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**Through The Esses - Ken Breslauer - Sebring's Historian Sees
An Historic Race Ahead**

02/04/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

"Sebring is the toughest test in the world on Brakes and gears. As of now, it's also no daisy-dance for the drivers; for them it is the toughest twelve hours they can spend behind the wheel." - Sports Car Illustrated article from 1958

In a few short weeks the hundreds of palm trees and orange blossoms of south central Florida will once again share their warm environs with hundreds of thousands of fanatic sportscar racing fans who will come to this remote area to participate in the festival of noise and speed known as the annual Mobil 1 12 Hours Of Sebring. Since 1950, the word 'Sebring' has meant one thing; a premier endurance event featuring racing's finest cars and drivers - and some of the most enthusiastic fans to be found anywhere. And for a continuous 24 of those 58 years, one man has never missed a 12 Hours race. His name is Ken Breslauer.



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Breslauer is the Media Director and Track Historian at Sebring International Raceway. His passion for auto racing goes back to his roots as a newspaperman - a vocation he began right out of college - covering local sports teams for a Florida daily. He authored a comprehensive book (Sebring - The Official History of America's Great Sports Car Race, David Bull Publishing - 1995) that chronicles each year of the Sebring Circuit's history from the days when promoter Alec Ulmann first waved a green flag in December of 1950, right through to the final FIA World Championship race in 1972.

The circuit has undergone a significant number of temporary and make-do changes since 1950, and as we approach the opening of the 56th 12 Hour weekend, changes of a more permanent nature are now in place - or are about to be finalized in time for the March 12 - 15 weekend. Breslauer talked with us about his personal history with Sebring and about the significant and modern upgrades fans will find in place this year.

"I started going to Sebring in 1976, as a spectator. I have been there every year since. I was a spectator the first two years, and then I was a sports writer for the Pensacola News Journal. I was doing some freelance stuff for the track - program articles and the like - and then in 1985 they called me and asked me if I would like the job as Media Director. Back then, the job was on a contract basis, not as a full time employee. I did that for a few years and eventually I was hired into the job full time.

"With the Pensacola News Journal I covered mostly high school sports as I was the new kid just out of college. I was always a race fan so I did get to do some auto races. My editor, Jack Flowers - who is a well known NASCAR writer now - let me cover a few NASCAR races like Daytona and Talladega. I also got to cover Sebring."

Breslauer had a passion for motorsports that branched out into the history of racing, adding an additional element of joy for this fully qualified historian of the sport.

"I've always been a motorsports fan, and I have always had a keen interest in history (Breslauer also has a Masters Degree in Historic Preservation and has authored several books on Florida history and roadside Americana). Major events like the Sebring 12 Hours and the Indianapolis 500 really appealed to me from a racing and historical standpoint. And back in the 1970's Sebring was still a temporary circuit. It was an airport for 360 days a year and a racetrack for just four or five days. I would go to the races and see all the old airplanes that were there (Sebring is on property that once was known as Hendricks Field, a training base for the B-17 bombers of World War II). It was all very fascinating to me."

Breslauer continued his display of his affection for this historically bumpy and makeshift facility when he told us about a small part of the history he works to preserve. Even the parts most followers of sportscar racing would rather forget.

"1983 was the first year they deleted part of the actual runway section from the race circuit. Over the next few years the track was continuously modified a little bit more each year and it wasn't until 1987 that the circuit no longer included sections of the still-active runways. In fact, 1987 was the first year that Sebring became a permanent race course, offering testing and racing every day of the year. A lot of people don't realize that prior to 1987; Sebring was always a temporary circuit.

"From 1991 to 1996, Mike Cone was the promoter at Sebring. He sold the rights to the lease to Andy Evans. The raceway is owned by Sebring Airport Authority but the circuit is leased. Evans bought in and had it for one year. It was a tumultuous year, to say the least."

Breslauer had his string of several years as Media Director interrupted for a few months during Evan's blessedly brief tenure.

"Evans brought in the FIA GT series in October of that year. After the Sebring 12 Hours he essentially said, 'Thanks, but we don't need you anymore', and I was released. I was gone for several months. Then in January of 1998, Don Panoz bought out Evans and the next day he and raceway manager Tres Stephenson asked me to come back!

"Interestingly, Panoz is now the man with the second longest tenure of any race owner since Alec Ulmann, the man who founded Sebring back in 1950. Panoz has surpassed six or seven other owners. It is amazing how time flies!"

For this, the 56th Annual Mobil 1 12 Hours of Sebring, a number of significant improvements have been made to the grounds. Breslauer no longer has to work out of a trailer, for instance. Nor does he have to wonder if the historical documents he lovingly shepherds will ever come face to face with a hurricane again.

"We have just completed and moved into a brand new administration building. We had been working out of a double-wide trailer for 24 years. We barely survived the three hurricanes we had in 2004! We love the new building and it is great for the fans too. We have a new gift shop in there and a new registration and ticket office, which is going to make life a lot easier for race fans and competitors. It is just a nicer and more accessible building that includes a conference center and our offices along with a small archives area.

