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**Through The Esses
Hampton Downs - A New Zealander's Dream Come True**

04/06/11 © Andrew S. Hartwell



Chris Watson (in red shirt in photo) is part owner, along with Tony Roberts, of the new Hampton Downs motor racing facility located just 60 kilometers south of Auckland, New Zealand, on the north island of this beautiful country, in the region called Te Kauwhata. The circuit is conveniently accessible from the No. 1 Motorway which runs the length of the island from Cape Reinga in the north to Wellington in the south.

We visited Hampton Downs during the Legends of Speed (Vintage and club racing) weekend in March of 2011. While this event did not quite carry all of the cache of the "NZ Festival of Motor Racing celebrating Chris Amon" hosted here in January, there were plenty of race cars on site and on track for us to see and hear.

During our visit – on a bright and moderately warm day - it became quite apparent that Hampton Downs is just beginning to come alive with potential for great racing and other events. We were able to learn of some of the plans for the future of this facility from Chris Watson himself. He describes the new facility as "New Zealand's first fully integrated Motorsport Park that has taken us six years to get to this stage of the development, and there is still a lot more development to be done."

As Watson and I stood together alongside the open and inviting Hamptons Café and bar facility overlooking a section of the track, we could see in the distance, just beyond the straightaway, large areas of land being cleared for future development. Watson pointed out just what was happening on yonder hillside.



“We intend to build a 170,000 square meters industrial building along with a village square in that area with shops and restaurants and such. An access road will run through the middle of it all. This is just part of our plan to create an atmosphere here that the whole family can enjoy, not just the guys driving the cars.”

The facility is quite vast and, as can be expected, a project like this simply doesn't happen on a whim. It took a lot of planning and vision to allow us to be standing here having this conversation. We learned that the vision for Hampton Downs is very much alive and is thankfully coming to fruition.

“It has probably taken us 20 years to get here.” Watson said. “The main problem was finding a site. It isn't easy to find a site in New Zealand where you are away from other people but close to the city center. The only other place we could have gone was out near the airport.

“In total, Hampton Downs covers 450 acres of land and we chose this location because it puts us in close proximity to over two million people within two hours drive from us. This is very unusual for New Zealand. This area was also chosen because of noise considerations. We have a prison to the south of us and a landfill to the west. We sort of have the good, the bad and the ugly!”

Watson gave us a run down of where the facility is today and what has transpired up to this point.

“We've got a 2.8 K track here (the one in use during our visit) and you can see the earthworks are being done to expand to a 3.8 K track. We will have the option to run one long track or we can run the two tracks independently at the same time. The smaller track will also double as a go kart track.”

The vision extends beyond the racing surface at Hampton Downs as Watson told us the facility is one at which people can literally live their lives in the world of motorsports every single day.

“We have a long development life ahead of us.” Watson noted, “We expect over a 10 year span the economy will go up and down but we feel lucky that we sold all of the apartments we constructed on the site. We sold 80 apartments in five weeks. Everything just came together. A few of the apartments are used as full time living quarters. There are 25 which are in our motel pool – the ones we rent out during race weekends or other events and conferences. Each one is a two bedroom apartment with all the facilities. They all come with double garages below the apartment. The people living in them can come and go in and out of the park just as they would in any city or town.

“We are building industrial apartments as well, in another area of the grounds. These are designed to be a place to store a car and have a bedroom available when at the track.”

Watson told us the project had quite a bit of very constructive help from a company called Envirowaste. (www.envirowaste.co.nz) They opened a new waste disposal facility on land adjacent to the new circuit and had – with some opposition from a government agency – a motorway exit and access ramp constructed that serves both facilities. Watson feels that the new ramp should result in the sort of to-the-track traffic he feels will be warranted by all that the motorsports facility will have to offer.

“Envirowaste worked hard to get approval to build the new over-bridge (overpass and highway exit ramp) off the motorway which allows us to hold big meetings (events) here. We have a full interchange right at our doorstep. The land is an amalgamation of three farms and we were happy to pay a premium for it because we knew we would be getting the over-bridge.

“I think the extension of the track is a key for our future.” He continued, “We have a jet boat pond going in close to the highway that should be up and running in about three months. We are also putting in a paint ball facility. The idea is to create a lot of facilities and attractions here so the whole family can wake up on a Sunday morning and come here and find something for everyone to enjoy.”

The facility also holds enormous appeal for manufacturers who sell cars in New Zealand as Watson confirmed for us when he said, “We are going to build a car showroom and facilities in which manufacturers can process imported cars. As we are just outside of Auckland, the manufacturers can ship their cars here in bulk and then take smaller trucks to deliver cars into Auckland and to Hamilton as well. A delivery truck leaving here would also be able to easily reach Wellington in a day as well.”

With so much promise ahead, we wondered if the vision also included bringing professional racing events to Hampton Downs.

“We are looking at a number of international events but the problem for us is our population base. We’ve only got four million people in New Zealand and we are a private company – just two guys who built a track – whereas a country like China has 700,000,000 people and all the tracks are owned by the government. How can we compete against the Chinese at the negotiating table? We haven’t got a dog show.”

In January, the facility hosted the NZ Festival of Speed vintage racing event with legendary Kiwi racer Chris Amon the honored guest. Watson told us the event was a huge success and it will be an ongoing key event for the track every year. But people don’t have to wait for big events to see race cars in action at Hampton Downs.

“With the weather here in New Zealand we can race all year round and the track is in use almost every day. We have just about everyone using the track. There is a private girl’s school in Auckland that brings the girls down here to go cycling. We also have several driving schools that run here. We also do product launches with Audi, BMW, Ferrari and Volkswagen all having used our facilities. We also have a four wheel drive course behind the circuit that companies like Mitsubishi will use to let people drive their cars and off road vehicles on. There is something going on here every day.”

Watson not only owns and operates this racing facility with a bright future ahead of it; he has a history of wheel time behind him that confirms his place as an involved and compassionate owner of a racing facility.

“I went to the first New Zealand Grand Prix when I was 18 months old. You find with families in New Zealand that generation after generation stay involved or interested in motor racing. Right now I’ve got a BMW which is very quick and I am just finishing off the restoration of a McLaren M18 Formula 5000 car. The project has been going on for the last 20 years!”



This being our first ever visit to New Zealand, we came away feeling grateful that we had the chance to tour this incredibly beautiful country. While our experiences were those of the once-in-a-lifetime variety, we expect the Hampton Downs facility will provide repeated opportunities for many people to enjoy themselves time and again among the rolling green hills that surround this place.

We wish Chris Watson and Tony Roberts – and everyone associated with Hampton Downs – all the best of every tomorrow as they continue to build, improve and enhance their operation. We also send a special note of thanks to Bill Ritchie, the Race Coordinator, for it was he who arranged for us to be driven around the circuit a few times in the track safety car. It was a blast to lead a field of high powered race cars around on a pace lap and then suddenly shoot off into the pits in time to clear the road for the starter's flag!

