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Auto Racing

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Major Changes in Educational Services Prior to the 1990's, autistic children did not receive educational services by public schools for the specific disorder of autism. Many of these children were institutionalized or received intensive home-based therapy. Services provided were behavioral in nature, often involving many hours of one-on-one intervention. However, in 1990, P.L. 101-476, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments, was amended by Congress. Autism was included in the categories of disabilities. Children with autism were able to receive a free, appropriate education with related services with age-appropriate peers. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 1994 only 4 percent of children with autism were receiving services in the regular class in 1991-1992, suggesting that most of the children with autism were educated in segregated classrooms.

Thiomersal Controversy Many parents and physicians were concerned that thiomersal, a mercury-based preservative used in many immunizations given to infants and young children, was the cause of the increase in the incidence of autism. Through legislative efforts by parents, physicians, and other concerned individuals, this preservative was removed in 1999 from most immunizations. This action resulted in a slight decrease in the incidence of autism. However, the issue has remained controversial. Some researchers argue that the change is highly significant, while others state that there is not enough evidence to support either stance.

Impact The change in legislation and the redefining of criteria for diagnosis allowed professionals such as researchers, educators, and physicians to track the incidents of autism. Children with autism were provided free, appropriate educational services, which allowed them to be a part of society. Individuals and families began to advocate for increased funding to research causes and treatment for autism.

Further Reading

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Melinda Swafford

See also Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; Educate America Act of 1994; Health care reform; Medicine; Pharmaceutical industry.

■ Auto racing

Definition The sport of racing automobiles

As a consequence of new sponsors, personalities, race tracks, and television exposure, automobile racing—and in particular NASCAR—reached unprecedented heights of popularity during the 1990's. Indeed, NASCAR, with its cafés and memorabilia, became a "way of life" for many Americans.

While automobile racing has its origins at the end of the nineteenth century with the beginnings of the industry, at certain levels the sport was radically transformed during the 1990's. First, and particularly as a result of the spectacular success of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), automobile racing brought in enormous amounts of money. Second, it was no longer the automobile manufacturers that made the key decisions related to auto racing but rather those controlling business aspects and the organization of the sport.

The influx of money was not true across the board, however. At the second level, beneath NASCAR and Formula 1 (primarily a European-based activity), stood races organized by the Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) and the Indy Racing League (IRL). Conflict between these two organizations diluted fan interest and profits. At a third level were those engaged in sports car road racing, governed by the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) and International Motor Sports Association (IMSA). Finally, grassroots-level racing, either at the club level or at oval dirt and asphalt tracks located in rural America, thrived, but more as a labor of love than as a way to make money for those involved.

The NASCAR Boom During the 1990's, NASCAR exploded on the American scene. Once confined to the southeastern United States, NASCAR became a national sport, with high-paid drivers, a large and increasingly diverse fan base, extravagant sponsors, and broad media coverage. Money was everywhere. For example, sponsorship contributions rose 7 percent annually during the decade. By 1998, more than fifty companies invested more than $10 million each year. Top sponsors included Philip Morris, Anheuser-Busch, Coca-Cola, General Motors, PepsiCo, AT&T, RJR Nabisco, and McDonald's. New sponsors in sectors with little direct connection to the automobile business—fast food, home supplies, detergents—became commonplace.

Consequently, top drivers like Dale Earnhardt and Jeff Gordon earned more than $10 million per year, and successful crew chiefs $300,000 to $500,000. Ultimately the money was due to the fact that NASCAR was highly adaptable to television, and thus it was media executives rather than the auto industry who was now calling the shots in this business.

The 1990's also witnessed the rise of a new generation of NASCAR drivers. Heroes from the 1960's and 1970's, including Richard Petty, Bobby Allison, Cale Yarborough, David Pearson, and Buddy Baker, gave way to Jeff Gordon, Dale Jarrett, Ernie Ervin, Mark Martin, Bobby Labonte, Jeff and Ward Burton, Ricky Craven, Johnny Benson, and Jeremy Mayfield. Symbolically, Richard Petty's 1992 "Fan Appreciation Tour" ended winless. Petty's last race in Atlanta found him running his final laps at half speed, the consequence of an earlier crash.

