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Sportscar Racing Is Coming To New Jersey In 2008

06/04/07 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

For sportscar fans living in the northeast corridor of the United States – the area running between Washington, DC in the south, to New York City in the north– there are no convenient (read: nearby) racing circuits to go to for professional road racing events. At the southern end of the corridor, Virginia International Raceway is several hundred miles south and west of Washington. At the north end, beautiful Lime Rock Park (in southwestern Connecticut) is really not too far, about 100 miles from the city, but the upstate Watkins Glen circuit is over 250 miles west.

Anyone residing within the corridor simply has to resign themselves to having a long ride ahead to get to the racing action.



But that should not be the case come the summer of 2008. For it is then that the New Jersey Motorsports Park facility is slated to open in Millville, New Jersey. This location is about 130 miles south of New York, 150 miles north of Washington, and 46 miles south and east of Philadelphia.

And the plan is to have sportscar racing become as big an attraction as the casinos of Atlantic City, which lie waiting to collect your hard earned dollars just under 40 miles east of Millville.

But this new multifaceted motorsports facility will not have games of chance for the fans to indulge in. All the chances will be taken by the professional and vintage racers who will be tearing up the straight-aways and drifting through the corners of what is promised to be a modern and well planned racing facility with something to offer motorsports fans of every interest, from road racing to motocross to off-road racing.

The facility is being developed on land adjacent to the Millville Airport. A tract of over 700 acres has been earmarked for the facility and the first phase of the construction will include over 500 of those acres.

One would have to believe a project of this magnitude would require some experienced minds be driving the process through the multiple phases, and numerous obstacles, to be met for this idea to become reality. We spoke with two of the primary initiators of this ambitious project, Lee Brahin and Joe Savaro, and learned quite a bit about what the future holds in store for them, for the town of Millville, and for race fans living along the northeast corridor.

We began by asking Brahin about the background story behind this effort to bring a new racing venue into existence. He began with the current status of the project.

“There is no facility on the property today. This is a ground up project and certain construction activities are underway as we speak. We are taking ownership of the land next Monday and we are in the middle of closing a debt-equity deal with a participating lender.

“The main principals in this project are myself, Lee Brahin – I am a real estate developer out of the Philadelphia area – and Harvey Siegel, who is a personal friend and partner in real estate projects, and one of the owners of Virginia International Raceway (VIR). Joe Savaro, who is presently an employee of one of my companies, Brahin Management Corporation, is also a full partner in this project and he has been instrumental in pulling together a lot of the activities required to make this happen. We three are the main players with the vision and the resources needed to bring this to fruition.

“And we recently brought in another partner, a name that sportscar fans will know well, R.J. Valentine. He is a longtime racer and the owner of F1 Boston, the indoor karting facility.

“The opportunity came across to us about four years ago at a real estate convention in New York. Joe had made friends with the Economic Development Director from the city of Millville.”

Savaro: “We went out for a drink and started talking about opportunities in the Millville area. He told me that the city had recently acquired land next to the airport and they were interested in putting a motorsports park on the property. They wanted to build something along the lines of what they had heard about down in Virginia. When I asked him if he meant VIR, he said ‘yes’. I then asked him if he would like to meet the owner of VIR. One thing led to another and, using the cities vision to create a motorsports park, we did some research and found out what we needed to know.”

Brahin: “We learned that this location had the highest concentration of motorsports enthusiasts in the Motorsports market, with the least number of motorsports venues. We have over 30 million people within a 150 mile radius of Millville and we don’t really have any competition in terms of a facility of this nature anywhere close by. We think we simply have the best demographics for this kind of a facility.”

Brahin went on to tell us the plan is to create a motorsports facility that will offer something for almost anyone with an interest in speed.

“The first phase will include two road racing courses and a karting facility. There will also be a number of other amenities. And we will be located just a few hours from New York City and under an hour’s drive from Philadelphia and Atlantic City.

“We also know that several sanctioning bodies are interested in a facility that can deliver the kind of demographic profile NJMP can deliver. Vintage organizations and major racing series – such as Grand-Am and the American Le Mans Series – would be the sort of racing groups we

would want to work with. We want to have a number of major spectator events each year as well as also having a country club element to our facility.”

Support from local and state government agencies has been positive. Being next to an airport has also meant federal involvement – through the FAA – but that too has proven to be a positive experience for the principals involved.

“Because the land is part of the airport area, we had to get approval from the FAA to use the land for our purposes. That involved a federal overview process. This was in addition to the local, state and environmental approvals required. The whole process took about four years and was just completed about a month ago.”

In the last few years several racing facilities have either opened for the first time (Miller Motorsports Park in Utah and Barber Motorsports Park in Alabama come immediately to mind) or have been resurrected (VIR), each with an aesthetic appeal appropriate to their surrounding area. Brahin and Savaro told us that NJMP will reflect the heritage of the Millville Army Airfield, the former training base for pilots of the famed Republic P-47 Thunderbolt jet planes used in World War II.

