

Creating crystal trophies is an art form

Many hours from master craftsmen in Ireland are needed for Honda Indy Toronto's awards for racers

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It's one of the most famous podium celebrations in motor racing history. Four-time CART champion Sebastien Bourdais, having finished second in the first race of a 2013 Honda Indy Toronto doubleheader, doesn't notice that the crystal trophy he's just picked up isn't attached to its wooden pedestal. Seconds later, time stands still as the runners-up trophy sloooooowly tips over, bounces off the podium twice, and detonates itself right in front of third-place winner, Dario Franchitti.

You can't buy that kind of publicity, and you could almost feel the entirety of the IndyCar community hold its breath when Bourdais finished the second race of the day on the podium as well.

"It was definitely interesting," says Claudia Truchan, general manager of William Ashley, which has handled the logistics and delivery of Honda Indy Toronto trophies since 2010. "I remember receiving the phone call from our team that day — I was at the track to help present the trophies — and our operations manager was saying, 'Oh my God, oh my God, the trophy broke, oh my God!' We were disappointed for Sebastien, but secretly quite relieved it wasn't the winner's trophy!"

Rather than being swept furiously beneath the rug, this potential PR nightmare has become one of the most endearing moments in an eight-year relationship between the Honda Indy Toronto, Waterford Crystal and its Canadian emporium, William Ashley. Indeed, five days before this year's race, staff at WA's flagship store in Toronto even presented Bourdais with a paper replica of the 2018 trophies he was there to unveil. Which, naturally,



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Josef Newgarden lifts a vase on the podium after winning the Honda Indy Toronto in Toronto on Sunday, July 16, 2017.

he dropped.

'Quality' is le mot juste, without a doubt.

After the initial "incubator for dreams, ideas and inspirations" design phase, very fine beechwood is carefully moulded with hand tools to shape the molten crystal that will eventually become the Honda Indy Toronto trophies. Master Blowers manip-

ulate these shapes yet further in a furnace heated to 1,315.6 C (2,400 F). Only after the first of six rigorous inspections is completed is the sculpted stem and bowl ready for the first cuts to be made. It's an exercise where patience and a deft hand are crucial; should a craftsman, even one with the required eight years of training, angle his diamond-tipped wheel too aggres-

sively, the whole design is immediately considered flawed, and thrown in the garbage.

Any and all rough edges are polished thoroughly before the Intaglio engraving process can begin in earnest. It's a mind-bogglingly detailed and precise art form, one that the House of Waterford Crystal has practised since its foundation in 1783 (give

or take a 94-year dormancy), and one that incorporates more than 750 tons of crystal per year to produce more than 45,000 products.

"Waterford is one of Europe's most respected companies when it comes to crystal production, and it's because they use a very specific content of lead," explains Truchan. "Traditionally, the definition for crystal is that it needs to be 24 per cent lead. Anything below that is glass. This allows Waterford to make deep cuts, which creates the beauty and also provides the weight. Imagine picking up a heavy crystal goblet — you know immediately that it is something special."

"And that's so important for William Ashley and House of Waterford Crystal in our partnership with Honda Indy Toronto; we want the drivers to know they are holding something special."

Jolted perhaps by Bourdais's incident in 2013, Truchan and her William Ashley crew take the safety of this near-\$15,000 collection very seriously, especially because there are no spares during a race weekend. You might think, then, that the three trophies being readied for the 2019 race will be kept in hermetically sealed vaults deep beneath the circuit. But no. As I speak with Truchan, all three trophies stand mere inches from us in the Honda Indy Toronto paddock, admittedly encased in shatterproof plastic and atop some very sturdy pillars. Even so, I've rarely been more conscious of where my elbows are pointing during an interview.

"Fortunately nothing like (the Bourdais podium) has happened since, but our team is still extremely careful when transporting and storing these trophies. We always have a dedicated team monitoring them, and any movement of the collection is only ever done by us."

"That includes after the podium presentation too, where things can get a little complex. Some teams — I won't say who — prefer to keep the actual trophy, so we've had a lot of requests over the years for copies of trophies to be sent to the drivers."