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Through The Esses - Sebring Survives The Hurricanes

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Over the last few months Mother Nature repeatedly visited the state of Florida while she was in a very bad mood. So bad was her mood that she wreaked havoc in the form of three consecutive hurricanes that struck this peninsula with such fury as to leave thousands without homes and millions of citizens without power. The stories of damage done and lives lost is still being written. But despite the devastation, the good people of



Florida are already putting things back together, and their determination to rebuild is just as fierce as were the hurricane winds that brought them to this condition.

The mid-central section of Florida suffered direct hits from hurricanes Charley, Frances and Jeanne. This area includes such towns and villages as Wauchula, Avon Park, Bowling Green, Lake Wales and Sebring, among others. Yes, that is the very same Sebring where the annual 12 Hours of Endurance race takes place each March. And, despite the destruction wrought by big momma wind-bag, we have been assured the 53rd running of the American Le Mans Series sanctioned Sebring International Raceway (SIR) event will be back as good as new come March 19, 2005.

We caught up with Ken Breslauer, the Communications Director and Track Historian for SIR, to get an update on the condition of the circuit. Breslauer has been an integral part of the Sebring facility operations since 1985. Early in his career he was a sports writer for the Gannett News Service and he spent years covering the SIR races for that outlet. As time passed he became involved with assisting SIR staff with media operations and this eventually led to his moving into a permanent operations position with the circuit. Breslauer has seen it all at Sebring and so we

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asked him to give us an idea of the devastation caused by the hurricanes and to also tell us a bit about what lies ahead for the 2005 season.

“We got hit by all three hurricanes, and the last one, Jeanne, was by far the most severe. We suffered pretty heavy damages. Most of the signs and billboards were destroyed, including the large one that welcomed race fans to the entrance to the track. One of the worst things to happen was with one of the warehouses losing its roof. We stored all our past programs and posters in that warehouse and almost everything in it was destroyed. Since most of our inventory is gone I suggest anyone with old programs hold on to them because they are collector’s items now. We lost pretty much everything.

“The pit structures had some minor water damage. Several trees were down and all of our lighting was knocked out. But that being said, we were a lot luckier than the people of the Sebring community at large. They suffered a tremendous amount of damage to homes and businesses in this area. There is a lot of really bad damage everywhere in this area.

“The first hurricane, Charley, caused terrible damage to communities just west of Sebring. Wauchula and Zolfo Springs were absolutely devastated. It is unbelievable. A lot of elderly people and migrant workers and others who lived in trailers were wiped out. So we feel fortunate in that respect.

“And the rebuilding process is already under way so by the time race fans arrive next March they probably won’t see too much evidence of the destruction, except for the loss of so many trees.

“We are putting a new roof on the warehouse and will get the rest of the facility back to bright and shiny condition by early next year. I don’t think the spectators will really notice any difference.”

Each year planned changes to improve SIR are developed and enacted and, hurricanes aside, many changes were on the boards for 2005. But the weather has put some of the plans on hold at least temporarily, as the resources needed are currently being allocated to rebuilding the neighboring communities. Breslauer explains what is still proceeding as planned and what will have to go to the back of the grid for now.

“The roads leading into SIR are being widened and totally redone. Airport Road (aka Haywood Taylor Blvd), which connects Highway 98 with the track, is currently closed. It is being torn up and made into four lanes with traffic lights and a separate entrance to the track. There is a detour road being used presently to get in and out of the track and the Sebring Regional Airport (located directly behind the track). We are hoping work will be completed by March however the hurricane has really slowed our progress. Among other things, new electrical poles and new lights need to be installed. And the companies involved in the many phases of construction have all been tied up helping rebuild the rest of the state.

“They hope to have it done by March and, after that is complete, we expect to see the road from Sebring into town also being widened and improved.

“We were planning on expanding some of the suites above the pits but we think we may have to hold off on that because of the other priorities within this area that need to be addressed first. We will make some decisions on that project and on some plans to expand the Chateau Elan hotel (located right on the SIR property) in the near future. Right now it is a tough situation with both labor and materials being in short supply.”

We wondered if all the hurricane related activity had provided any time to plan special events for the 2005 race. We learned that some plans are moving ahead while others are yet to be formulated.

“It is too early to talk about some of our special plans for the 53rd event but one thing we did announce a short time back was the planned expansion of the spectator area to include the outside of the back stretch. This is the area opposite the paddock along the Ulmann Straight, on the drivers left. This will be a whole new camping area (the area was previously closed off to spectators.) and spaces there will be sold on a reserved parking basis. Access to this area will be through a road that forks off of the competitor’s entrance.”

The infamous Green Park area is open to everyone as part of the general admission price. The new buy-your-space spectator area is being established to provide an effective alternative for those who wish to fall asleep to the sounds of rustling breezes rather than the serenading voices of inebriated campers attempting to imitate popular vocalists with little or no success achieved. In other words, you can buy yourself some peace and quiet along the Ulmann Straight. No amount of money will buy that for you in Green Park.

“We feel the appeal of that area will be in that it will be rather quiet when the cars are not running. It will be somewhat off the beaten path. For people who want to get some sleep it will probably be the best place to camp. You will be buying a 50 X 50 space and you can do a lot with that much area. A space will sell for \$900 and you get first rights of renewal for each season thereafter.

“With Green Park there is no charge to get in. However, there may be a charge to get out!”

Getting in to SIR has been something of a tradition for people who simply have to be among the first to be a part of this annual festival. In years past there were people showing up weeks in advance of the race date. One such early bird – the man who set the record for earliest arrival – was Patrick Taylor. Taylor passed away last year and with his passing Sebring has decided to prohibit others from arriving before March 1st.

“It was getting too difficult for our staff to manage. This year, the area these fans were camping out in is filled with materials staged for the work being done to the facility and the roads. The other reason we are not letting people line up too early is that they form a temporary community of thousands of people and you need to have all the services of a real community at their disposal. You need bathrooms and garbage pick ups and everything else that goes along with having a small town on your doorstep. We will allow the very first person who arrives early to stay, but anyone else will have to wait until at least March 1st.”

And there are many of us who can hardly wait for the start of the 2005 racing season. Yes, we know the ALMS and SPEED Challenge series just wrapped up for 2004, and the Grand Am Rolex and Cup series still have a race to go, but, like the Patrick Taylor’s of the world, we do like to get started early. Besides, have you ever tried to find a hotel for a Sebring 12 Hours Race Weekend?

And if you do plan to go the camping route – by choice or out of necessity - , Breslauer does suggest you keep one eye open for one of Florida’s wildest creatures. And we are not referring to a Green Park resident.

“Because of all the rain we have been having, there are alligators everywhere right now!”

Hmm, alligators at Sebring? We wonder if anyone in Green Park will even notice!