

Watkins Glen 1948

An Add-On Track for

Grand Prix Legends

January 2003

Watkins Glen Grand Prix Circuit – A Living Legend

By Michael Argetsinger

The history of this magnificent 6.6 mile road circuit – conceived and designed to rival the great European race tracks – is inextricably tied to the very origins of American road racing in the post World War II era.

At the time, the sport of road racing was a concept foreign to most Americans, who associated racing with oval events – as exemplified by the Indianapolis 500. There was, however, a dedicated core of sports car enthusiasts who wanted a place to race in the European tradition. And one of these enthusiasts was a man who possessed the foresight and organizational skills to make it happen.

When Cameron Argetsinger sought a venue to launch road racing in America, he looked at familiar ground. Watkins Glen is a charming village situated on the very foot of Seneca Lake – the largest and deepest of the famed Finger Lakes in western New York State. To appreciate the classic 6.6 mile circuit that Argetsinger created at Watkins Glen, one needs to visualize the timeless beauty of the forests, hills, lakes, glens and gorges that characterize the area. Out of the roads that crisscross this favored land – Argetsinger found his circuit.



The End of the Underpass Straight



Seneca Lake (Looking from the Big Bend)

He also found an enthusiastic cadre of local leaders who quickly understood and came to terms with his idea. The event was always envisioned as a means of increasing local commerce and extending the tourist season in to the autumn. Among the local people who came to Argetsinger's aid in organizing the first race in 1948 were Don Brubaker, President of the Chamber of Commerce; Watkins Glen Mayor Allen D. Erway; and a local newspaperman named Arthur Richards.

It was Richards who, after a significant local meeting, sent Argetsinger the famous post card which simply said "Bring on the cars." And bring on the cars he did. Argetsinger was a member of the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) and knew that this group was virtually 'chafing at the bit' to sanction a race for its members. At a meeting in Indianapolis the weekend of the 1948 '500', Argetsinger presented the idea to the membership of the SCCA and they immediately endorsed it.

The challenges involved in organizing the first race in 1948 should not be minimized. Argetsinger obtained clearances for use of the roads from the village of Watkins Glen, the nearby towns of Reading and Dix, the county (Schuyler) authorities, the New York State Department of Public Works, the State Police and the Finger Lakes State Park Commission. Additionally the track passed over an important trunk road of the New York Central Railroad. Train schedules were modified for race day to allow the trains to pass between races.

When the flag fell on October 2, 1948 to start the inaugural Watkins Glen Grand Prix, Cameron Argetsinger was on the grid in his red MG-TC, #2. Having originated and organized the race, he now competed in it and finished an excellent 9th overall. Road racing had returned to America and



The Railroad Crossing

Watkins Glen was the solid footing on which it prospered and spread.

The first lap of the first race was led by George Weaver in a full Grand Prix car – a Maserati V8RI - and the race was won by Frank Griswold in a beautiful blue 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 B. Briggs Cunningham finished second in his BuMerc. Bill Milliken overturned his Type 35A Bugatti in the left hand turn at the bottom of the long hill as the cars reenter the town. He was uninjured and to this day the corner is known as 'Milliken's Corner.'

The classic 6.6 mile circuit was used through 1952. A partial international listing was obtained for the 1949 race and by 1950 the race enjoyed a full FIA international listing. As the reputation and legend of the races at Watkins Glen spread –

entries dramatically increased – as did the crowds. From a 1948 crowd estimated at 15,000 – by 1952 the New York State Police were reporting crowds of more than 250,000.

Miles Collier in the Ardent Alligator (one of the first Anglo American hybrids – the car started life as a 1929 Brooklands Riley and the Collier brothers fitted a Mercury engine and drive train) won the 1949 Watkins Glen GP in one of the most exciting finishes ever. Collier started the last lap in third position – some 49.6 seconds behind leader Briggs Cunningham in a Ferrari 166SC. He passed George Roberts, who was driving Cunningham’s BuMerc, just after the railroad underpass, and on that final lap caught and passed Cunningham himself on the downhill approach to Milliken’s corner!

