

VENUES TODAY

Keeping Pace at Grand Prix of Long Beach

Savor continues to reinvent for GPLB, which fills the convention center each year

- by Jessica Boudevin
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The racetrack for the 40th Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach winds around the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center and through downtown. (Photo by Andy Witherspoon/Grand Prix Association of Long Beach)

REPORTING FROM LONG BEACH, CALIF. — It wasn't just the racetrack that was crowded for the 40th Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach, April 11-13, which took place on local streets. An estimated 180,000 spectators attended over the three days of the event, up about 6,000 attendees over last year for an economic impact of about \$35 million to the city. There was a lot more to do than just watch the cars, with GPLB filling the SMG-managed Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center with displays and a trade show, and plenty of new tastes to delight the crowd.

Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center General Manager Charles Beirne said he thinks every possible space except for one room in the entire facility was filled.

“It certainly is a race that is geared to every age group, with families, racing enthusiasts, and every demographic coming out,” said Beirne. The arena served as the Family Fun Zone, with rock-climbing walls, video games and racing simulations. There were also electric cars for kids ages 4-8, used by 657 children. The Lifestyle Expo filled more than 270,000 sq. ft. of exhibit halls with more than 150 booths. The paddocks for the support series cars were also located inside the expo, giving fans a chance to see the cars being worked on before taking to the track.

The addition of a historic display of cars in the lobby of the promenade meeting rooms was new for this year, featuring cars that have raced the streets of Long Beach over the last 40 years.

“We weren’t about to let the 40th go by without doing something special — the very fact that we’ve accomplished getting to the 40-year mark was significant and warranted having a display reflecting what was 39 years of effort,” said Jim Michaelian, president CEO of the Grand Prix Association of Long Beach.



A display of historic cars filled the convention center lobby in celebration of 40 years of racing. (VT Photo)

Beirne recalled standing with Michaelian in the lobby and debating whether the cars could physically fit in the space. The loadin was tough, with logistics involving removing the center doors and doorjamb, but the cars came in without incident.

“I think we had an inch — it was that close — but they looked great and people loved them,” he added.

Asst. GM of Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center Dan Lee has been with the facility for 20 Grand Prix events, and said the Grand Prix Association of Long Beach always tries to do something a little different each year to keep things fresh.

He described the convention center's role as "the middle of the hub, because they literally race around the facility."

GPALB rents the facility each year, and Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center provides support services.

"Our biggest role obviously is cleaning and making sure we help support them in any way possible," added Lee.

GPALB tries to continually use the convention center in new and exciting ways. This year marked the first time they've held a prerace press function in the newly-renovated lobby, and the association scheduled a sponsor party in the updated promenade area.

"Quite frankly, they've spent a considerable amount of money upgrading those facilities and, to the extent that we can, we want to take full advantage of the improvements," said Michaelian, adding the spaces look "sharp and spectacular."

It was the largest number of events and activities conducted during Grand Prix weekend, leading to the best attendance number in the last 10 years.

"Like anything else in life you must provide some variety for things that come around every year," Michaelian said. "There are a lot of people who return to this each year and have the expectation that they're going to see and experience some new things."

"If we just reiterated what we've done in the past, the event could get stale," he added.



Even though tickets were free for children under 12 years old, they were still catered to in a Kids Zone within the arena, which featured activities including electric car racing. (Photo by Tom Loeser/Grand Prix Association of Long Beach)

The races also switched to standing starts in order to up the excitement, and will continue to utilize the standing starts as part of the program.

Ticket prices for general admission ranged from \$28 for Friday only, to \$75 for all three days, with children 12 and under entering free to encourage families to attend. Three-day reserved seating ranged from \$72-\$135.

The Grand Prix also utilizes SMG's Savor for food and beverage. Savor has been the master concessionaire for the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach for 22 years.

Savor Sr. VP Shaun Beard flies in from Pennsylvania to oversee operations for Long Beach's biggest event of the year. He also likes to change things up each year when it comes to the offerings at the race because, "if you don't, what fun is it for the guy that comes to the race?"

