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A Private Club Where the Privileged Can Play With Cars



Tom Madden for The New York Times, left; Scott Cornelius Architect, top right; Miller Motorsports Park, lower right
William H. McMichael, the club's president, at the construction site, left; rendering of clubhouse at the Monticello Motor Club, top right; and Miller Motorsports Park in Utah, which started a membership program.

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MONTICELLO, N.Y.

[Keeping Track of the Tracks](#) (November 17, 2007)

FOR most anyone who has thrilled to the notion of driving fast in powerful cars, a wishful thought has visited at least briefly: I may not be a Mario Andretti, but I could've been.

Proving anew that commerce has a knack for anticipating unfulfilled needs, chances to prove those unrealized driving skills are emerging

in the form of members-only racing clubs. Such clubs — some giving access to an existing track, others with their own courses — are popping up across the country.

Aspiring Andrettis can buy a membership in Alpine Motorsports or BeaveRun Motorsports, both in Pennsylvania; New Jersey Motorsports Park in Millville; High Rock Raceway in North Carolina; Miller Motorsports Park in Tooele, Utah; or closer to home, Lime Rock Park in Connecticut. Many others are on the drawing boards.

Private racing clubs are a logical corollary to the run-up in values of collectible cars — especially vintage racecars with credentials — to prices that border on self-satire. For speed seekers among America's most affluent, it is not always enough that they can afford a car of distinguished racing pedigree; now they can test the limits of the car (and themselves) without having to wait for an organized track event.

And with the hot laps happening away from the public's eye, no one's the wiser if the driver's talent is not as heroic as imagined. Nor is it a problem if the well-heeled driver has no clear idea where the clutch pedal is: private clubs offer professional instructors to help.

While the club concept has been adopted at many existing racetracks, the most exclusive are purpose-built facilities like the [Monticello Motor Club](#) being developed here, two hours northwest of Manhattan. The track is scheduled to open around Father's Day next June.

The club is taking shape in the economically stagnant Catskills, where the decline of Borscht Belt resorts has made job-creating projects a priority. Earth-movers have cleared 200 acres of the 700-acre property on the grounds of the former Monticello Airport and sculptured vast expanses of terrain. The developers say they have moved a half million cubic yards of earth.

But that's just the beginning. The club — a \$50 million endeavor, according to the president and managing member of the Monticello club, William H. McMichael — will focus on the most elite of

recreational drivers. Hedge-fund moguls, communications barons and Wall Street lions are paying an initiation fee of \$100,000 for the privilege of bringing their own racecars — some multimillion-dollar mementos of history, others less precious — to the track. There is also an annual \$7,500 membership fee. Discussing the new circuit, Mr. McMichael, 40, beamed. “I’ve driven on lots of tracks,” he said. “Friends of mine and I rent them whenever we can. And some tracks — Mont Tremblant in Quebec, for instance — are special. But our track is going to be special, too — a track with soul.”

A few twists in the road are to be expected in such an ambitious venture, of course. Mr. McMichael, who has sold his health care business, Trinity Homecare, said that he and two wealthy investment bankers had recently bought out Michael J. Kaplan, the developer who began the project.

Membership is not limited to novices; skilled amateur racers are expected to join as well. Still, club officials say the project’s “sweet spot” is the person who, like Mr. McMichael, has been to a track and just wants to enjoy driving his cars. There will be three levels of driving: touring, or driving individually; lapping, or driving individually at high speeds; and racing. Members can hone their skills at their own comfort level.

Safety and comfort are priorities. There will be two-way communications with drivers on the track and a light system to warn if a car ahead has had a problem. The lights can also be used to keep cars separated during individual-lapping sessions. Putting just 12 cars on the 3.7-mile track affords ample solo driving room for everyone.

James M. Glickenhau, a general partner in his family’s investment firm who also owns some priceless historic racecars, sees practical benefits to the individual lapping sessions. “If I’m dialing in the fuel injection of my 1966 Ferrari P3/4,” he said, “I don’t have to worry about some yahoo from the [BMW Club](#) putting me off,” referring to a possible misstep by a less-skilled driver.

For Carlos J. Conde, an investment banker in Scarsdale, N.Y., and a veteran of the Ferrari Challenge series of competitions for production Ferraris, membership has other advantages: “I joined because, at three-plus miles long, it’s a very large track — and it’s within easy driving or helicopter distance.”

A helicopter pad is among the promised amenities. The track is a complex blend of 12 shorter track segments that can be combined in different configurations and can be run clockwise or counterclockwise. It can also be segmented into three discrete circuits, allowing simultaneous lapping. “The one thing I was afraid of is building a track where the same old corners and straightaways get boring,” Mr. McMichael said. “We’ll have enough variety to keep members interested for 20 years.”

But make no mistake — the main 3.7-mile circuit will be a thrill ride. It will include replicas of the famous diving corkscrew turn sequence from Laguna Seca in California and the high-speed rising Eau Rouge curves from the Spa circuit in Belgium.

In carving out the course, the huge earth-moving exercise has also been directed toward reducing safety hazards. Wide paved runoff areas will be built on the borders of the corners; if the car slides far enough, the surface becomes increasingly grippy, restoring control.

Brian Redman, a professional racer with many wins to his credit, has helped with this aspect of the track design. “Safety is just so important these days,” Mr. Redman said in a telephone interview. “Crash barriers keep the car on the track — and the closer the better. That way, impacts with them will occur at a mild angle.”

Including the racing veteran has another benefit. In addition to a full-time professional driving staff, Mr. Redman will be on hand 30 days a year to dispense instruction, wisdom and caution.

State-of-the-art electronics called autometrics and biometrics will be available at the club to monitor both the car and its driver.

Autometrics refers to a telemetry system that records the car's engine speed, braking points, acceleration, throttle position and other measures of performance and driving technique. Biometrics refers to the monitoring of a driver's physical exertion, including blood pressure, heart rate and even the pressure of his or her grip on the steering wheel. Monitoring physical condition in this high-stress activity (and taking into account the stressful lives members may lead), is a vital component of the experience.

Like luxury suites in sports stadiums, the Monticello club will cater to its members' comfort. The design for the main clubhouse — think country club, not a grass-roots track from racing's early days — is a five-story glass-enclosed structure that includes a fancy restaurant, social rooms and overnight accommodations for members.

Robert J. Sechan, a Wall Street asset manager from New Canaan, Conn., sees an aspect of the club that reaches beyond cars. "We're extremely busy people, and we aren't home a lot, so if I was going to spend time at the track, I want a bunch of friends there with me," he said.