The 1950 Grand Prix was won by Erwin Goldschmidt in a Cadillac Allard from Briggs Cunningham in his Healey Cadillac. Sam Collier, brother of Miles and himself one the great pioneers of American road racing, was killed when the Ferrari he was driving crashed while in the race lead in the high speed right hand bend shortly past the railroad underpass. A stone marker today marks the spot on the circuit where Sam Collier crashed and honors his memory and that of his brother Miles.

Phil Walters and John Fitch in Cunningham C2’s swept the first two positions in 1951 with team patron Briggs Cunningham finishing 4th. Bill Spear in a Ferrari 340 America kept the Cunningham team from sweeping the top three positions.

The 1952 race was halted on the second lap when Fred Wacker’s Allard grazed the crowd entering the first turn after the start finish line. The contact left seven-year old Frank



Sam Collier’s Stone Marker

Fazzary dead and twelve other spectators injured. It was no solace to race management that the injured and dead were occupying a clearly designated no-spectator area. The enormity of the crowd had made it impossible to enforce well-thought out spectator restrictions. One of the greatest race circuits in the world had run its last event – a victim of its own success.

The happy news is that Watkins Glen survived as a major race venue – in 2002 hosting the 55th annual sports car races, an unbroken successor of the 1948 race. After leaving the original circuit the races ran for three years at a temporary circuit on public roads outside of town on the site of the present circuit. A permanent 2.3 mile circuit was built in 1956 and a 1.1 mile extension was added in 1971.

Cameron Argetsinger continued to organize and direct the races at Watkins Glen in to 1970. He successfully brought World Championship Formula One racing to America in 1961, after it had failed at other circuits. Watkins Glen remained the home of the United States Grand Prix through 1980.

Today the circuit is owned by International Speedway Corporation and annually hosts a round in the Winston Cup NASCAR series. The track also hosts one of America's largest and most successful vintage car races in mid-September. A traditional highlight of that race weekend is on Friday when some 400 cars come downtown from the track and line the streets of Franklin Street. From the start/finish line in front of the Schuyler County Court House, the cars – many of them veterans of the 1948-52 era – tour the original 6.6 mile circuit which is closed to other traffic for the day.

The original circuit survives today virtually unchanged from its days as a world class venue for international road racing. As European Grand Prix drivers began to come to Watkins Glen in the late 1950's and 60's they all wanted a lap around the original circuit. They compared its setting and driver challenge to the classic European circuits such as the Nurburgring, Spa-Francorchamps and Rouen.

Stirling Moss recently said that while he thought the circuit on the hill was first rate, his great regret was never having raced on the original circuit - through the village streets, up the hill in to the countryside, crossing Stone Bridge – and finally dramatically sweeping back in to the village with the lake and the village at one's feet.

Cameron Argetsinger recalled a lap of the circuit.

“The old circuit, commencing at the Court House in Watkins Glen, turned abruptly up the long steep hill to the west, and the cars thundered up a tree lined passageway, through a 75 mph “S” bend at the top of the hill, across a rolling straight at over 100 mph, under the railroad underpass, round gentle right and left sweeps that were taken at really high speed only by the great drivers, then plunged down into White's Hollow and across narrow Stone Bridge, twisted and turned up and out of the hollow into Archie Smith's Corner, then flashed down Railroad Straight at over 120 mph to the New York Central grade crossing where the faster cars became airborne, 'round the 130 mph Friar's Bend and then swiftly downhill through Big Bend to the village with the right angled hard left turn that was known as Milliken's Corner awaiting them at the foot of the hill. Lap speeds of around 80 mph were achieved on the old circuit, and its varied corners and surfaces made it unsurpassed as a challenge to car and driver.”

6.6 miles of beauty, drama, and challenge that still makes the blood of the true enthusiast race.