Two years ago Savor introduced food trucks. Since the initial introduction, Food Truck Village has expanded and refined into a destination.

"Before it was a little scattered but, now, working with the race, it has a lot of uniformity where you can tell it's kind of built into the event, which I think gives it a lot more play," said Beard.

The branded Dog Gone Grills and The Finish Line have taken hot dogs to another level.

Regional F&B Director Veronica Quintero and Director of Culinary Operations Chef Rosie Romo came up with different versions than traditional hot dogs, including the "Pig on Fire," an all beef hot dog with pulled pork and siracha-spiced slaw. Other variations include the "Squealing Pig," topped with peppers, onions, jalapeno bacon and grilled jalapeno, and the "Flaming Cow," topped with nacho cheese and flaming hot Fritos.

Foodies could take their hot dogs to The Finish Line to really customize with topping choices.

"Everybody has mustard and ketchup, so we thought we'd get something like 40 types of toppings and all sorts of sauces to try, because that's what people want," said Beard. "People get really excited about seeing six different types of hot sauce, and get excited that we went out and found that local hot sauce that they get at their favorite stores."

"Ten years ago, that just didn't happen," he added.

Venues Today Staff Reporter Jessica Boudevin spoke with Sr. VP of Savor Shaun Beard about new food offerings at this year's event. (VT Photo)



Savor took margaritas in-house last year, branding them Rita's Long Pour Margaritas and doubling sales from 2012.

"We wanted to brand it and make it a bigger deal — have a bit more fun," said Beard.

This year, the company took the branding to the next level, creating specialty shakers and cook uniforms, and increasing the size of the location from small tiki huts to "giant, 40-foot tiki houses."

Keeping both the items and concepts fresh will continue to be a priority, with Beard saying the team starts figuring out how to reevolve their offerings at the Grand Prix the day after the race ends.

"We have to figure out how to change it, how to re-up it, how to reposition it and how to make it better," said Beard. "The days of saying I'm just going to come out and do the same thing but better, are over — it's not enough any more."

"You can do it like that, but I think you'll come in second," he added.

Michaelian said the GPALB hasn't even considered looking at switching concessionaires, and he appreciates the initiative of Savor to continually update their product.

"We're constantly requesting that our vendors and suppliers review their processes and make the experience newer, fresher and bolder for our customers," he added.



Spectators crowd the track to snap photos of racing action. (Photo by Grand Prix Association of Long Beach.)

The event is a success for the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau, which shows off the city's capabilities to dozens of meeting planners each year during the Grand Prix.

bring their events to Long Beach," said LBCVB Director of PR Bob Maguglin. This year, the bureau brought more than 60 meeting planners in to show off the city's hotels, attractions and venues.

"Over the years it has been one of our most successful presentations that we use to sell clients on why they should

"But mostly what we're showing them is how well this city gets together in every aspect for an event," he added. "We never fail to book conventions and business from the Grand Prix."

He added that the Grand Prix of Long Beach extends the media reach for the city all across the country.

The meeting planners from around the country represent a mix of those who have brought repeat business and those who may not have hosted events in Long Beach yet. Should this year's group all book events, it would lead to about \$52 million in economic impact to the city.

"They do close a number of deals every year based on the number of meeting planners who are present for the Grand Prix, and that's something that the city needs to take into consideration when they're looking at their options," said Michaelian, alluding to the recent talk of bringing a Formula 1 race to Long Beach. Another consideration is the potential cost increase F1 would bring to the consumer and if the demographic could support the pricier ticket.

"Our top price for three days is \$135 and we've seen scenarios for Formula 1 where that number would be in the high \$400-\$500 range," Michaelian said. "You have to wonder how many citizens of Long Beach would be able to come for that price."

"We feel that the Grand Prix and the way we have our event structured provides the maximum opportunity for citizens to come back and be involved in their event, because it really is a civic event as well as a city event," he added.

The Grand Prix of Long Beach is contracted with the city until 2018.

Interviewed for this story: Shaun Beard, (610) 729-7916; Charles Beirne, (562) 499-7575; Bob Maguglin, (562) 436-3645; Jim Michaelian, (562) 981-2600