
Indy champ Hornish hears Cup's siren song

By Nate Ryan, USA TODAY

DEFIANCE, Ohio — Indicators of tectonic growth and evolution are visible everywhere in this Midwestern town that has existed at the intersection of the Maumee, Auglaize and Tiffin rivers for more than two centuries.

Orange barrels choke traffic and concrete culverts lie on banks of mud along U.S. 24, the major thoroughfare that is being expanded to a four-lane expressway for easier access to Toledo, Ohio, and Fort Wayne, Ind.

Along Clinton Street, where 18-wheelers rerouted by construction rumble past torn-up downtown sidewalks, there are signs one dream of supersonic progress already has been fulfilled. Hanging from the lampposts on the town's main drag are checkered flag streamers reading, "Defiance Ohio's Sam Hornish Jr. 2006 Indianapolis 500 champion." The banners are remnants of the parade on a rainy Wednesday in July that drew 10,000 from a town of roughly 17,000 to honor its favorite son's last-lap victory against Marco Andretti.

A triangular block of granite ("Defiance native Sam Hornish Jr. accomplished his boyhood dream in taking the checkered flag of the Indianapolis 500, 90th running, May 28, 2006") among the fountains and flower beds at Potomac Park marks how the razor-thin triumph shook Defiance.

The finish ignited Memorial Day weekend block parties throughout Karl Kissner's northside neighborhood.

"You've never heard such hooting and hollering," Kissner says. "That's all anyone talked about the next day. The response from the community was overwhelming."

Mayor Bob Armstrong burst into tears while listening to the finish over the loudspeakers on a golf course.

"The whole town exploded," Armstrong says.

But just below the banners in the town square are signs why Hornish might desert the open-wheel circuit that has been the center of his universe since slightly before his July 2, 1979, birth date (his mother, Jo Ellen, attended the Indy 500 that year eight months pregnant with the last of five kids).

In the front window of Spanky's ("Home of the Giant Taco") is a life-size cutout of Dale Earnhardt Jr. holding a Budweiser, promoting karaoke on Wednesdays and weekends. There's another billboard of NASCAR's most popular driver just a mile down the road from the trucking company owned by Hornish's parents and the General Motors powertrain plant on the edge of town.

They are reminders that even though Hornish capped a career season with a third IRL IndyCar Series championship last year, he hasn't reached the pinnacle of auto racing in America. That mantle belongs to NASCAR, and even in a town such as this, the sport spawned by bootleggers in the Southeast has established a foothold.

Standing at the country's crossroads, Indianapolis Motor Speedway always has held a strong sway on the U.S. heartland. But while Defiance is a three-hour drive from the Brickyard, it's only an hour or so from Michigan International Speedway, where the Nextel Cup Series races — and rules — twice a year.

On the cars and pickups that crawl down Clinton at the midafternoon rush hour, there are bumper stickers with Hornish's No. 6 but also plenty of NASCAR drivers' numbers — Nos. 8 (Earnhardt Jr.), 20 (Tony Stewart) and 24 (Jeff Gordon).

It's validation that Hornish, who is dabbling in the Busch Series this year to determine whether he wants to make a full-time go at Cup in 2008, has a hometown blessing if he answers stock car's calling.

"It'd be exciting," says Tim Small, president of the Defiance Chamber of Commerce. "There's a nice blend of NASCAR and Indy fans here."

Kissner says Hornish actually has raised the profile of the IRL in Defiance on a level with NASCAR as the city's Ohio State-Michigan rivalry (but without the bloodlust). He believes it's obvious what his fellow citizens would tell Hornish.

"Go into that and take it," Kissner says. "There's nothing more that people would like to see than Sam take NASCAR by storm. It would solidify his racing ability in so many theaters."

Moonlighting in Busch

As one of several open-wheel drivers to moonlight in stock cars, Hornish is fortunate to drive for the only IRL team based in Mooresville, N.C. Team Penske operates its IndyCar and Nextel Cup teams (as well as an American Le Mans squad) from the same 424,000-square-foot facility.

