

TECHNICAL TIPS – “Wench With a Wrench”

By Gail Wagner – Midstate Miata Club of NY



Hello, Miata Folks,

As I look out the window in mid-April and it's STILL snowing, I feel badly to have cancelled our annual Watkins Glen International Racetrack Opening Day track laps originally scheduled for Sunday 4/15 due to very uncooperative weather. I intend to reschedule later in our driving season and perhaps add lunch or dinner at a local restaurant in Watkins as well. Stay tuned....

In the meantime, since WGI is on my mind, I thought you might enjoy a short history of the famous and highly-regarded Watkins Glen International as one of the best auto race tracks in the world and it's right here in our own backyard!

I've also added a few tidbits I've been saving to share with you. Enjoy!

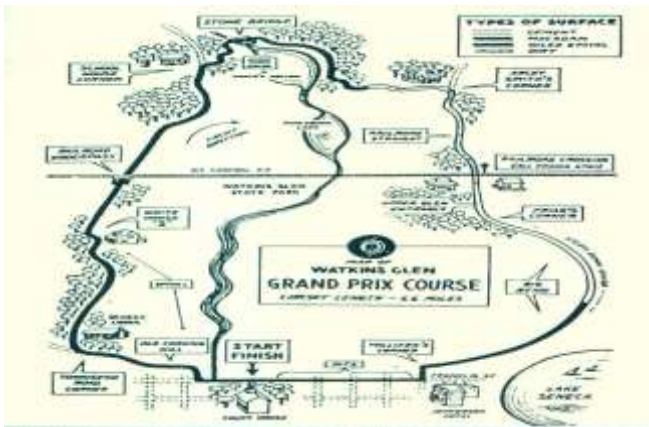
HISTORY OF WATKINS GLEN INTERNATIONAL RACEWAY

Beginnings and The First Race Course:

In 1948, Cameron Argetsinger, a Cornell law student and early SCCA (Sports Car Club of America) member whose family had a summer home on Seneca Lake, proposed an amateur road race to the Watkins Glen Chamber of Commerce.

A 6.6 miles course was created on mostly paved 2-lane roads through town and the surroundings hills. The New York Central Rail Road (since the race continued over a railroad crossing) and state and county roads were closed by permission and the first race, the Watkins Glen Grand Prix, took place on October 2, 1948, sanctioned by the SCCA. Fifteen sports cars were entered and ten completed the race. The 1950 race brought tragedy after a driver was killed in a rollover and another racecar left the road injuring several spectators. This was the era of open cockpit roadsters (MG, Jaguar, Maserati, Allard, Ferrari) with no seatbelts required and minimal, if any, protective helmets. (Ever seen member, John Piston's vintage leather helmet and goggles? ☺)

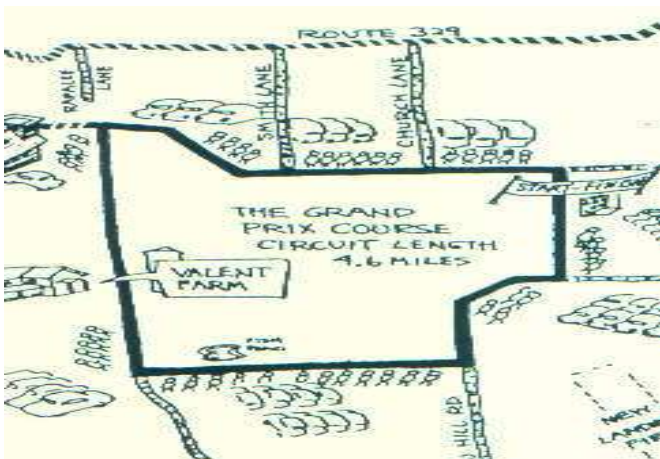
1952 was the last year of the original circuit road course as a racecar left the course in town on the start-finish straight injuring twelve spectators (no barriers!) and killing a small boy. The race was halted and never completed.



The Second Race Course:

In response to the horrific events in 1952, the State of New York threatened to impose new policies forbidding racing on state highways but the subsequent difficulty in obtaining insurance for the course made this unnecessary and it effectively ended racing on the original circuit. After some searching, a new location was selected in the Town of Dix on the top of a hill to the southwest of town.

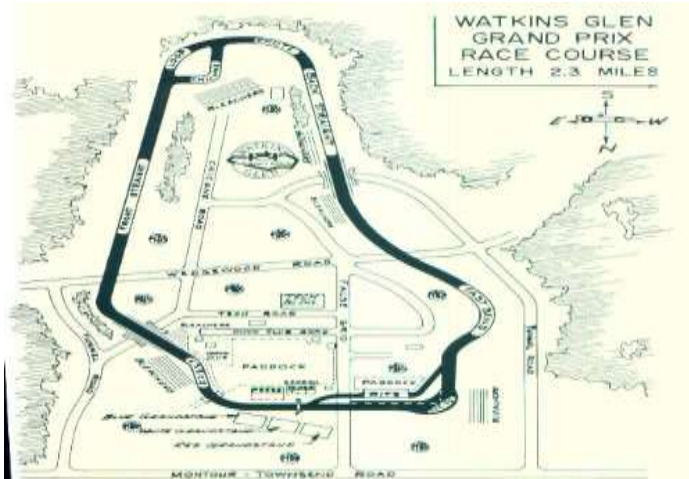
A 4.6 mile course was designed using existing town roads, agreements were reached with surrounding land owners, and a lease agreement was signed with the Town. The Watkins Glen Grand Prix Corporation was formed by the Chamber of Commerce to manage the races. Spectator control, parking and concessions were all improved at the new site. Unfortunately, the SCCA choose not to sanction the 1953 Watkins Glen Grand Prix but thankfully no incidents occurred that year and the SCCA finally sanctioned the 1954 and 1955 races.



