

HOOSIER RACING TIRE

Revs Past 'Coolest Thing' Rivals

By Anthony Schoettle

Hoosier Racing Tire was born to be a serious competitor in the Coolest Thing Made in Indiana contest.

Not surprisingly to the top brass, the Plymouth-based company took top honors in the third annual event, which concluded with the crowning of the champion in December at the Indiana Chamber's Best IN Manufacturing event.

"To me, it starts with racing," relates Joerg Burfien, Hoosier Racing Tire president

and CEO. "Anything related to racing is cool. But ... a tire is a pretty cool product in and of itself. What people don't always think about is the tire is the only thing that keeps a car contacted to the road. Without a tire, you're going nowhere. Sometimes the contact patch is only the size of a stamp; it's smaller than a pair of shoes. When you pair that with massive engines, the force on the tires – that's pretty impressive."

It doesn't hurt to have a staff passionate about what they're doing and the employer for which they work. Hoosier's marketing staff was among the most active during the Coolest Thing Made contest, and the company's employees along with vendors, customers and others responded with thousands of votes each round, topping some

pretty tough competition along the way, including Nashville-based Hard Truth Distilling Co. in the finals.

"The cool thing about our business is we take stock in everything that happens in racing every week, and we react and respond," explains Mark Spence, vice president of manufacturing and technology. "You can feel the passion for what we do. When you visit our plant, you can see that passion and engagement of everyone who works for us."

Then and now

The history of Hoosier Racing Tire is one of an American dream come true for two young, Indiana entrepreneurs who turned a personal vision into reality.

It started in the early 1950s when Bob Newton, along with his wife, Joyce, began a successful racing career on the small asphalt tracks of northern Indiana. Bob, like many of his fellow drivers, was not satisfied with driving on street tires with their limited sizing options and hard tread compounds. It was during these early days that Bob had a vision to produce his own tires specifically designed for racing.

In 1957, the Newtons decided to begin producing their own race tires by re-treading street tires with softer compounds. They began their business in an abandoned horse barn in South Bend, selling their tires to local racers. The Hoosier name was chosen for their enterprise to reflect the origin of Bob's racing roots on the short tracks of the Midwest, and the purple color that embodies



Hoosier Racing Tire executives and employees turned out in force, traveling from Plymouth to Indianapolis, to receive the company's Coolest Thing Made in Indiana award.

the Hoosier Tire brand today was adapted from Bob's first race car.

Today, the business has 550 employees – 99% of whom work in Indiana – and makes more racing tires each year than any other company globally; a fact no one in the industry disputes. Not to mention, Hoosier Tire's manufacturing plant in Plymouth became the first one solely dedicated to racing tires in 1979.

"I can't think of a business where the costs of entry are steeper or the level of technology needed to succeed is higher, and Hoosier Tire has come in and taken on all comers," suggests Dick Berggren, editor of *Speedway Illustrated* and a retired racer.

While Hoosier Racing Tire was acquired by Germany-based Continental AG in 2016, the company maintains its deep roots in Indiana, still making tires on the farmland where it all began for the Newtons.

And, boy, do they make tires: 1,400 different types! Some 85% of its sales are in the U.S., but it has a growing presence in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the United Kingdom. Hoosier Tire's strength is in its oval-racing tire; the fastest growing segment is its rally racing tire, a combination of dirt and asphalt, which is an especially hot commodity in Europe.

Start your engines

Burfien says the manufacturer found out about the Coolest Thing Made in Indiana contest shortly before the 2022 competition started. He and his staff went all in for 2023.

"We were eager for this year," he emphasizes. "We do believe we have a pretty unique and impressive product, so we said, 'Let's go.' We have a very passionate staff. You can probably feel that."

Hoosier Racing Tire had 10 company officials attend the awards presentation in downtown Indianapolis, and Burfien said more from the company would have attended had several of them not gotten sick at the Performance Racing Industry racing trade show in Indianapolis earlier in December.

"We were able to take some of our long-serving employees, with 35-plus years with the company," Spence explains. "They were really into it. They're very proud of the product we make and the part they play in that."

The competition began with 47 companies from 38 Indiana communities. The contest is held in a single-elimination Hoosier hysteria-style tournament. An online randomizer generated the initial Coolest Thing Made in Indiana matchups, with online public voting determining the winners in each round.



Hoosier Racing Tire's innovative rubber compound and advanced manufacturing techniques have made it the tire of choice in hundreds of North American race circuits.



There was no entry fee to participate. A company did not need to be headquartered in Indiana, but the product submitted had to be manufactured in the state.

Burfien credits employee excitement and an aggressive marketing campaign during the competition for the company's championship run.

"We managed to get our story across and got people not only inside our company, but outside our company excited about what we're doing," he shares. "We really spread the word we were in this contest, and we do have a lot of supporters especially in motorsports circles."

It didn't hurt that the city of Plymouth joined in the rallying cry, putting up signs for people to vote for Hoosier Racing Tire around town and several businesses joined in

as well. "The Plymouth mayor was trumpeting this pretty loudly," Burfien relates. "We were inspired by the level of support."

Hoosier Racing Tire wasted little time incorporating the Coolest Thing Made in Indiana championship into its own marketing, using it on all its social media channels and even having hundreds of T-shirts made touting the win for its employees, customers, suppliers and other supporters.

"We will definitely use this in our marketing and sales. After all, now we are officially the Coolest Thing Made in Indiana, so we will get a bounce," Spence stresses. "We can already feel the momentum, and we think that will translate in a lot of positive ways for us: sales, employee recruitment, morale and other areas. This is real."

RESOURCES: Joerg Burfien and Mark Spence, Hoosier Racing Tire, at www.hoosiertire.com