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Archie Urciuoli – A Vintage Racer Brings Lola To The New Track In Town

08/08/08 © Andrew S. Hartwell

We were on hand this weekend for the inaugural Sports Car Vintage Racing Association (SVRA) race weekend at the brand new New Jersey Motorsports Park (NJMP) facility in Millville, New Jersey. This 500 acre facility contains two separate road racing courses, the Thunderbolt and Lightning, and an F1 Karting track. We were very impressed with the size of the facility and it seemed the vintage racers all came in after their laps wearing broad smiles you could almost see right through their helmets.

It was in the new Tech Garage, located right behind the scoring and timing tower here that we met Archie Urciuoli. He was standing next to a beautiful example of Lola's handiwork



from the mid 1960s. For those who do not know, Englishman Eric Broadley established Lola Cars in 1958 and his firm went on to build some of sportscar racing's most endearing cars, including the incredibly alluring Lola T70 Spyder. Lola's have won at Indy, in Formula One, in Can-Am competition and in many other series around the globe. And Lola continues in operation today. KROHN Racing currently campaigns two Lola chassis in the Grand-Am Rolex Series.

But for today, we are talking about a particular Lola and the man who proudly owns it,

Urciuoli is a veteran - and accomplished - vintage racer. He is a member of the guiding council for the International Motor Racing Research Center in Watkins Glen. He is also a member of the exclusive Road Racing Drivers Club (RRDC), where he serves on the committee that nominates the annual recipient of the Bob Akin Memorial Award. Past winners of the award include Sam Posey, John Fitch, Jim Haynes, and Cameron Argetsinger.

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Urciuoli has spent many years behind the wheel of some wonderful race cars, dating back to 1959 when he drove his Jaguar to the track, then on the track, then back home. His history includes some very notable achievements. To recap them we are going to take the easy way out and reprint his biographical sketch as it appears on the RRDC website. (www.rrdc.org)

First raced Jaguars (XK140MC & E-type) in New England SCCA regional events in late 50s and early 60s ... Returned to racing in 1988 in Barber Formula Ford, and VSCCA, SVRA and HSR vintage classes ... From 1990 – 1996 campaigned a D-type Jaguar, Ford GT Mk IV and Ralt Formula 2 at tracks across the United States, with a number of podium finishes ... Winner, Skip Barber Racing Cup, 1994 ... Ran Ford GT40 Mk IV at Bonneville speed week in 1996, at top speed of 226 and one-mile average of 187 mph ... Co-drove G & W Motorsports First Union Bank Porsche GT3 in Rolex 24 At Daytona (DNF in 1998; 9th in class in 1999) ... Also continued vintage racing and won Monterey Historics Award in 1997 ... Continued in HSR/SVRA vintage GTP and FIA classes with Chevron B-36, Porsche 956, and Ford GT/40 from 1999 to present ... Many podium finishes from 1988 to present: 1st in class, 5th overall at 2002 Sebring Rolex Enduro, 1st in class and 6th o/a at 2003 Sebring Rolex Enduro, 1st in class and 4th o/a at 2003 Road Atlanta HSR Enduro ... Winner of GTP 2 in 2003 HSR/SVRA GTP/Group C Series Championship ... Overall winner of HSR Historic GTP/Group C series championship in 2005.

Once we saw the beautiful blue Lola sitting peacefully in the sun just outside the garage, we knew we had to learn all about the car and its owner. We struck up a conversation with Urciuoli and he was more than happy to tell us all about his latest passion.

“This car is a 1966 Lola T70 Spyder. It was originally raced in the SCCA and the Can-Am series, sponsored by a company called Colorado Plastics. It was driven by a man named Ross Greenville. He was a good but not particularly famous driver and at some point he crashed the car at Bridgehampton. By that time the Lola distributor, who was John Mecom, was replaced by Carl Haas and this car was traded into Haas for a new Lola MK3. This car was sold to a fellow named John McDonald in Colorado and he raced it out in the west.”

Over time the car changed owners, coming to reside in the capable hands of a known restorer of quality race machines. But it had to spend a few years waiting on line before those hands began bringing the car back to life.

“The car was eventually sold by McDonald to a man named Mack McClendon who is a big Lola enthusiast and restorer. He has owned it for many years but it was left unrestored. Starting sometime in late 2006 he began to restore it and I bought it from him while the restoration was underway.

“I am delighted to have the car. It is a beautiful and wonderful car. This weekend is actually its shakedown cruise. We did have it out at low speeds to check the gears and things like that but this is the first time it will be on the track under anything approaching race conditions. We are just kind of taking it easy and shaking everything down, so to speak.”

We asked him about his start in racing and some of his history in the sport. He ran down some of the points covered in the RRDC bio sketch for us. And he told us the success he enjoyed in vintage racing, driving an original Porsche factory 956.

“I began racing in 1959. I started with an XK 120 – you know the kind of car you can drive to the track and then change the plugs and then race. I moved to an XKE and then got out of racing for work and family reasons for a number of years. I went back through the Skip Barber series

and then I discovered historic racing in the late 1980s. I've been doing some of that and some pro racing as well, in Grand-Am. From about 2000 to 2006 I raced in the HSR GTP series with a Porsche 956. We had a great time in that car and we won our class in that series in 2003. We won the overall series in 2005.

"Then I decided I didn't want to work quite that hard anymore!

"I sold the 956 to Vern Schuppan, who was the original factory driver of the car when it raced as new. I wanted to go back to an open car so I bought this Lola T70. I also have a Ford GT 40 which I will only race once or twice a year. I might bring it out at something like the Monterey Historics or the Lime Rock Vintage Festival. I expect to run the Lola at this year's Lime Rock Festival and then a week later at the Glen Festival."

Our conversation next turned to his impressions of the new Thunderbolt circuit at NJMP.

"I am very favorably impressed with this new track. It is obviously longer than Lime Rock and shorter than the big tracks like the Glen, Road Atlanta or Road America. It has a nice mix of turns with high speed areas and elevation changes. It's a bit tight when you compare it to Road America, lets say, but it's not ridiculously tight like some of the new tracks that have been built recently. Some have been made too tight by putting in too many turns for such a small space. That takes a lot of fun away. If you go to a track with a car like this Lola and you have five or six second gear turns you are not really flowing the way the car can go. I like this facility very much."

While NJMP is just beginning what is hoped will be a long and storied history in racing, it turns out Urciuoli has been here before...almost.

"Many years ago I raced at Vineland, New Jersey, which is about 15 minutes from here, so this is something of a reinvention of that in a sense. But I think they have done a very nice job here and it will only improve as the facility matures. "

We knew we had probably taken up enough of his time at this point, so we decided to wrap it up by asking him if he was looking forward to taking his new gal Lola for a fast ride.

"I am so eager to go back out on this track! I'm still getting the car settled in with shock adjustments and so on but my hope is that I can live up to the cars capability!"

We suspect a racer with his years of experience, in a car with a long racing history, will have no problem showing a brand new race track what fast really is. And wherever he is today, Eric Broadley is probably smiling.

PS: Urciuoli send us this update just before we posted this column: "The old girl won the group 5 race on Sunday!"