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Lightning Strikes In New Jersey – Thunderbolt To Follow

07/24/08 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

We have been following the progress of the creation of the New Jersey Motorsports Park (NJMP) racing complex in this column for some time now. Located on 700 acres in Millville, New Jersey, in the southern central area of the state - about 40 miles from both Philadelphia and Atlantic City - this facility will feature two new road racing courses when all the construction activity is done. Lightning Raceway– a 1.9 mile / 10 corner race track is completed and operational. The second course, Thunderbolt Raceway, consists of 14 corners spread along a 2.25 mile length and opens August 2nd.



During the weekend of July 12th, the Lightning Circuit hosted its first ever racing action when the Eastern Motor Racing Association (EMRA) took to the brand new asphalt in pursuit of 'lightning' fast round-trips. And with the Thunderbolt Circuit only two weeks away from hosting the Sports Car Vintage Association (SVRA) event, it is no longer a case of wait and see what will be. It would seem the start of some brand new racing traditions are right around the corner (corners?).

We had a conversation today, with Rob Armbruster, the Chief Marketing Officer for the New Jersey Motorsports Park facility. He gave us an update on the progress of the construction efforts, and what is yet to come in phase two of this ambitious and most welcome addition to the world of sportscar racing.

“We are almost completed with phase one of the project, which encompasses 500 of our 700 acres. We have focused on the creation of our two road courses – Thunderbolt and Lightning - and our karting facility – F1 New Jersey. Right now, F1 New Jersey and Lightning are open and getting ready for the season ahead. Thunderbolt construction will be completed in two weeks.

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“Phase one also includes our event garages, clubhouse, the timing and scoring tower, driver’s school building, and VIP suites. We also have a building we call the Hangar which houses a banquet hall called “The Officers Club” that can accommodate up to 500 people – all with a trackside view. The clubhouse is open now and the rest of the buildings will be operational within two weeks.”

Besides offering a smorgasbord of racing experiences to satisfy the hunger of racing fans, NJMP will also offer a place for refueling those fans. And everyone, whether they are racing fans or not, are welcome to partake of the culinary pleasures to be offered trackside.

“The clubhouse restaurant opens August 1st and will be open to the general public on select days – reservations required - except when closed off for private functions.”

With the opening of NJMP comes the start of what could develop into long time traditions for the sport of road racing. We are reminded somewhat of the villages of Sebring, Florida and Watkins Glen, New York, and how those communities embraced the arrival of sportscar racing in their midst. Armbruster told us the Millville and southern New Jersey region communities have also heartily embraced the creation of NJMP. As was true in Sebring and Watkins Glen, the people and the politicians recognized the significant impact an attraction of the magnitude of NJMP could have on local businesses. The principals behind NJMP have wisely developed and nurtured those instincts, as Armbruster explains.

“We are already a part of the community – the city of Millville, Cumberland County and the whole South Jersey region. Part of our future development planning included building our own 20,000 square foot conference center. But now the county is so enthused about our project and the excitement it is creating, that they are looking to build a 100,000 square foot convention center on our property, along with a hotel attached to it. The county is about to enter into a feasibility study phase to see how it makes business sense to develop. That’s just one example of the level of interest we are seeing. The region is fully behind us and we are forming some fantastic partnerships with the government and the business communities.

“One excellent example of how we are working in partnership with the community is the upcoming Millville air show. We are next door neighbors to the Millville Airport. (The airport opened in August of 1941 as America’s ‘First Defense Airport’. It served as a training base for pilots flying Republic P-47 Thunderbolt airplanes, hence the choice of circuit names.) The airport traditionally hosted a very popular and well attended air show every year. This year we are moving the show to our area and we will be bringing vintage planes and vintage racing cars together in what we are calling the Wheels and War Birds show. There will be all sorts of planes with over 20 WWII War Birds on display and in the air! Aircraft will include many different planes from P-47 Thunderbolts, to TBM Avengers, B-25s, a C-47 DC3 Paratrooper Transport, and P-51 Mustangs.

Given that the construction activity would be taking place on grounds once used to train fighter pilots, we wondered if any special consideration needed to be given to insuring the bulldozers and earth movers wouldn’t come across any potentially hazardous remains.

“Because the Millville Airport was used as an air base during the war, we had the entire area scoured for any old unexploded munitions or other debris left over from that time. In the end, the EPA issued a ‘no further actions necessary’ ruling that confirmed we got rid of anything on the grounds that might have been a potential problem during the construction phase. Once construction began it was full speed ahead; the only thing that slowed us down was weather.”

