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MARCH 11, 2009

A motorsports jewel growing in the timberlands of Kershaw County

The Need for Speed

BY [DAN MCCUE](#)

"The track's all yours."

The offering comes among the crackle and whirl of a walkie-talkie — a signal to start the engine.

With that, we put on our helmets and Brian Smith, manager of Carolina Motorsports Park, flips a switch, guns a button, and brings the engine of his seriously tricked-out Ford Mustang to life.

The car has been stripped of the amenities it had when it left a Detroit product line, down to little more than straps, a fire extinguisher, and the roll cage we had to climb over to get inside.

"We'll take her around once, just to get her warmed up," he says as we pull out of the pit. "If you're comfortable after the first lap, just give me the thumb's up, and then we'll let her fly."

Open for nearly a decade, Carolina Motorsports Park in Kershaw County may be one of the best-kept recreational secrets in the state, but that's something Smith and fellow track manager Jochen Tartak are working to change.

Built at an initial cost of \$2.5 million, the park is the only road course in the Carolinas, with only two others within a days drive — Road Atlanta, in Braselton, Ga., and the Virginia International Raceway, in Danville, Va. What makes a road course a road course is its mixture of multiple left and right turns and intermittent straight-aways, unlike a NASCAR style oval.

Not too long ago, the 2.3-mile, 14-turn Carolina course was ostensibly a private playground for the park's 25 shareholders. The vision is to turn it into a public facility and proving ground for everything from NASCAR teams and tire and brake manufacturers to weekend stock car racers and competitive motorcycle riders.

Last year, the track managers and shareholders began making more than \$1 million in upgrades, including modifications to the course design, a clubhouse, a timing/scoring tower, and day garages.

Smith and Tartak also created the Palmetto Motorsports Club, a concept that's similar to country club memberships — only instead of a leisure front nine, players here move at something close to 140 miles per hour.

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 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," he says.

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The course at Carolina Motorsports park is not your mother's oval track
Courtesy of Steve Phillips

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"If they can only break away for an afternoon, no problem."

Isle of Palms landscaper Steve Phillips made the move from life-long racing enthusiast and spectator to road course fanatic in 2007.

"You know how it is," Phillips says of his high-octane hobby. "You focus on your career for several years, and then you reach a point in your personal and your business life, where you feel, 'if I'm going do this, now's the time.'"

Now competing in Ford Mustang events sanctioned by Grand-Am Racing, Phillips uses the Carolina Motorsports track to hone his skills and practice between races.

"I'm up there every chance I get," he says.

The park was developed on the site of a former World War II flight school in the late '90s by Greenville resident Bob Humphreys and Joe Hooker of Greensboro, N.C., two amateur sports car racers concerned about the rising costs of traveling for their road course fix. Today, the facility has nearly 40 full- and part-time employees and is open most days, with the track in use about 260 days a year.

"The first time you come here and stand by the track, you think it looks simple ... there's a lot you don't expect, due to the twists and turns," Smith says. The allure of the track will always be the road course, but the managers are also working on a go-cart track and 24-trackside condominiums along the perimeter of the park.

They've also introduced a competition for jalopies. The cars in the so-called lemon competition only cost \$500 before adding on safety equipment.

"We did that for the first time last year, and it proved to be our most popular event ever," Smith says.

Phillips takes his wife with him on weekend trips to the track and he says it's not as far from home as it seems.

"If I leave the Isle of Palms by 6 a.m., I can be in my car on the track by 8:30," he says.

Snaking around a series of turns at nearly 100 miles an hour, Smith chuckles when I point out the number of skid marks on the track.

"Yeah, on a busy weekend like we had last week, you really hear the tires squeal," he says. "You ready?"

Thumb's up.

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