



ash - through the esses

This column originally appeared on TheRaceSite.com

Through The Esses - Watkins Glen Is Worth The Trip

6/8/2005 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

This weekend, the Grand Am Rolex Sports Car Series makes the first of three stops in 2005 at the "Road Racing Center of the East" - the Watkins Glen International circuit. The first race up is a 6 hour sprint / endurance / get out of the way affair, with the subsequent races to come at "The Glen" running for just 200 and 250 miles in length. Given the on-track action this series has yielded to date, we expect all three races to be worth the price of a ticket.



But just going to far away Watkins Glen at all is worth the trip, anyway.

Watkins Glen is the small town in upstate New York that first recognized the monetary and publicity value associated with the staging of professional sportscar races. In 1948, a young lawyer by the name of Cameron Argetsinger persuaded the local politicians that a race held in the fall would help to extend the tourist season. He convinced the town leaders that an October race event would put the town on the map and bring in tourist dollars from far and wide. He was right, of course, with the first few years seeing townspeople - and those all important cash-carrying visitors from other towns across North America - lining the streets to watch daring thrill seekers in exotic cars chase after a black and white flag.

In those earliest days, those cars had equally exotic names such as Allard, Cunningham, Jaguar, Farago Special, Alfa Romeo, Bandini-Fiat, Vauxhall, and Gordini. And the men who drove them at breakneck speeds had names that ranged from the colorful like, Haig Ksavian, Ledyard Pfund, Zora Arkus-Duntov and Doctor Gandolph Vilardi, to the more mundane and ordinary such as Dave Garroway, John duMont, Sam Collier and Phil Hill.

But none of these racing pioneers were ordinary. And the spectacle of fast cars racing just inches in front of thousands of fascinated spectators could only lead to an intoxication with racing that would carry on through to today.

When you look at the entry list for this years running of the Sahlen's 6-hours of the Glen, you won't find any of the cars or drivers that first established Watkins Glen as the home to organized sportscar racing in North America. But, while the cars and the drivers are not the same, the spectacle remains unchanged - give or take a few blue guard rails that now sit between the combatants and the spectators. But such is the price of safety.

If you are a fan of sportscar racing, but you have never been to Watkins Glen, you are encouraged to go for at least one of the three Rolex series events. If you still haven't warmed up to the stylings of the Daytona Prototypes - or you simply prefer to relive the past glories of racing on the streets - then we

suggest you make plans to visit in early September. The weekend of September 9 through 11 will see the Zippo U.S. Vintage Grand Prix and the Watkins Glen Grand Prix Festival take place. (<http://www.grandprixfestival.com/>) Events include a reenactment of those early street races, a concourse d' elegance, a vineyard roadster tour, the Glenora Run Road Rally, the addition of several names to the Glen Walk of Fame and the appearance of some of those people who first raced here oh so long ago. And of course, there will be some really beautiful old race cars that will be driven on the track to bring three-dimensional form to long dormant memories.

But if you have fond memories of races past, but find you seem to have developed gaps in your memory, there is a place you can go to in town that can fill those gaps and tell you even more than you knew before you forgot what you can't remember! That place is the International Motor Racing Research Center (IMRRC).

For history buffs, avid readers, and researchers alike, this facility will seem like heaven on earth. Historians Mark Steigerwald, Glenda Gephart and Bill Green are the caretakers of this repository of anything related to the sport of speed. Within the walls of the center you will find volume upon volume of programs, books, illustrations, films, models and more from racing adventures that took place at pit stalls and 'through the esses' of race circuits ranging from coast to coast. It is a place where the memories of racing's yesterdays are lovingly preserved for all to enjoy.

And the memories that are made at this season's races at The Glen will soon be joining their predecessors on the clean book shelves and in the computer database library housed within its walls.

Yes, Watkins Glen has a lot to offer race fans. The owners of the racing circuit that sits on top of a hill outside of town - and many miles from where we live - the International Speedway Corporation, have invested in upgrading the facility recently. This has to mean that what was a great place to watch a race before has become even better now.

If you go to Watkins Glen this year - and by now you should know that we think you should go - you can make your own brand new racing memories in the town that started it all nearly 60 years ago.

My memory is faulty. But I am going to tax its limits this weekend by going to Watkins Glen. Who knows, maybe I will actually retain some of the memories I make this weekend. But even if the old noggin fades to black, at least I know the Research Center can help me get my memories back!

That is, of course, if we can remember how to get to Watkins Glen.