New owners were also a part of the NASCAR scene during the 1990's. Included were stars from other sports, including National Football League coach Joe Gibbs and the National Basketball Association's Julius Erving and Brad Daugherty. With new tracks located near Fort Worth, Texas, and Fontana, California, NASCAR was seemingly being transformed in virtually every possible way.

Jeff Gordon celebrates after winning the first Brickyard 400 NASCAR event on August 6, 1994. (AP/Wide World Photos)

Perhaps the most dramatic event of the 1990's was NASCAR's coming to the legendary Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the inaugural Brickyard 400 in 1994. With NASCAR founder Bill France and longtime Indy track owner Tony Hulman now dead, their successors could bury long-term differences and realize the potential of such an event in terms of media coverage and fan enthusiasm. Thus, on August 6, 1994, Jeff Gordon won the inaugural 160-lap event in front of 300,000 fans.

CART Versus IRL Despite the great success of the Brickyard 400, during the 1990's controversy swirled around the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and its owner, Tony George. During the 1980's, CART and the United States Automobile Club (USAC) had been the two sanctioning bodies that governed racing at Indianapolis, and these two groups had an uneasy relationship. In 1994, George announced that the Indianapolis 500 would leave the CART series and become the centerpiece for George's own IRL series. Whether the decision was motivated by ego, a concern over the increased presence of foreign drivers, or a perception that Indy was dropping in status as a race is unclear. The upshot of all of this, however, was that in 1996 a group of unknown drivers raced at Indianapolis, while CART organized its own race, the U.S. 500, held in Michigan on the same day. The split greatly affected this level of racing, as it led to decreased television revenues and waning fan interest. In the end, the Indianapolis 500 prevailed, and after shifting the race date of the U.S. 500 to July, in 1999 CART canceled the race altogether.

End of Tobacco Company Sponsorship Since the early 1970's, tobacco companies had played a critical role in automobile racing through sponsorship of teams and events. No longer able to advertise in print or on television, the tobacco industry could advertise on the side of cars, however, and it did so freely. This investment came to an end in 1998, however, when after litigation involving the companies and the states' attorneys general an agreement was reached that eliminated cigarette companies from automobile racing. After twenty-eight years, NASCAR's Winston Cup ended, but racing continued, now known as the NEXTEL series.

Impact Despite America's wavering love affair with the automobile, auto racing remains one of the nation's most popular sports, on the level with football, baseball, and basketball. A huge and vibrant business, its fan base draws from virtually every class segment in society.

Further Reading

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See also Automobile industry; Gordon, Jeff; Sports; Television.

■ Automobile industry

Definition Industry involved in the manufacture and sale of motor vehicles

During the 1990's, the American automobile industry was transformed in terms of products, leadership strategies, organization, and technology. Increasingly, the American industry has evolved into part of a global web of manufacturers, parts suppliers, and consumers.

In 1999, annual sales of cars and light trucks in the United States reached a high of 16.9 million units, eclipsing by nearly one million the previous high reached in 1986. Despite ending on this high point, the 1990's proved to be extremely competitive and turbulent time for automakers. As the decade unfolded, and following a trend that began in 1980, more and more light trucks as opposed to passenger cars were manufactured. In addition to trucks and sport utility vehicles (SUVs), new "market segment busting" vehicles appeared, called "crossovers." The crossover mixed together features such as style, sturdiness, reliability, and luxury. These new vehicles were in part the consequence of a new generation of leaders in the industry, typically "motor heads" rather than the "bean counters" that had preceded them. As a result of making innovative vehicles that were of better quality, sales quantities and profits moved commensurately higher. For example, after staggering losses at the beginning of the 1990's, between 1994 and 1998 General Motors (GM) and Ford had a global net income of $52 billion on reve-