



Through The Esses – Road Racing Returns To Thompson in 2014

*A conversation with Josh Vanada, General Manager, Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park (TSMP)
03/24/14 © Andrew S. Hartwell*



New England area based fans of vintage and club level sports car racing will have something new to enjoy in 2014.

Beginning back before the start of World War II, auto racing has taken place in the Northeast corner of the state of Connecticut every year, thanks to a man determined to make something permanent out of a temporary disaster. Now, after nearly 75 years in operation, the still family-owned Thompson Speedway **Motorsports Park**, long time home to NASCAR oval racing, is bringing back an element of track action not seen at this facility in over 40 years.

After a devastating hurricane - referred to as the 'Long Island Express' - passed through Thompson, Connecticut in 1938, farmer John Hoening decided to build a dream. He cleared the storm-ravaged land on his farm and created the first asphalt oval racetrack in the nation. He called his new racing facility the 'Thompson Super Speedway'.

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A description of the then-new facility appears on the current speedway website: (www.thompsons Speedway.com/)

“By the standards of the day, a 5/8ths mile, high-banked racetrack was huge. Most tracks had dirt, boards or bricks as surfaces and were ¼ mile in length or less. But, in spite of the critics, Hoenig persevered and on May 26, 1940, the gates opened for the first time to a capacity crowd. The word of this new “superspeedway” spread across the country and soon Thompson became known as the “Indianapolis of the East.”

“Nearly every big name driver in the country set his sights on Thompson, CT. The track became a Mecca for auto racing drivers and fans. Next came the addition of a ¼ mile oval track that was built inside the much larger original track. This track was used to accommodate the growing stock car and jalopy racing groups since the “big track” was too fast for the technology of these cars of this time. “

In that 70 plus years of operation, there was, for a short period of time - from about 1952 to the mid 1970's - a road course on the grounds. It was home to amateur road racing, where sports cars ran in place of midgets and stock cars. Of course, all road racing in the beginning (generally considered as starting in 1948 - see Watkins Glen, Road America, Bridgehampton and other places where racing was done on public roads until the early 1950s) was considered 'amateur' because the sanctioning bodies, most notably the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), frowned upon paying drivers to drive or on giving race winners prize money. As time passed, it also became clear that racing on the streets would have to give way to a safer, more controllable environment.

Ultimately purpose-built circuits like Lime Rock Park, Bridgehampton, Road America and Virginia International Raceway would emerge towards the end of the 50's decade. Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park was one such location and was, in fact, the first to debut, five years before the rest. Thompson hosted SCCA races for a number of years, when organized American road racing was still in its infancy, but, while the other tracks we noted all went on to host major professional racing series, such as the Trans-Am, Can-Am and USRRC, Thompson never became host to such vaunted pro road racing events. But everyone has to start somewhere and the people who raced at Thompson in the early years, many of them at least, would go on to become paid professional racers. Without question the Thompson road course was very much a part of the formative years of sports car racing in the USA.

With the advent of other road courses in the greater New England area, the SCCA would come to use the facility to hold time trials and Gymkhanas over the later years. In time, the Thompson road course itself simply 'went away' as an active race track, with the Hoenig family placing a greater emphasis on NASCAR short track races as well as midget racing on the ovals. Once the road course fell into disuse, sections of the road course roadway were used as access roads and have remained in such use for decades.

From the TSMP website:

“Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park (TSMP) is one of NASCAR's oldest and most historic Home Tracks, opening in 1940 and hosting its first NASCAR race in 1951. Still operating under the NASCAR sanction sixty four years later, TSMP regularly hosts its own four NASCAR Whelen All-American Series divisions, as well as NASCAR's oldest and most beloved regional touring series – the NASCAR Whelen Modified Tour.



Josh Vanada is the General Manager of the Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park. His role has him overseeing the day to day operations of the facility, "I am responsible for the ovals, the renovated road course, track rentals, the autocross area and so on." Vanada told us. That role is presently expanding in concert with the number of improvements currently being made to the circuit grounds

"The facility will be 75 years old in 2015." Vanada continued. "There have been three different versions of the road course in that time. We actually were the first purpose-built road racing course in the United States (1952, preceding the circuits we mentioned by five years). Our stock car and our early road racing history is rich and for 2014 and forward, our focus is on bringing both grassroots motorsports back to Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park. This is in addition to our continued participation in the NASCAR Whelen Series and our other oval track activities."

Vanada noted that the rebirth of the road course will come with some updates to the original course layout. "The road course we are reopening is, for the most part, true to the prior design but there are some variations we are building in." Vanada said. "It has been nearly 40 years since we ran on that course and the road course market has expanded and continues to show growth, and the oval racing market has changed, so now is the right time to reintroduce the road course. We wanted to diversify our operations and we feel this will broaden what we can offer the entire motorsports community. We felt that with a rich history of road racing it made sense to capture that history with the rebirth of the road course and sports car racing."

While the professional road racing series of years ago did not visit Thompson, Vanada told us that at least one pro series is slated to hold an event weekend on the new course this year. Vanada: "The focus for us is really on grassroots motorsports. SCCA club racing and the like, but we are looking to dabble into a pro race series this year with the Formula Atlantic Championship Series We want to make that the kind of event that we can showcase and offer to race fans."

Another variant offering to be featured at TSMP in 2014 is the circuit's first-ever Vintage Road Racing event. The Vintage Sports Car Club of America (VSCCA) and the Vintage Racing Group (VRG) will be racing member's vintage cars the weekend of June 27 – 29. "It is pretty special for us to not only host this first vintage road racing event," said Vanada, "but to have the two vintage groups come together at the same time, at our track. We also know that many of the vintage race cars in these two groups have raced at TSMP before, which is pretty cool."

