

The Need for Speed:

Carolina Motorsports Park

BY DAN MCCUE



After several long minutes of waiting in the sun, the crackle of the walkie talkie was the signal the duo had been waiting for. "We'll be coming off the track in a moment," said the voice of the crew chief of Euro-International Racing. "The track's all yours."

With that, the helmets went on and Brian Smith, manager of Carolina Motorsports Park, flipped a switch, gunned a button and brought the engine of his seriously tricked out Ford Mustang to life. "We'll take her around once, just to get her warmed up," he said as he pulled into the pit area and promptly accelerated out onto the track. "If you're comfortable after the first lap, just give me the thumbs-up, and then we'll let her fly."

After nearly a decade of operating as a virtually unknown quantity outside the auto racing industry, Carolina Motorsports Park is in the process of reinventing itself as a spectator- and family-friendly venue for high-octane thrills. Although Smith concedes the 2.3-mile, 14-turn track — located a mere 45 minutes from downtown Columbia and an hour south of Charlotte, NC — is still one of the best-kept recreational secrets in the Carolinas, he believes the application of solid business principles is quickly changing that.

Over the past six months alone, Carolina Motorsports Parks has played host to a number of events that have drawn thousands

to the track, with collateral benefits for restaurants in nearby Ker-shaw, and hotels in Lancaster and Camden.

"When it comes to amateur tracks, a lot of what you find falls into the category of their being a plaything for someone who has a lot of money," Smith said during a quiet moment in his office, which looks out onto the track's straight-away. "We, on the other hand, are operating as a real business. If this park doesn't make money, it's not going to be around anymore."

Smith says he can't just ask shareholders to make additional investments in the park, instead the park must show what return on investment can be expected and a timeline for how long it should take to achieve it.

The allure of the track will always be its "road course" personality. Unlike NASCAR, which has embraced the oval as its track of choice, the owners of Carolina Motorsports Park have stuck to a design more prevalent in Europe and Canada than in the United States. In fact, Carolina Motorsports Park is the only road course in the Carolinas.

What makes a "road course" a road course, is its mixture of multiple left and right turns and intermittent straight-aways. "This is what racing was all about in the heyday of the 1950s, 60s and 70s," Smith said.

Recapturing some of the magic of Champ and Indy racing series car tracks was what drove Greenville resident Bob Humphreys, president of Delta Apparel, and his friend, Joe Hooker of



Motorsports Park continued on page 20



Greensboro, NC, to begin redeveloping the former World War II flight school to conform to their passion for speed. Veteran track designer Alan Wilson created the track on the 300-acre property. Over the past two years, Smith and fellow track manager Jochen Tartak have been working diligently to recast the venue as a public facility, as well as a proving ground for everything from NASCAR teams and tire and brake manufacturers to weekend sports car racers and competitive motorcycle riders.

Last year, after being presented with a detailed five-year business plan by the park's managers, the 25 shareholders invested more than \$1 million for upgrades.

In addition to minor modifications to the original course design itself, the team built a luxurious clubhouse, and added a timing/scoring tower and day garages.

During a tour, Smith pointed out recent improvements to paving on some of the track's curves, and areas where the roadbed has been refreshed.

"In this business, pavement makes or loses you money," he said. "To grow the business, we eliminated some of the tighter turns and paved more of the paddock area, where the naturally occurring sandy soil had raised a few concerns. It's all about listening to what our visitors were telling us. Once you know what people want or are concerned about, the solution is easy."

To better increase the track's visibility, Smith and Tartak created the Palmetto Motorsports Club, a concept that's similar to other country club memberships — only instead of a leisurely front nine, players here move at speeds around 140 miles per hour.

The Palmetto Motorsports Club is currently one of only 12 such organizations in the country. The three levels of membership range from \$2,000 to \$5,500 and afford members up to 52 "club" track days a year, coaching sessions, discounts on track apparel, and unlimited track access for family and friends among other features. The level of the membership purchased determines the number of days and benefits afforded members.

The club already has 70 paying members, and Smith said they hope that number will grow to 300 or 400 over the next few years.

"The nice thing about it is club members can come out on those days and spend as much or as little time as they want here. If they can only break away for an afternoon, no problem," he said. "Another thing about this track, you don't need a Porsche to feel like you belong. You can drive a Miata, Subaru, Focus, Mustang... whatever."

The club offers a trial program for interested enthusiasts to test the track's waters.

"Basically a one day program that they pay for and if they like it, we credit that money toward their membership" he says.

The facility is open year-round. It employs four full-time staffers, three part-time, 12 fire-rescue contractors, and 30 part-time "corner people," who are positioned around the track on race days and employ a



variety of flags to communicate with drivers concerning conditions and potential track hazards.

However, Smith says the best is still to come. He and Tartak recently completed a new business model for a mini-road course that will allow the park to turn what have typically been post-event go-cart sessions into a full-blown part of the enterprise.

Also in the works is the construction of 24 trackside condominiums along the perimeter of the park on U.S. Highway 521. Construction of the site is expected to begin later this year, with units currently selling at the early bird price of \$119,900.

Upcoming projects include the construction of several new storage buildings so more drivers can leave cars at the track. The park currently has nine warehouse spaces reserved, but is looking for several more before construction begins.

"So there's some good growth going on or anticipated in the near future," Smith said.

And as for the nation's current economic slowdown affecting the park, Smith says so far, business has been fine.

"I guess the best way to explain it is, we're a Cadillac, we're not a Roll Royce," he said. "We have all the features you need, (but we) haven't invested in a lot of bells and whistles that you're never going to take full advantage of anyway."