Switching from precision-handling, high downforce vehicles to 3,400-pound stock cars with tricky tires can be precarious. Other Indy-car winners (Christian Fittipaldi, Paul Tracy, Scott Pruett) have struggled to make the leap, and only one (Tony Stewart) has done so directly from the IRL.

When Hornish joined the team in 2004, car owner Roger Penske and team President Tim Cindric made their driver aware that if he wanted to try NASCAR, they'd plot a steady course without pressure to perform immediately.

After winning Indy, Hornish decided he was ready. Penske entered Hornish in its No. 12 Busch car for two races last year, and he is scheduled for 11 races this season.

Cindric says moonlighting makes sense because "once you're out of your seat, it complicates things." It also allows Hornish to contrast NASCAR's frenetic pace with the IRL's slate of 17 races in six months. Nextel Cup runs from February to November, and drivers often are scurrying between sponsor appearances midweek.

"One of the bigger concerns for Sam isn't whether he can drive a stock car vs. an Indy car, it's whether he wants that lifestyle of racing 38 weekends a year and the demands that brings," Cindric says.

A taste of the harried schedule came early. After completing two days of preseason IRL testing at Homestead-Miami Speedway in February, Hornish left the track at 10:30 p.m. and flew to Southern California. He landed at 3:30 a.m., checked into a hotel at 4 and was up at 6:30 to head to California Speedway for a Busch Series rookies meeting.

Hornish has begun chartering planes to alleviate some travel stress but "so far, it's not been too bad."

"I haven't lived that life with these media and sponsor obligations," he says. "I definitely thought this was going to be difficult, but as soon as I'm home four days, I've got to do something. You feel lazy watching DVDs."

When he's not watching one of 500 DVDs in the home theater of his red-brick home (which sits in a quiet, upper-middle-class subdivision in Napoleon, about 15 miles northeast), Hornish often tools around old haunts in one of his custom Chevrolet pickups.

"He can be racing Sunday, and you see him the next day in the grocery store," says Armstrong, who greets visitors to his mayor's office with plastic combs.

Jo Ellen, who has lived in Defiance with her husband, Sam, since 1987, says her son still lives near home because "people are close enough to Sam, they say 'hi' and that's enough for the day," whether he's eating at Carmine's Little Italy or Kissner's family restaurant, which has been open since 1928.

"The man has a day off; let him enjoy it!" Kissner says. "The customers don't climb all over him."

Defiance has produced some other high-profile athletes, particularly in baseball (such as Los Angeles Dodgers prospect Chad Billingsley), and was the setting for a 2005 Julianne Moore movie (*The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio*), but it retains enough charm to be ranked in the top 20 of America's 100 Small Towns (by *Site Selection* magazine).

"Sam likes the normal life here," Small says. "He's as simple a person as you'd ever meet. He'll be on *Letterman* one night and in Defiance the next day kicking the dirt in a ball cap, tattered jeans and T-shirt. He's a great role model."

His presence is felt even during the 200 days a year he spends on the road. His foundation has donated nearly \$2 million since 2001, with much benefiting local causes: a heart center at Defiance Medical Center, a youth lounge at the YMCA, a fitness room at a high school. A \$3.5 million Defiance Senior Center is in the works.

"I told him, 'To whom much is given, much is expected,' and he tries to follow that," Jo Ellen says.

Defiance business leaders returned the favor last Christmas by buying him a customized golf cart. The gratitude surprised Hornish — as did the turnout for his parade, which still is being looped on a local access cable station ("Sam had this vision of tumbleweeds blowing down the street," his mother says).

"They generally don't throw parades for normal guys, as much as they probably should," Hornish says. "I'm the kind of guy that a lot of times I don't feel anyone should be throwing a parade for. I'm honored and love when people are interested, but I'm not trying to make sure everyone knows who I am."

Matching up with the greats

The obvious advantages to running NASCAR are greater fame and money (Hornish has earned \$13.4 million in a seven-year IRL career; Jimmie Johnson made nearly \$16 million winning last year's Nextel Cup title). But for Hornish, "A lot of it is to see if I can do it." Only A.J. Foyt and Mario Andretti have won the Daytona 500 and Indy 500, and no one has won Indy and the Allstate 400 at the Brickyard.