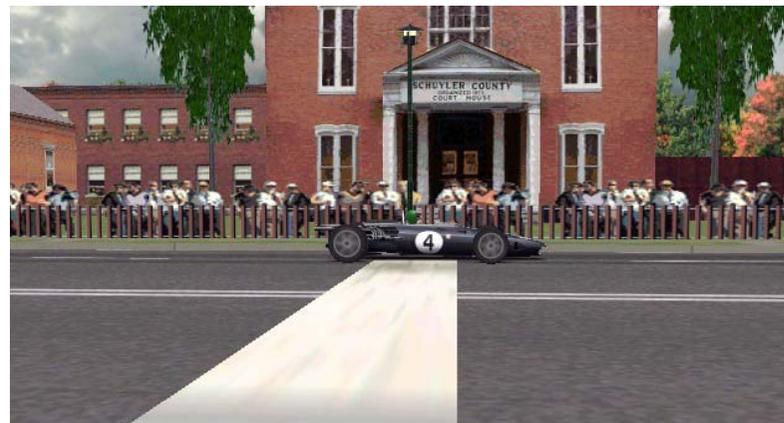
What's it like in GPL?

By Less Gifted Writers

The start/finish straight of the track is Watkins Glen's main North-South street, Franklin Street. This is where most of the spectators are, and the atmosphere is very special. You start braking for the first corner just before the start/finish line, very close to the town's courthouse.

The combination of the first and second corners is a little bit deceptive. Corner 1 is a 90-degree right-hander, leading into a 90-degree, slightly uphill left-hander; both are taken in second gear. You always feel too slow in corner 1, but going in too fast causes the car to drift too wide, and your line into turn 2 will not be wide enough; that will make you lift and your exit speed will be too slow. You also have to be careful there because of the bump at the apex of turn 2.

After exiting turn 2, you're going up the Old Corning Hill. A short straight leads you into a kink to the right, taken flat-out in third gear on warm tires but could be tricky on cold ones. Another short straight takes you one of the deadliest combinations of the track, turns 4 and 5. Turn 5, Townsend Road Corner, leads into an uphill straight, and exit speed is important there. The trouble is that braking into it starts at turn 4. You must take turn 4 a bit slower than you think you should, lift off slightly in the middle of it, and brake for turn 5 with just a little bit of throttle to balance the car. You turn into Townsend Road Corner in third gear, not taking a wide line in order to avoid being thrown too wide by the bump at the apex, and get back to the throttle as soon as possible.



Start/Finish Line and the Courthouse

Still going uphill, you're accelerating towards the White House Esses, a wonderful left-right-left-right combination, each of these corners is slower than the last one. You go all the way up to fifth gear, actually changing up to fifth right at the entry to the complex. The first part of the Esses is a fast left-hander, taken flat in top. It is followed by a slower, fourth gear right-hander that leads into a third gear left. Inside this corner you must scrub off some speed, because it takes you to the last part of the Esses, the second gear right-hander.

Exit the Esses and you see a long straight ahead of you, but not all of it is flat out – there is a railway underpass in the middle of the straight, and the car jumps a little bit when the road starts to drop for the underpass; it happens to be a good time to change from fourth to fifth gear, so it doesn't cost you too much time. Later on the straight there are more rises and

drops, but none of them causes the car to lose contact with the tarmac. You'll see your car's front suspension working hard, though.

After the straight you find another lovely combination of two fourth gear corners, a right-hander followed by a left-hander. Approaching the complex at around 190 mph, you have to brake for the first one, but the second one only requires a slight lift when you get the line right.

A small jump follows these corners, which actually gives you good indication of how fast you are going, and after that you see the groove getting very dark and a junction down the road. The tarmac road continues to the left, and it's blocked with hay stacks; you are going to the right, through the School House Corner, to a short gravel road that seems to disappear right after the split. It actually drops very sharply, and you must slow down to around 70 mph in order not to jump too high over the drop. You must stay on the road there because right after the drop the road snakes to the left, to the right and then to the left again; if you are in the air, you will be unable to slow down for these corners.

(Note that the School House Corner is the one place we couldn't get exactly right in this rendition. In real life it turns right much more sharply than in our track, but Grand Prix Legends was unable to handle a sharp turn and a sudden drop at the same spot. After a long time of experimenting, Arthur and Dan Gulick agreed that the drop should be as realistic as possible and the turn could be a bit wider than in real life. This compromise seemed to represent the nature of the turn more accurately than any other combination.)

