

# TRACKS FOR THE LITTLE GUY

DESIGNER ALAN WILSON FOCUSES ON THE CLUB LEVEL

BY LARRY EDSALL

THERE IS A NEW RACE-track-building boom, but this time the target is not Nextel Cup dates. In most cases, the owners of these new tracks don't have the time to promote major professional races.

Instead, they are building their tracks so they and their friends have a place to race. Sure, they could afford to rent track time at a major speedway, if they lived close enough to one, but why rent a track when you can own one?

And if you own, not only do you get track time anytime you want it, but you can always rent it out to others, maybe even often enough to turn your hobby into a business.

One thing these private tracks all seem to have in common is racetrack architect Alan Wilson. Wilson Motorsports is based in Castle Rock, Colorado, a town between Denver and Colorado Springs where Indy cars and USAC stock cars once raced on the 2.8-mile Continental Divide road course.

To many people involved in racing in North America, Wilson is best known as the husband of Desire Wilson, one of the few women to compete—and win—at the top levels of international auto racing. But Alan also raced—cars and bikes—and ran teams and tracks before making his name as a track architect, designing temporary street circuits for CART and Trans-Am in cities such as Denver and Dallas. He also worked on road courses for the infields of the Las Vegas and Pikes Peak oval tracks.

"Desire's my biggest critic," Alan says with husbandly affection. "She really understands tracks from the driver's viewpoint. I'll lay something

out and she'll tell me it won't work." Wilson says that in addition to offering advice, Desire contributes exceptional computer-aided design skills to the family business.

In 1995 Chicago bar owner Dan Schnitta hired Wilson to design GingerMan Raceway on Lake Michigan's eastern shore, a place where he could play

automotive market.

Wilson says he designs tracks with club-level racers in mind, including club-level motorcycle racers.

"Motorcycles represent about 40 percent of track usage," says Wilson. "Tracks have to be built to handle both [cars and bikes], and motorcycle safety has to be

"Flow is crucial," he says. "When I do a track, I try to make the approach to the corner with trepidation, then when you get to the apex, there is a sense of satisfaction because you've hit it right, and then there is the pure adrenaline as you accelerate out and look forward to doing it again. That flow comes with bike racing."

The opposite approach is what Wilson calls the Formula One approach, replacing flow with high speeds interrupted with extreme braking.

Wilson also takes into consideration the growing popularity of vintage racing.

"You need to accommodate the histories," he says, "and those cars don't like heavy braking and tight corners, because they don't handle as well as modern cars." Wilson says vintage racers represent a tremendous number of potential customers.

A goal, Wilson says, is to design a track so that "if somebody goes off, they change their underwear, not their bodywork." With that in mind, he doesn't put in long straights. "Everybody talks about top speed," he says, "but there is an intimidation factor that comes in above 140 or 150 mph, even though in the bar afterward they all say they pulled 155."

Rather than absolute speed, Wilson puts a premium on a good level of technical difficulty, appealing to the pros without overwhelming the amateurs. When he says that, he sounds like famed golf-course architect Robert Trent Jones, whose courses reward precision as well as power.

Not that Wilson's tracks can't be daunting. In modernizing the circuit at Mont-Trem-

Track designer Alan Wilson has worked on projects from Pennsylvania to China.



with his growing car collection. Club racers, car companies and even Detroit-based automotive magazines soon adopted GingerMan as their unofficial home track.

Wilson has been shuttling back and forth to work on Comp-Speed, a track in Beijing that could host major international events and serve as a hub for the development of grassroots racing in China, the world's most populous nation and, before long, largest

the No. 1 safety factor. What's safe for bikes is safe for cars, but not the other way around.

"From the track-design standpoint, it's my job to see that there is as little as possible to hit. You can't keep motorcycles from going down, but you can provide enough room for somebody to go off, get the bike or car back under control, and then get back onto the track without hitting anything. We use gravel traps only as the final resort.



L.A. PHOTOGRAPHIC (2)

**Race drivers and sanctioning bodies alike call Alabama's Barber Motorsports Park a world-class facility. It hosts Grand-Am in October.**

blant, which is north of Montreal, Wilson retained the challenging turns and topography while providing alternatives to two turns Jackie Stewart has called the most dangerous in F1.

Owned by a Canadian businessman who wanted a place to race his Ferrari, Mont-Tremblant is a showplace, and has earned a spot on the Grand-Am series schedule.

Also on the Grand-Am calendar is the new Barber Motorsports Park near Birmingham, Alabama. Car restorer George Barber, who had assembled the world's largest private motorcycle collection that for years was shown in a converted warehouse, decided to build a proper museum, complete with racetrack.

Barber Motorsports Park already has been acclaimed as one of the best and most beau-

tiful in the country, perhaps in the world. The FIM inspector who visited completed only half a lap of the track when he pronounced the circuit was ready for a round of the world motorcycle championships.

Some of Wilson's other tracks include:

■ **Carolina Motorsports Park**, built on a World War II fighter-training base near Kershaw, South Carolina, south of Charlotte. "Basically it was two guys [Joe Hooker and Bob Humphries] who got a group of about 40 other people to invest," says Wilson.

■ **Mid-America Motorplex**, located adjacent to I-29 south-east of Omaha, Nebraska. The track is owned by Ford/Chevy/Dodge dealer Mark Tincher, who was encouraged by his auto mall's finance manager Aaron Johnson, a racer who wanted

a local place so he and others wouldn't have to drive all the way to Topeka to race.

■ **BeaverRun MotorSports Complex**, located in a hilly setting off the Pennsylvania Turnpike, half an hour from the Pittsburgh airport. Wilson admits he was skeptical when he was approached by two guys he describes as "BMW fans who do the one-lap every year." But Wilson soon discovered these two guys, attorneys Tom Wettach and Tim Silbaugh, had a viable business plan, so viable they now have one road course and are building another on their property.

■ **Arizona Motorsports Park**, just west of Phoenix, next to Luke Air Force base. Wilson says its design includes "the biggest purpose-built autocross pad in the country." But track developer Dan Maloney, a club

racer and autocrosser, didn't just want a place to play; he saw opportunities for track rental, especially with so many automakers doing ride-and-drive programs in Phoenix. "He didn't move an inch of earth until he was sure it would work financially," Wilson says.

Wilson has other projects in various phases of development and construction, including club-racing tracks near Boston and Chicago, one in Tulsa, and another near Ottawa, Ontario.

"I get approached two or three times a month by people wanting to do tracks," Wilson says. "But as soon as they say NASCAR or Formula One, I politely say no thanks."

But if you want to talk about a viable plan for a club-racing track that might host occasional pro sports car or motorcycle events... ■