"Being versatile is one of the best things you can be as a driver," Hornish says. "To put yourself beside a name like Foyt or Andretti, that's pretty neat. It gets to a point where you're saying, 'I've accomplished a lot (in the IRL), what do you do to make yourself one of those guys people think about 40 years after you're done racing?' "

Hornish's Busch results have been forgettable. His best race was at Atlanta Motor Speedway, where he qualified fifth and finished 15th. Cindric said Hornish has driven cars that aren't always optimum (Team Penske struggled mightily on superspeedways last year) and has been caught in crashes caused by reckless peers (open-wheel veterans Tony Stewart and Ryan Newman suffered similar fates in Busch, going winless before elevating into successful Cup careers).

Buddy Baker, who has mentored Hornish in stock cars, says a test at North Carolina Speedway was a more accurate barometer of Hornish's ability. On an abrasive track he'd never seen, Hornish was turning laps faster than 2004 Cup champ Kurt Busch within an afternoon.

Baker, a 19-time Cup winner, met a teenage Hornish during a speaking engagement in Defiance 10 years ago. Struck by the determination of Hornish (then a go-kart champion and rising star), Baker says he predicted then Hornish would be "remembered as one of the greatest drivers of all time."

"There's no chance that Sam's not going to make it," Baker says. "He's in a great position. He has a car owner who thinks he hung the moon, and it's up to Sam to figure out how far to pursue it. The big question is whether he wants to divorce open wheel."

A poker aficionado who enjoys everything from Omaha to Chicago Hi Lo to Texas Hold-'em (he always deals because "I can tell people to hurry up and they won't know if it's because I have a good hand"), Hornish seems to be holding all the cards in deciding on his career. The team wants to add a third Cup car eventually and, while a sponsor would be needed, Penske said in January that if Hornish "wanted to give up open wheel, we'd take a look for sure. He doesn't have to prove he's a great driver."

Hornish, though, still seeks evidence that one option trumps the other.

"There's big gambles either way," Hornish says. "Stay (in the IRL), and you might wonder if you could have done something different and been successful. If you do (NASCAR), you might not be any good or you might be good and not like doing it at all."

Cindric says: "He's not looking to live the life. He values his time and his family and going to Defiance, Ohio. That isn't as easy (in NASCAR). He needs to figure that out."

That pondering probably will occur in northwest Ohio, where Hornish and wife Crystal are planning to raise a family.

"The more I'm home, that's the most real version of me," Hornish says. "They knew me when I was a kid, as the guy trying to become the Indy 500 winner and as the guy who became the Indy 500 winner."

And they might know him as the guy who became a NASCAR star.

Hornish's IndyCar Series stats

Sam Hornish Jr. has won three IRL IndyCar Series titles and more than \$13 million since 2000:

Year	Starts	Wins	Top-5s	Top-10s	Poles	Laps led	Rank	Earnings
2000	8	0	1	2	0	38	21	\$521,950
2001	13	3	11	12	2	764	1	\$2,477,025
2002	15	5	11	12	2	654	1	\$2,470,615
2003	16	3	7	11	1	393	5	\$1,330,865
2004	16	1	6	8	0	301	7	\$1,042,140
2005	17	2	9	12	3	367	3	\$1,464,505
2006	14	4	9	11	4	655	1	\$3,835,205
2007	4	0	2	4	0	3	6	\$262,000
Career	103	18	56	72	12	3,175	-	\$13,404,305

Hornish's Busch Series stats

Track	Start	Finish	Top-10s	Poles	Laps	Miles	Earnings
Atlanta	5	15	0	0	195	300.3	\$15,775
Daytona	27	31	0	0	114	285	\$50,475
Fontana	16	35	0	0	132	264	\$29,980
Homestead	24	43	0	0	20	30	\$20,929
Nashville	13	25	0	0	218	290.6	\$15,900
Phoenix	27	36	0	0	183	183	\$21,750
Richmond	28	43	0	0	16	12	\$15,988
Total (7)	20	32.6	0	0	878	1364.9	\$170,797

Source: *Racing-reference.info*