"In 2004, everything in our warehouse - which was just a metal storage building - was destroyed in a hurricane. We lost a lot of posters and photos and track records and so on to water damage. Fortunately, most of the serious material was stored in my house so it escaped the same fate. And now that we have this new permanent structure I have been moving these items back into our new archives area. We have film, slides, race records, lap charts and so on. This material is not for public view but persons doing research will eventually be able to make an appointment to go through some of it. But we are really just getting started with organizing everything."

One intriguing new area of the circuit that the fans are invited to visit is presently under construction behind pit lane.

"We are about 20% of the way towards completing our new Gallery of Legends building. This building is being built and operated by the Sebring Hall of Fame Museum, a non-profit entity. We used to have a big Tent set up every year filled with historic cars from Sebring's past. This new building will house that exhibit during March, and the rest of the year it will be available to car clubs for banquets and shows and things of that nature. It will be ready to open in time for this year's 12 Hours weekend."

While the fan-accessible areas of the track are steadily changing in the name of progress and comfort, there remains a segment of this circuit - the bumpy bits - that will forever be left as is.

"One thing we probably will never do is take away the character of the track. The front stretch - as bumpy as it is - is still the original 1941 Hendricks Field strip of concrete. Indy has its strip of original bricks and we have our strip of original concrete. That's not going to change. The rest of the circuit has pretty much been paved over or improved.

"While we do have a reputation as being a rough and bumpy track, today it is nothing like it used to be. I think it was Nic Minassian who said something like it was so bumpy the first few laps it caused his vision to blur a little bit. But he said he loves the circuit because this is how a sportscar track should be. He said something like he likes the changes in road surface and all the bumps because the European circuits are all ruined because of the F1 wimps!

"The track does have its character but that only serves to make it a true test of endurance."

The fans that choose to be at Sebring each year have their own ways of enduring. Some will camp out, others will sleep outdoors, and others will probably not do much sleeping at all. Breslauer suggests anyone coming to this year's event consider setting up camp outside the circuit, whether your camp includes a motor home or a Yugo hatchback.

"We now offer reserved camping along the outside of the Ulmann Straight. It is the only place you can park your motor home parallel to the track instead of perpendicular. There is a lot of room in this area and it has become a very popular area. We also have a large free parking/camping section outside the circuit that we encourage people to use because we always run out of room by the time race day arrives. It is so much easier to park outside and walk in, rather than be land-locked inside the circuit grounds. If fans are coming just for Saturday we definitely recommend they park in this area. In fact, the last three years we had to close the entrance to the track because we had so many people inside already. We normally get upwards of 80 to 90 thousand fans!"

In past years the real fanatics amongst the faithful would begin to line up at the entrance to the track as much as three months before the race weekend. A small city of people would literally spring up from nowhere and take up residence outside the track, living their lives from day to day without running water or even the most basic sanitary conditions to accommodate them. This practice has, however, been banished for all the sane and practical reasons you can imagine.

"We no longer allow fans to line up outside the entrance weeks and months in advance of the race weekend. By the start of February - six weeks before the event - we would have as many as six or seven hundred people lined up along the fence! It became a real security and sanitation issue to have that many people essentially living out of their vehicles. What we do now is let only the very first person park there, with no one else allowed to park there until March 1st. We simply couldn't manage what became a whole city of people living outside the park."

This decision has to be hailed as one of sanity over an animal-like attraction for communal living. Perhaps the idea of preventing unwelcome wild behavior stems back to an incident involving another kind of wildness, as in wild animals taking up residence on the circuit grounds.

"Well, we did actually find an alligator loose on the track in 1992. He was sitting right by the hairpin lying in the middle of the track. He apparently had come through the rain drainage pipes. We called someone to come and take him out of there. We do still have a few wild hogs running around the area and a few other animals roam here and there, but it is pretty rare to see something as alarming as an Alligator."

Another kind of animal - the dreaded inebriated Homo sapiens - have been known to display themselves (sometimes in full skin mode) proudly and loudly while residing in an area of the circuit known as Green Park. Here the college age crowd congregates for a weekend of

unabashed celebrations and never-ending parties. But even in this area, things are showing signs of improvement with age.

"Green Park is probably not as chaotic as it was in the 70s and 80s but Friday night is still a night when the residents get a little wild."

We wrapped up our conversation with Ken Breslauer by asking him for his opinion on this year's season-opening American Le Mans Series race. Needless to say, his enthusiasm for this place, and for this race, has never waned.

"I think this is going to be the best race since 1999. There are four manufacturers who have a legitimate chance of winning. Audi and Peugeot will be the favorites, with their diesel engines, but I do think Porsche and Acura have a very strong chance at an overall win. It should be a four way battle and an amazing race. The GT2 field will probably be the best in many years, and who can forget that amazing finish in the GT2 class last year!"

With a slight twinge of regret, Breslauer sometimes wonders what it would be like to go back to those first two years he came here as a spectator.

"I still love it - being someone who works at Sebring. But I think when you work at a track you really don't get to enjoy the whole experience as much so far as the racing is concerned. One regret that I have is that you are so busy managing the race and meeting the needs of the media that you just don't get to enjoy it all. Sometimes I look out the windows of the media center and I see the guys in the motor homes across the way lying back with a cool drink and having a barbeque and I think, Man, that doesn't look too bad!"

And we bet that old gal Sebring isn't looking too bad herself nowadays. At 58 years young who could blame her for getting a little face lift?