



# ALAN WILSON: safety first

*The inside story on the man  
behind many of today's  
safest racetrack designs*



**CLAUDE DANIS IS THE FIM'S SAFETY INSPECTOR,** a well-respected Belgian whose blessing is required to homologate a circuit for MotoGP, World Superbike or World Endurance racing. Franco Uncini is his equal at the International Road Race Teams Association (IRTA) representing the riders. Both had been looking for a venue suitable for an American MotoGP for many years.

They had been to the United States several times, checking out circuits for a U.S. Grand Prix such as Road America (which came close before being abandoned), Road Atlanta and Homestead-Miami Speedway. They sent Mick Doohan to look at Watkins Glen. Daytona International Speedway was considered for all of a few seconds. Misamis Raceway at Laguna Seca had scheduling conflicts. Then they heard of a new facility in Leeds, Alabama.

Soon Danis and Uncini were in a rental car driving along the roadbed of what was to become Barber Motorsports Park. Also in the car were a pair of motorcycle enthusiasts: track owner George Barber—whose namesake museum houses one of the world's greatest collections of motorcycles—and Alan Wilson, a prolific racetrack designer whose imprint is on tracks the world over.

The Barber track had been rough-graded, with no gravel or asphalt put down, but already the inspectors knew this was something special. At one point (now Turn 17), the future racetrack dove downhill into a vast hole where a tunnel was being built. Seeing the layout stirred powerful emotions in Danis. Turning to Barber, he said, "This is like Eau Rouge." Coming from a Belgian, this was high praise indeed. Eau Rouge is the signature corner of the great Spa-Francorchamps Circuit in Belgium, possibly the most challenging and intimidating turn in racing. It's an e-ticker ride, the equivalent of making a downhill ski run to a hillclimb and running it all in a few seconds. When they got back to the proposed start/finish line, Danis said, "You want to go MotoGP; you have MotoGP! All this largely due to the efforts of Wilson.

If you've used motorcycles in America, you owe a debt of gratitude to Wilson. He has improved the safety of Daytona International Speedway, Road Atlanta and Misamis Raceway at Laguna Seca; has done consulting work at Infineon Raceway, Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course and California Speedway; and has designed the road courses of Barber Motorsports Park and Pikes Peak International Raceway, along with numerous others. He has become the "go-to guy," not only for racetrack design, but also for improving the safety of existing facilities.

"I'm sort of anal about safety. I know that at some stage someone is going to get killed at one of my racetracks. [But] I've been extremely fortunate," the South African designer says. A year ago, Wilson received a call from the proprietor of Limpitlan Raceway, a 1.9-mile road course in South Haven, Michigan, that Wilson





Three "before and after" shots of the Barber Motorsports Park facility show the tremendous amount of work necessary to create a racing circuit from scratch. The top two photos show the paddock and administrative building areas, while the lower two shots are of the Turn Two area immediately following the short straight. Note the generous amount of runoff (and sand trap) area in Turn Two, as well as the next grass-fallen hillside.



world." Since the track's opening in 1996, the owner told Wilson that "as of now, we've never fired up the engine of the imbalance." • Wilson's love affair with motorcycles began in his native South Africa. Wilson put himself through college by selling Yamahas for future World Champion Jim Redman at Redman's distributorship in Durban. Mike Hallwood was living in South Africa at the time, and the shop would shut down whenever Hallwood arrived, he and Redman swapping tales of the life of Max, Dunderd, Spa-Francorchamps, et al. Wilson soon embarked on his own racing career, pitting early two-stroke Yamaha bikes against the Nortons and AJSs of the day. In his very first race Wilson faced two future world champions, Kirk Barrington and Jon Ekerold.

In time he would move to the U.K., where he managed the Brands Hatch Leisure Group, coordinating and running 200 events at the organization's four race tracks each year. In '83, he moved to the U.S., where he was put in charge of organizing a Grand Prix in Flushing Meadows, New York. Various roadblocks made sure the race didn't happen, but he's been here ever since, living and working in various parts of the country before settling in the Denver area with his wife, Denise (who is generally considered the greatest female open-wheel racetrack driver ever, and the only woman to have won an FIA World Championship race), to run the Denver (CART) Grand Prix in '90 and '91. Still, there's more than a hint of the South African accent in his soft-spoken voice, which rises only slightly when discussing his passion: safe racetracks.

"I go to the most extreme position I can to try to find the most safety, knowing you can never be 100 percent safe," Wilson says.

He was the person Mazda Raceway at Laguna Seca designated to redesign the infamous Corkscrew after Akira Yanagawa was injured during the '88 WSF event, and Gonzalo Rodriguez was killed in a practice crash at the '99 CART auto race. "They had struggled for years to find a smoother way around," Wilson says. "It took less than five minutes standing there to see the solution. It cost a fair amount of money, but in terms of construction, ultimately the solution was fairly simple. [The problem] was there was a tree there. It was their signature. Once they understood that if that came out, the problem goes away, the tree came out." After the cypress tree disappeared, the whole bank to the rider's right was smoothed out.

At Daytona, Wilson was brought in to find a way to alleviate the multiple accidents that plagued the chicane exit in '90 and '91. With help from AMA roadrace manager Ron Barwick and Daytona's director of operations, Gary van Veenk, Wilson designed a new chicane that sent riders toward the Turn Three banking at a more gradual angle, though at greater speeds.

"The whole goal there was to reduce the impact angle at the top of the banking. We knew going in it was going to add five to seven mph to the top speed. My feeling was that the tire companies have the capability [to] meet that extra speed. They've got engineers that know what they're doing. The danger of coming off five mph faster when you're doing 190 mph is not going to make a hell of a lot of difference. You get there sooner, but [you're] eliminating that huge danger of slamming into that outside wall."

The new corner was 50 feet wide at the apex, giving the AMA the flexibility to widen or narrow it if problems arose. At the December Dunder tire test, however, the Superslide riders were almost universally against it, while the Supersport and supporting riders were less vocal. But during the AMA Bike Week races, the tires performed flawlessly, better than they had the previous year, and there were no catastrophic events in the chicane.

Wilson ran Road Atlanta for the '90 season, brought in by Roger Wexler, founder of ESPN and SpeedTV, when the racetrack emerged from bankruptcy. They spent a million dollars on safety, including removing the Turn One bridge, widening the runoff area and adding runoff to Turns Five and Seven. But they failed in their attempt to buy the facility, which they knew needed more work. The final turn at Road Atlanta, Turn 12, was recently described by Bruce Transportation Group's Marty Craggill as the "worst corner in the world." Taken in fourth gear at more than 100 mph as a Formula