Knowing that the new circuit would need to appeal to both the club racer and the professionals in the sport, NJMP principals Lee Brahin, Harvey Siegel, Joe Savaro and R.J. Valentine invited people like Carroll Shelby and officials from several racing sanctioning bodies to review their plans before construction began. The consensus was the facility would be perfect for both amateur and professional racing events. And the first professional series to secure a race date was Grand-Am.

“Grand-Am did not have any special demands or requirements that were outside of what we showed them in our original plans. They have visited us several times during the construction to validate what we said we were building and they have been very happy with what they have seen.”

We are holding out hope that the American Le Mans Series will also consider coming to NJMP in 2009 or beyond. This would give that series an opening into the Baltimore – Philadelphia – New York corridor that as of yet has been unavailable to them. The Lime Rock event in July is an incredible draw for that series – and that venue – and we can only surmise a date at NJMP would be equally beneficial. Grand-Am has certainly recognized the potential value of bringing their series to this region. We expect the fans will show up in large numbers for that weekend.

And as per Armbruster, fans are already making plans to come to NJMP for whatever racing action may be taking place there.

“Ticket sales are going really well. For our first racing weekend with EMRA, we didn’t offer advance sales. We sold gate passes the day of the event only. At \$15 per ticket, we had about 1,500 people show up! We thought maybe we would get 200 or 300. We were blown away by that. People are genuinely excited about us being here.

“Advance sales for our main events, such as the SVRA Vintage Races, ARCA and the Grand-Am Rolex series are really good. The economy is what it is, but we are priced aggressively. For \$65 you can attend every day of the Grand-Am race weekend – Thursday through Sunday. Compare that to most entertainment options out there. And we offer something completely different for this region.

“We are also selling season passes for \$200 and we have sold a lot more of those than we expected to. And while our advance sales are going well, we are really set up to handle a big walk-up crowd. We can accommodate everybody. And keep in mind that NJMP is easy to get to. From Philadelphia or Atlantic City we are just a 35 minute drive. We are just two hours from the Lincoln Tunnel in New York. We are conveniently located for anyone living in the Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York areas. People used to visit South Jersey just for the shore points. Now they have another reason to come down here.”

Spectator comforts are said to be a priority at NJMP. Armbruster gave us a taste of what fans can expect.

“We will have some grandstands priced at general admission. We will have permanent concession stands and vending locations. We will have gated parking and tram service to shuttle people around the facility. For example, while the Grand-Am events are underway on the Thunderbolt Course, the Skip Barber School will be doing things on the Lightning Course. Spectators can hop on a tram and go back and forth to check out everything that is going on. If you aren’t interested in the Moto ST races for example, just hop on the tram and see what else is going on somewhere else in the facility.

“And our karting facility is now open too, so fans can take the tram there and race the karts between other activities. The F1 New Jersey facility has ‘arrive and drive’ karts that can attain speeds of 50 miles per hour!

“Another thing to keep in mind is that NJMP is designed to be a lifestyle facility with retails shops and condominiums. This is a complete facility. No matter what type of motorsports you’re into, we have something for you. We have the two different race courses, the kart facility, and we are building an ATV area, and a tri-oval race track. We are also building an industrial park we call SpeedPlex, which will cater to businesses connected to the automotive market. And we will have other restaurants and hotels too.”

Putting the creature comforts and attractions aside for a moment, the racers who are reading this will have one primary question on their minds: “What is it like to drive on the Lightning and Thunderbolt tracks?” Armbruster feels that question will be answered in a way that will make racers smile.

“The EMRA guys gave us great reviews. We are brand new and we know that we have a lot to do. But the people who have been on the Lightning course are loving it. That course includes the ‘Light Bulb Turn’ which has 50 degree banking. You can come out of that turn with a lot of speed. And there are numerous elevation changes too.

“The principals behind NJMP are all involved in driving race cars at some level. Harvey Siegel, who owns VIR and brought that circuit back to life, is a vintage racer as is his partner Lee Brahin. And R.J. Valentine, who owns several F1 karting operations, is a veteran sportscar racer who still runs in professional races today on the Grand Am circuit. Going into this, Carroll Shelby gave us some input at the beginning as well. We feel comfortable saying racers of all ages will love what we have to offer.”

The 2008 NJMP Spectator Events Calendar:

August 7 -10	SVRA Vintage Racing
August 15 – 17	Shelby Club Convention
August 28 – 31	Grand-Am Rolex Series
September 12 – 14	Star Mazda and Atlantic Championship
September 20 – 21	Wheels And War Birds Show
September 26 – 28	ARCA Re/Max 150 / SPEED World Challenge / Formula BMW