Vanada sees this first vintage event as the inaugural weekend for what he hopes will repeat every year. "We are hoping this will become an annual tradition for us. That is the direction we are headed. We are putting a lot of time and effort into that event and we are all really looking forward to it. Both vintage groups have been great to work with and we think it is the perfect way to reopen our historic road course with many of the cars that made history there in the first place."

Race fans know all about the other road racing circuit in Connecticut, Lime Rock Park. LRP has been holding an annual 'Historics' event on Labor Day weekend for several decades now. We wondered if Vanada saw the TSMP event to be of a similar design and construction. "In broad strokes I expect our vintage event will be similar but I feel confident we will be able to put our own character, our own stamp on it." Vanada said.

As the construction activity winds down, Vanada is eagerly looking forward to the new season. “Our oval racing season will start in about two weeks. Road course activity will follow in June, with the vintage event. The phases of construction that affected the oval track (the road course uses a section of the oval) were addressed earliest so as not to delay our opening of that area of the facility.”

From the TSMP website:

“The Hoenig family, which has owned Thompson Speedway from the beginning, is committed to taking the facility to the next level with the redevelopment project underway and slated for completion in 2014. Thompson Speedway Motorsports Park will offer a world class motorsports experience combining its 5/8 mile high banked oval, Quarter Midget facility and newly paved multiple configuration 1.7 mile Road Course, Autocross and Skid Pad testing area--encouraging the next generation of rising motorsports talent to get their start here at America’s First in Racing facility.”

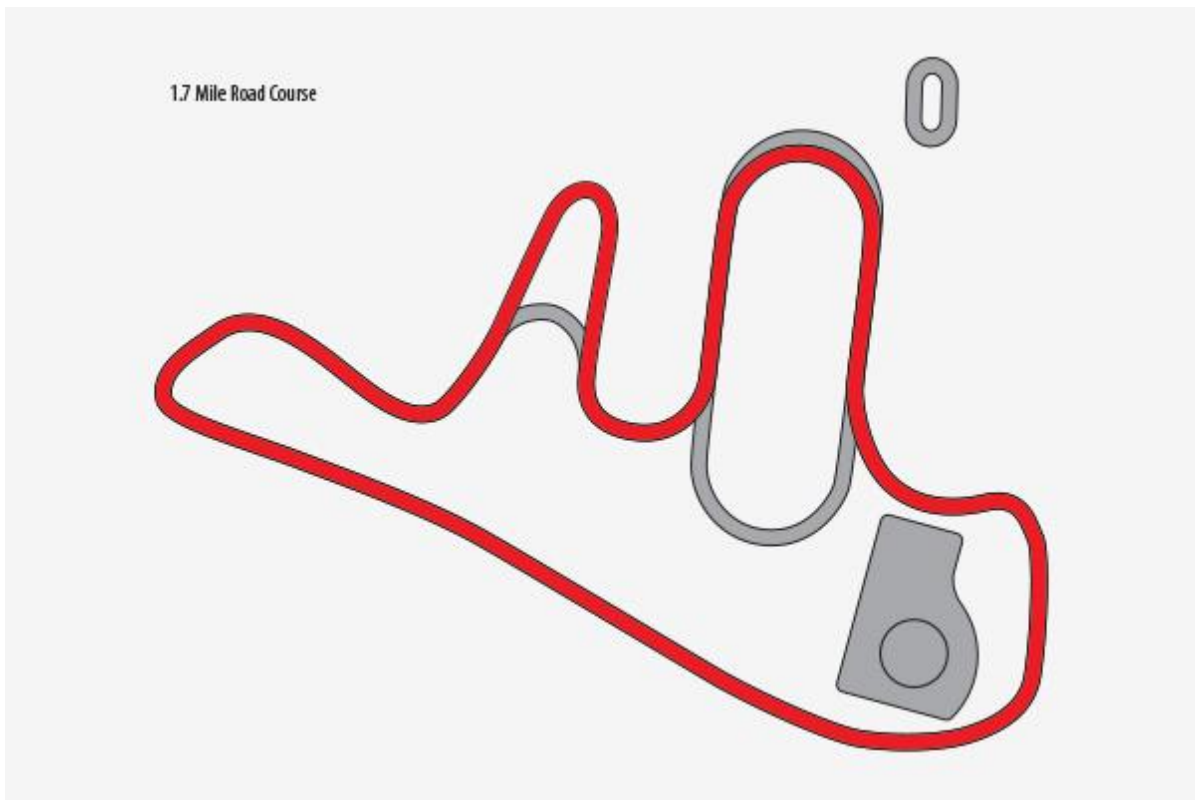
In addition to the restored road course, Vanada noted that several new structures were being erected to support the new expanded opportunities TSMP intends to provide. “We put up a 15,000 square foot garage building which is just about complete. We have also put up a brand new control tower.”



With construction progressing nicely, and the return of the oval racing season just around the corner, to be followed two months later with the first vintage racing event ever at TSMP, one can't but think Vanada and the Hoenig family are pleased with what they have envisioned becoming closer to reality with every passing day.

"I think what we are most proud of is that by restoring the road course we are finally bringing all elements of our history back together." Vanada said. "We are proud of the fact that we can offer different forms of motorsports and become the premier grassroots motorsports facility – oval and road course based - in our region."

We look forward to attending that vintage festival in June and we wish the Hoenig family another 70 plus years of racing success.



More Photos





Links for more information:

TSMP website: www.thompsons Speedway.com/

TSMP Vintage Festival: www.thompsons Speedway.com/events/vintage-motorsports-festival