The Third Race Course:

In 1955, it was decided that it was unreasonable to close public and farm roads for racing and drivers were unhappy about poor runoff and poor visibility. A decision was made to build a permanent road course. A 550-acre site which overlapped the second race course was chosen, however, no roadways were shared and new roads were built for the race circuit. Race car drivers and Cornell engineering professors were consulted and a new 2.3 mile course was laid out. SCCA sanction terms were not able to be obtained, in fact, the SCCA tried to get its drivers to withdraw and eventually banned SCCA drivers to participate but the first race was held

anyway. The course was completed the night before the first practice! The 9th Watkins Glen Grand Prix went off without any serious incidents in 1956.



Finally, in 1957 the SCCA ban was lifted on driver participation and the Glen Region of the SCCA was formed.

NASCAR Grand National Division came to The Glen in 1957 and the U.S. Grand Prix Formula One became a fall tradition in 1961 and was held for 20 years. Additional events from Can-Am, Trans-AM, Formula 5000, IMSA and CART Indy series were hosted.

Despite the improvements including “The Boot” section, the circuit became unsafe for the increasingly faster and stiffer-suspended cars of the late 1970s and a few horrendous, sometimes fatal accidents claimed several lives. This course laid the foundation for the fourth and final course in 1971 and is the one which pretty much exists today. Increasingly rowdy crowds began to tarnish its image (you know who you are. ☺ Remember “The Bog”?). In May 1981, the International Auto Sports Federation removed the race from its schedule because the track had failed to pay its \$800,000 debt.

The track closed its doors in 1981 to professional racing and filed for bankruptcy, sadly falling into disrepair although the SCCA held races there on a regular basis.

The Fourth Course and The Modern Era:

In 1983, Corning Enterprises, a division of nearby Corning Glass Works purchased the track and formed a partnership with the International Speedway Corporation forming Watkins Glen International and the track reopened in 1984 with many improvements.

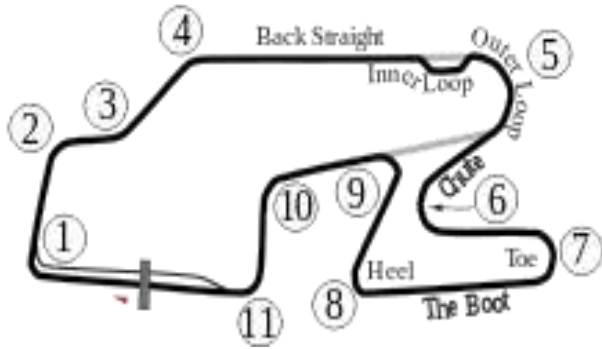
The dangerous, accident-ridden chicane was removed in 1985 but new chicane called the "Inner Loop" (a.k.a.the Bus Stop) was installed at the back straight in 1992 increasing the course to 3.4 miles and pit lane and pit straight were relocated.

In 1997, the facility was purchased from and is now wholly owned by the International Speedway Corporation /France family who also own Daytona International Speedway and several other tracks.

Watkins Glen international Raceway is known as the Mecca of North American road racing and is a very popular venue among fans and drivers. In 1986, NASCAR returned to Watkins Glen big-time and has been voted by race fans as the most popular NASCAR track in the U.S.

Many excellent facility improvements have been made such as a new media tower, new spectator stands, camping access, new clubhouse, restrooms, enhanced concessions, landscaping, as well as enhanced track turns and a recent \$12M track tear-up and re-pavement in 2015-2016.

The circuit annually hosts one of the nation's premier vintage events, the U.S. Vintage Grand Prix, each fall. Many original Grand Prix cars and drivers, as well as wonderful vintage race cars, return to the original 6.6-mile street circuit parade through the village streets during the Grand Prix Festival Race Reenactment during the Vintage weekend



MORE GOOD STUFF YOU MIGHT LIKE: ☺

**** IMPORTANT: Check the date on your tires ASAP !! Discard and replace if over 7 years old for safety reasons even if they look fine and have not worn down to the tread wear indicator. You can increase your tire's longevity by maintaining the correct air pressure, alignment and performing regular tire rotations.**

- The Moss Miata catalog/website (www.mossmiata.com) offers a Hard Dog “Hide Away” hitch for your Miata for about \$199-\$250, depending on model year, that is suitable for adding a bicycle rack carrier. Great for those weekend or vacation trips!
- I’m often asked for references for good auto repair shops or convertible top replacement/repair shops. If anyone has any additional recommendations, please let me know.

Taber Street Auto Repair (Family-owned for 40 years)

805 Taber Street (behind Wegmans)

Ithaca, NY 14850

Phone: 607-277-3346 – Ask for Jim, Shop Manager

10% discount on parts for Miata Club members (show your membership card)

Jim is a former owner of a Miata NB. He can perform timing belt/water pump replacement at a very reasonable price, as well as alignments, tire rotation/balancing and general repairs.

Welco Awning & Upholstery (In business for 40 years)

207 Old Elmira Road

Ithaca, NY 14850

Phone: 607-277-4727

Convertible top repairs/tears/zippers, rear plastic window replacement, new convertible top installation.

Upholstery repair and replacement.

p.s. Don't forget to check out my past columns on our website: www.midstatemiata.net

Zoom Zoom Safely!

Gail

DISCLAIMER

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