the finalized version of the physics will not change too much in this aspect as I find it very realistic, that as long as you are not using up 100 % of your grip by either braking, accelerating or steering, you should be able to divide the total amount of grip available, and then trade between grip for braking, accelerating or steering.

A quick test on the Twin Ring Motegi Oval confirmed that the cars seem to be less "glued" to the road, and they are more lively than seen in the 2003 mod. I tried both mods with very little downforce front and rear, to attempt to simulate a low drag - high speed oval setup. Unfortunately the team did not bring the proper oval aero-package to the track.

There is less inherent, terminal and unrecoverable understeer going through the turns (provided you drive sensibly), and if you yank the wheel too much over while on the throttle exiting a turn, there is the distinct possibility that you might spin out, just as it happened to me when I was trying to pass a slower car out of turn 4.

I suspect once the setup gurus get their hands on this mod and the setups are optimized for speed and oval racing, the handling will come even more alive.



Alas! The tests were over all too quickly, and in conclusion I must be honest with you: I don't think I impressed any team-managers very much. Some of them wore small smiles on their faces; smiles of the sort that tells you they're not laughing with you, but at you, but are trying to be polite about it by hiding their true feelings. Some were shaking their heads or arguing with the people from insurance over who was going to pay for

broken wheel-axles, bent wings and crushed bodywork. Some were just crying.

"Don't ring us, we'll ring you, they said". Must be a sign that I should practice a bit more on the PC!

My impression from testing this preview version is that the full mod will become the new favorite Champ Car Sim. There's a great intro and the menus are Champ Car themed. The cars are credible to drive as well as immersive in that elusive and addicting way that you're constantly on the search for that extra grip, because you know it's there, you just haven't been able to find the right line yet. The sounds are very very good too in my opinion Especially when you sit in the pits, and hear the other cars screaming by.



It's a huge, ambitious and brave undertaking that iDT have taken upon themselves; to give us 5 years of racing in the premier U.S. open-wheel road racing series, and they intend to make as many tracks as they possibly can, so we can go race the same tracks that were raced in real life.

I gather that the current plan is that the mod will probably be released in smaller, self-contained packages, possibly each package containing a specific season. This might change though, as the iDT team are making huge strides every day, in terms of completing this mod.

From where I'm sitting, it looks like they are going to deliver a fabulous mod, and they are working so fast that I have to hurry up and finish off this preview now, if I'm to beat them to release-date!

Reviewer's System Specs

- Intel Pentium 4 2.53 GHz CPU
- 512MB RAM
- 128MB Geforce 4 Ti 4200 / NVIDIA drivers v61.77
- AC97 onboard sound
- DirectX Version 9.0c
- Windows XP Home with SP1
- Logitech Momo Force steering wheel