Once you have landed safely, you can gently accelerate through these sweepers. The road becomes flat again and then drops sharply again towards a slow, double apex right-hander, the Stone Bridge corner. There is a very short braking area for this corner so you don't want to be too fast there. The Stone Bridge corner is slow enough for first gear but better taken in second in order not to break traction.



Stone Bridge Corner

The track climbs a bit after the Stone Bridge corner, and a short straight leads into a long, third gear right-hander. It's tempting to try taking it flat in third, but it's not a good idea: you'll soon realize it's impossible, lift, and most likely lose the tail on the loose surface.

The next section is not as nasty. You'll see the road snaking in front of you, and then rising and turning left. The road is in fact just wide enough to take an almost-straight line through the curves, accelerating all the way and get to fourth gear. The road starts to rise towards the left hand corner, so you can brake quite late for the corner, which is still uphill and taken in second gear.

Right after that corner the track surface changes from oiled gravel to dirt. A slight kink to the left leads into a slow right-hander, Archie Smith's Corner. Again, it's taken in second because of the need not to break traction on the exit. Then on to a right-hander kink, that looks like it has to be flat but usually makes the car twitch. Then you're accelerating down the long straight towards another kink, a more challenging one: sharper, slightly downhill, and with a much faster approach – around 175 mph. You can still take it flat, but your line has to be spot-on in order to do that. It's a wonderful feeling when you get it right and a disaster when you don't.

The reason for this is the railroad crossing that follows the corner. Your car must be pointing straight ahead when you hit the rails; you're very likely to lose it if it's even slightly sideways. The railroad crossing throws your car quite high into the air, and the front wheels land first. Giving the rear wheels some power, while landing, helps keeping the car under control. If you get it right, you only lose 10 or 12 mph on the crossing.

Shortly after the crossing there is a straight where there is another change of surface, this time from dirt to concrete. You're accelerating back to around 170 mph, and then lose some 70 mph and one gear for what is probably the most demanding corner of the track: Friar's Corner.



The Railroad Crossing

We're still not sure about the right way to navigate this corner, so don't take what we say here a gospel but it's a long, wide left-hander, slightly downhill, with a dip at the entry. Your car gets thrown out of the corner if you hit the dip to fast, and catching it is almost impossible; even if you succeed, you'll lose a lot of speed. It's probably better to take a tighter line at the entry, and a "slow in, fast out" approach is a must, but we still don't know how slow. Once the car has stabilized, you can accelerate out quite easily.

You don't have a lot of time to rest before you face the next challenge, the Big Bend. The name is very appropriate: the corner is about a kilometer long. Once again, there is a bump at the entry and you have to drop down a gear and slow down to 105 mph or so. You turn right into the bend, which goes slightly down hill, and the further you go, the steeper it

drops. The radius of the corner changes slightly a few times in the corner, and you must play with the steering and the throttle to maintain your line. At some stage the corner opens up a bit, and you can change up to fifth. If all that is not enough for you, the track surface changes in the middle of the Big Bend, from concrete back to asphalt, and you can feel the car jumping a little bit over there. You can call the Big Bend, Burneville's evil twin.

Exiting the Big Bend you're still going downhill, into a short straight. You can see the next corner on the horizon, Milliken's Corner, and you can see it's a slow left-hander. You have to brake quite early for it, but there is a bump right where you start braking. The bump makes it very easy to lock the brakes, and once they are locked, it's difficult to unlock them and still make the corner.

Milliken's is a first gear corner, still quite a steep downhill. A short burst of power exiting it, and lifting again for the last corner – a classic street circuit 90 degree right-hander.

Wave to the crowd at Franklin St. if you want to; just don't forget that you have to brake for the first corner before the start/finish line...



Change of Surface in the Big Bend



Franklin Street

The car in the screenshots is the GPLEA Eagle

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* In no specific order. We probably forgot a few people, and we're sorry for that.