



Courtesy of Lena Peres, Speedgroup

LAND OF SISU

MOTORSPORTS IN FINLAND

»» By Linda Spencer

Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland and Denmark are collectively known as the Nordic region, and its population of approximately 27 million citizens is passionate about all forms of wheeled competition, including rally racing, drag racing, drifting and circuit racing.

A high standard of living provides the locals with ample disposable income, and the positive perception of U.S. racing products provides an excellent export opportunity for U.S. motorsports product suppliers. In addition, the strong English-language skills among the average citizen make it one of the easiest export markets in which to do business.

This first article of a series on motorsports in the Nordic region focuses on Finland. With a population of 5.5 million, Finland is considered the northern gate between the east and west and is home to a disproportionate number motorsports world champions who enjoy strong support from the local enthusiastic fan base.

What makes this country (bordered by Russia, Sweden, the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia) a motorsports standout may be the Finnish people. The Finnish term “sisu” literally means “guts” or “intestines,” but it

is used to refer to strength of will, determination, perseverance and acting rationally in the face of adversity. It is also often used to explain Finland’s achievements in sports and physical endurance.

Below are some of the other factors (combined with sisu) that might lead to Finland’s outsized motorsports successes, as well as highlights of some of the nation’s motorsports achievements.

- The extensive network of private gravel roads (primarily developed for forestry) provides young people with a first-rate, free and plentiful training ground and challenging terrain that forces mastering control of vehicles. Cars typically slide more easily on gravel than on asphalt, not to mention the bumpiness of the courses. In fact, teenagers often are able to begin driving on these quiet private roads before obtaining their licenses, and the gravel

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roadways total about 280,000 km (174,000 mi.). Though they exist on a grander scale, they may not be very different in concept from the American rural dirt tracks that provide grass-roots training for NASCAR and even drag racing.

- The long, cold winters help to create excellent drivers who are forced to learn vehicle control on ice-packed roads.
- Rally racing is enormously popular in Finland, with the Neste Rally annually attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators. The race is famous for its hard-packed gravel jumps and blind crests, creating one of the fastest and most thrilling races in rallying. In fact, Finland has the second highest number of world rally champions on the globe, trailing only France.
- Racing exists for everyone from amateurs to professionals. Besides

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karting, which provides organized racing for beginners, one of the most popular and fun events is folk racing, which takes place nearly every weekend all over the country. These grass-roots events invite drivers from age 14 and up to participate in inexpensive second-hand cars. Attracting drivers of all ages and levels of experience, the rules limit the amount that may be spent on the competition cars. To keep everyone honest, there is a special rule that any participant can make a bid on any competitor's car after a race. The owner of the vehicle is required to sell the car, serving as a deterrent to spending any more than the allowed amount on the car (typically under \$2,000 USD). The spirit of camaraderie is a special feature of these events, with drivers willing to help each other, especially youngsters driving in their first folk races.

- Nine Finns have also made their marks in Formula 1, with four world championships and 50 Grand Prix wins among them. Most recently, Finland's Valtteri Bottas won the 2020 Russian Grand Prix for Mercedes at Sochi. He followed other racers that included Keke Rosberg, who won in 1982, and Mika Häkkinen, who won the 1998 title and successfully defended it the following year. The versatile Kimi Räikkönen, nicknamed "The Iceman," also saw success in the world rally



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championship and concurrently competed in NASCAR, driving for Kyle Busch Motorsports in the Camping World Truck Series. AKK Motorsport, the Finnish motorsport's national governing body, recently launched a study into the possibility of Finland hosting a Grand Prix for the first time. While most rally racers cut their teeth on gravel roads, F1 racers typically start out in the country's well-developed kart racing organizations.

- Finland also boasts key wins in the European drag-racing season, which runs from May to September. Finland's Anita Mäkelä is the reigning

FIA European Drag Racing champion in the Top Fuel category (winning in 2000, 2016, 2018 and 2019). In 2019, she was inducted into the British Drag Racing Hall of Fame. In 2021, Finland's Kauhava dragstrip (located about 250 mi. northwest of Helsinki) was added as round three in the 2021 six-round European Drag Racing Championship, hosting two of the series classes: Top Fuel and Top Modified.

Next month in our continuing series, we will cover the European Drag Racing Series in more depth.

Join SEMA for its inaugural SEMA Nordic trip in September 2021. Registration opens in March 2021. The SEMA Business Development Program to Stockholm, Sweden, includes trade buyers from throughout the region. The program includes low-cost, turnkey events that bring together SEMA-member manufacturers and buyers from key markets. The price includes hotels, a tabletop display, meals and networking events.

2021 SEMA NORDIC TRIP

For more information on the 2021 SEMA Nordic trip, visit www.sema.org/nordic or contact Linda Spencer at lindas@sema.org.



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»»» Rally racing is enormously popular in Finland with the Neste Rally annually attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators. On the world stage, Finland is the second winningest country in terms of the number of World Rally Champions, trailing only France.