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Through The Esses - Lime Rock Park – Where The Yellow Diesels Roar

06/21/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Construction, or rather the re-construction of Lime Rock Park is well along now. The first sounds of diesel engines echoing off the surrounding Berkshire hills comes not from the engine bays of the sleek silver Audi Le Mans prototypes, but instead from big, square, yellow Caterpillar tractors. The mega-movers have been busy sculpting the hillsides and leveling the hallowed ground here ever since the first day after the Memorial Day weekend. When the last transporter carrying a Grand-Am GT car had pulled out, the bulldozers were fired up and now, nearly four weeks later, the facility is right smack at the half way point of a major facelift.



We visited the grounds of this historic circuit this weekend to get an up close look at how this 51 year old facility is being plowed and leveled and surfaced into shape to make it as up to date in appearance as any peer circuit in North America. And from what we saw on our tour today, graciously arranged by Renea Topp, the Marketing and PR Manager, we can say we are at the redline of excitement over what is to come.

The official website for Lime Rock Park (www.limerock.com) outlines the general plan for the project as follows:

The entire Classic Lime Rock Park will be paved, the Optional Uphill and West Bend corners will be built and paved, the new entrance completed and two new spectator areas created. We're using asphalt millings to "pave" the road into the overflow parking in Lights Field and all the dirt roads in the Infield. No more dirt and dust, which is particularly good for campers. In addition, we have rebuilt the interiors of both hospitality Chalets and hope to finish the roof over the ticket taking area.

We have done an "as built" survey with the goal of replicating the cambers, banking, lack of both, etc. trying to exactly recreate the Classic track (minus the concrete patches and bumps). This is being done to the utmost capability of the machinery and as humanly possible for the physical labor involved.

The circuit will be ready for the ALMS race weekend. ALMS will run the Optional Uphill and the Optional West Bend. These two additions will also provide great viewing areas.

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As we walked the grounds, camera in hand, (Album [here](#)) we were amazed at just how much earth was being moved, dug, lifted, pushed and carried. And it was remarkable to see just how many people were driving pay loaders and dump trucks and steamrollers all in concert to get this massive undertaking completed in time for the ALMS race weekend in July.

Topp passed along this updated information on the status of little Lime Rock's version of Boston's famous 'Big Dig'.

"The plan is to do 90 days of work in 31 days to be ready for the American Le Mans Series, 11-12 July, as they will be the first professional series to run Optional Lime Rock. What everyone can expect for the American Le Mans Northeast Grand Prix race weekend is this: Classic Lime Rock Park will be paved, the Optional Uphill and West Bend corners have been built and will be paved, the new entrance will be completed and two new spectator areas created."

Skip Barber was on site when we were there, and we understand he has been keeping an eye on this project every day since the first yellow behemoth started flattening a large section of the former spectator area at the uphill. He reiterated the seriousness with which this \$5 million construction project started, and how he expects the fans will come to love what Lime Rock will become.

"This project is no small potatoes. A lot of effort, time and money has gone into the planning and execution of preserving Lime Rock Park. We might not get it right the first time. I would think a lot of massaging still has to happen over the summer and winter. But I will say, the American Le Mans Series race weekend is going to be a spectacular event, above and beyond its expected show. I can't wait to see these drivers on the newly paved circuit and I can't wait to see fans enjoying the new spectator viewing areas."

Those new areas include the outside of the new optional turn at West Bend, where a large earthen berm is being built to allow for a great view of the cars as they come north up the back straight, enter the right hander at west bend (old or new configuration) and then head under the Bailey Bridge east along the downhill. Barber is also considering clearing a path part of the way down the outside of the downhill so fans can witness the cars as they come out from under the other side of the bridge, a view never before available to anyone, including photographers and track marshals.

Another new area – one not in the original plan - is an extension of the current infield hill viewing area. So much dirt was removed from the area where the new uphill 'short esses' has been created that Barber has elected to use it to build up the spectator hill, 'growing' the surface area of the hillside, thus effectively moving the fans and the track closer together.

A new and longer pit lane entrance is also in the works with cars expected to be able to enter the lane just after passing under the bridge. The pit lane itself will also be longer. Other improvements include filling in 'Lake Lime Rock', the area between the left-hander and the spectator hill. Traditionally an area in which water resides almost indefinitely after even a moderate rain shower, the yellow diesels are busy filling in the area in an attempt to get the area dry and keep it that way.

The A and B Paddocks are both receiving special attention. We could see new pavement in the A paddock, which means the problem of soggy feet for those who worked on the cars there may now be a thing of the past. In the B paddock we saw mounds of dirt piled high and apparently waiting to be leveled out.

One area we found especially interesting is the new uphill section which we are now calling the 'short esses'. As the cars come down no-name straight, they now have a hard right-left-right switchback awaiting them. From the looks of the pavement configuration we saw today, this solution to the problem of keeping cars from becoming airborne should not only be effective in doing just that, it should also provide spectators with an incredible top-down view of the cars from a vantage point just slightly above this section of the track. We think this will become one of the more dynamic features in the optional track layout.

Other changes to this historic facility will be coming along later on for several reasons. First, there are issues of septic systems and related concerns that will preclude an immediate rectification of the current bathroom woes. That is, the men's and ladie's rooms found in the paddock will not be upgraded in time for the ALMS weekend. Also, the media center will not be torn down and replaced with a new structure until the same issues plaguing the bathrooms, as well as issues with the infield being in a flood plain, are satisfactorily addressed. But we expect those issues will eventually be put to rest and perhaps, the 2009 season will see new buildings up and available.

In summary, we have to say we are genuinely enthused by what we witnessed. A new entrance area, longer pit lane, views of the downhill from the outside, paved paddocks, an exciting new path to and through the uphill section, a wide sweeping corner at west bend, an extended spectator hill and more all add up to our favorite race track becoming an even more beautiful place to watch a sports car race.

We can't wait for July 11th!