



Photo Courtesy IMMRC

Watkins Glen

Home of the Formula One United States Grand Prix for 20 years (1961–1980), “The Glen,” as the Watkins Glen International Circuit is known, was built in record time back in 1956 to host motor races previously held on public roads in and around the village. **Jenny Ambrose** from the International Motor Racing Research Center writes about the first race meeting...

A Close Call

The first purpose-built, closed-course, road circuit at Watkins Glen, opened on a glorious, chilly autumn weekend in mid-September 1956, welcoming 118 racers to compete in six race events during the 9th Annual International Sports Car Grand Prix. The circuit, which has since hosted nearly every major racing series over more than six decades, almost did not open at all.

The efforts by the Watkins Glen Grand Prix Corporation – up to the 11th hour – to ready the 2.3-mile track in time for the race weekend were extraordinary. A successful “wave the green flag” bond campaign in the local community raised initial start-up funds for the project in a single month. Contractors broke ground in late July and, after delays caused by heavy rains and unfavourable weather, completed the final touches on the asphalt paving only an hour before practice sessions began. Alterations to one of the curves, using earth-moving equipment under the glare of spotlights, were made during the night before the first race. And then officials from the Sports Car Club of America jeopardized the entire event by withdrawing their recommendation for members to participate at the last minute due to what they deemed the “serious and hazardous conditions of the course.”

Despite official concerns, not a single driver willingly withdrew from competition. A crowd exceeding 30,000 spectators enjoyed the “European carnival aspects” of the weekend and watched a “thrilling race” across the fast and tricky course as George Constantine of Sturbridge, Massachusetts in his D-Type Jaguar took the chequered flag for the Sports Car Grand Prix.

The IMMRC

With a mission to “To collect, preserve and share the global history of motorsports,” The International Motor Racing Research Center, located at Watkins Glen, New York, has, since 1996, been a place open to historians and to the general public and preserves an ever-growing collection that documents the history of racing in the more than 4000 books, 250 different motorsports magazines and newspaper titles, club and sanctioning body records, race results, programs and posters, papers of motorsports journalists and scholars, correspondence of race organisers and still and moving images. Its knowledgeable research and archives staff assists hundreds of scholars, journalists, authors, documentary film makers, drivers and race car owners from all over the globe with inquiries about motorsports history every year. It relies on gifts and donations from the motor sport community. See www.racingarchives.org.

Oil on the Track

At the recent Espiritu de Montjuïc race meeting at the Barcelona circuit, the end of the second rainy Copa Racer heat, saw one of the Minis blow its engine to leave a trail of oil that ran from turn 5 to turn 10 – so effectively the entire second section of the circuit. For hours, it was shades of the Algarve, as the 2021 Algarve Classic Festival of October 2021 was similarly plagued by a monumental delay due to the circuit workers being unable to clear a trail of oil. If that had been a lengthy delay, this one was more so – it took the circuit the best part of two hours before the Masters, who were scheduled to race next, was finally

forced to cancel their race. Pro driver Aaron Scott, who shared an ORECA-GM FLM09 LMPC car with Rick Carlino went to inspect the worst affected section between turns 5 and 6 and reported that it was so slippery that people were ‘unable to walk’. Many drivers had already left the circuit, with planes to catch, but this fact put an end to the remainers entertaining any thoughts of additional track time. People were left without words for how, in the space of six months, two F1-grade circuits proved unable to clear a trail of oil in rainy conditions – surely not a highly unusual occurrence at a racetrack.