Brahin: “We are trying to tie into the history of the airport. We took the name ‘Thunderbolt’ for our road course to honor that history. Training for World War II pilots took place at this airport and we intend to have an aviation and automotive theme throughout the facility. There is already an aviation museum on the grounds of the airport. Joe is on the board of directors of the Millville Municipal Army Airfield Museum and we will be doing some functions that tie in with them. For example, there is a large air show that is held here and they get quite a large number of spectators to turn out for that. We would like people to come out and watch the air show from our facility. We are so close to one another that you could actually fly into the airport and ride a golf cart onto our facility.”

The beginnings for NJMP are similar to those of Sebring International Raceway in that both are located adjacent to airfields with a military connection. However, unlike the original Sebring circuit – which was built using the runways of the airport as the primary part of the circuit - the runways and the race track at NJMP will not share the same stretches of asphalt.

Brahin: “No, the FAA won’t allow that! But some of our buildings will have an aviation theme. The timing tower will actually look similar to an aviation tower. We hope approaching pilots won’t look down on the facility and wonder why the runways are twisted!”

Errant landings aside, NJMP should prove to be a genuine destination of merit for racing fans, some of whom may even be pilots.

Brahin: “We are going to have two road courses. A south course, called ‘Thunderbolt Raceway’, and a north course called ‘The Lightning’. The south course will be about 2.2 miles in length and the north course will be about 1.9 miles in length. Initially the two courses won’t be joined to make one larger course, but that ability will be built in later on. What we have found in our research is that the demand for race dates that we could accommodate can be much better addressed by having two road courses available. There will be two full size paddock areas for each course will all the amenities required.

“The fans will find the facility to be very much like a park. There will be extensive restroom and concession facilities. We are also building VIP suites and trackside villas. We have already started taking reservations for 20 of our 2,000 square foot town homes, each with a large

observation deck and living and entertainment areas overlooking the race courses. The owners of the villas can rent them out for race weekends and we will be providing condo-hotel types of services. They are not year round residences, however.

“We are also going to have event garages and VIP suites. The garages will be where teams can house their cars and work on them. We will also have 20 VIP suites which will essentially be garage spaces with living quarters above. These are very similar to what is available today at VIR and at Laguna Seca. These are great for corporate hospitality and for crews to use as sleeping quarters, being situated right above the race cars.

“We will also have Shade Tree Garages where people can rent space to store their cars and work on them during and between events. There will be a clubhouse with a pool and tennis courts. There will also be an administrative area within the clubhouse structure.”

On the NJMP website (www.njmotorsportspark.com) this overview of the new facility appears:

<|>“(NJMP) will be driven by an assortment of automotive industries and complementary businesses that will include, but not be limited to: high-end antique or classic automotive clubs; private garages; research and development campus with warehouses, distribution and sales facilities; All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) or ORV course; nationally renowned schools for more advanced driving techniques and training for defensive or military evasive driving skills; specialty car gallery for the display and sale of antique or classic automobiles; hotels designed for different price points; special Motorsports country club and clubhouse; multiple restaurants; villas or condo-style resort houses and conference center designed especially to accommodate the automotive industry.”</|>

NJMP is an ambitious project no doubt. And it is one we welcome gladly as there can never be enough first class racing facilities for sportscar racing in North America. Brahin and Savaro think the fans will appreciate what they are trying to create.

Brahin: “We are bringing Motorsport activities to the state of New Jersey, where they don’t currently exist. You will be able to see professional and amateur events. You can come out here and run your vintage car with one of the vintage racing organizations. We are under an hour’s drive from Philly, Atlantic City, and the Jersey Shore, and just a little over two hours from Baltimore. And we are currently working with hotel operators in the area to insure rooms are available for race events.

“And phase two of our construction will include an off-road course which will be essentially anchored by a pro-motocross facility. Gary Bailey helped design that facility. And there really is no place locally that riders can ride motocross legally and safely, and with instructors available. We also have approval for a ¾ mile oval facility and will probably start construction later on for other areas that will complete the complex.”

Brahin brings more than his real estate experience to the table with this project. He has hands on experience in race cars to also help him make it to the finish line.

“I have a few race cars that I run in vintage events with SVRA and Historic Grand Prix. I own two F1 cars – a 1979 Tyrell 09 and a 1974 Hesketh 308, which was James Hunt’s first foray into Formula One. I also have a 1977 Chevron and a Formula Atlantic car. I am just completing a project on a Formula B car that I will be racing for the first time next weekend. I also have a Lola T-296 sport racer.

"I also hope to go to Europe this year and race in the Masters Racing Series, driving the Hesketh. Yes, I am certifiably car crazy!"

There you have it. A new facility is on the way and it promises to be a shining example of how perseverance, vision, determination and desire can be applied in sufficient measure to deliver an end result that will be of benefit to many.

Savaro: "This project has been identified as the biggest thing in south Jersey since the casinos!"

We think this is one gamble that will pay off for every racing fan living within the northeast corridor. We are looking forward to opening day and we suspect vintage racer Brahin will probably be one of the first to lap the new track at speed.