

As a street driver, little did I know that the first time I kissed 120 M.P.H., I'd be permanently imprinted with a need for speed. For a guy who once fancied himself to be an ersatz egghead, that was a big surprise. I didn't realize that my human "hard-wiring" for challenge was so instinctual.



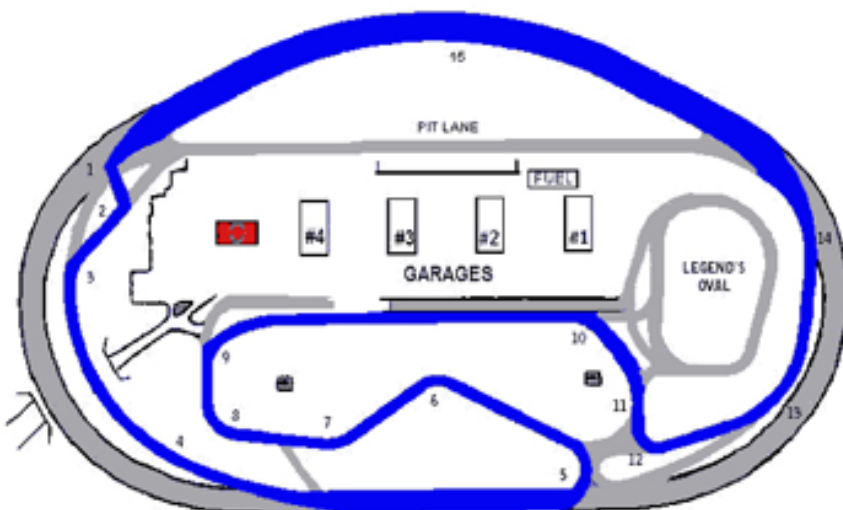
After over three years doing it, I finally understood it's adventure that calls me to monthly open-track outings. If you've tried open-tracking, know there's nothing quite like it. In a small world full of huge overstatements and hyperbole, you can forget it all. Your whole attitude changes positively each time you run. Everything you

are, everything you've been, recedes to a distant mental horizon, waiting as you focus on who you must be in the moment. When you finish a run, you feel completely exhilarated, satisfied that you've done a good job at something most would prefer to watch. Pushing to explore your limits, without exceeding them by running out of talent, is a challenge that open-trackers love.

I'm not running the fastest iron around, but I never feel slow. I LOVED piloting my '97 SVT Mustang Cobra at Las Vegas Motor Speedway (<http://www.LVMS.com>), on a 2.41-mile, 15-turn American Le Mans Series configuration course, sponsored by National Auto Sport Association (<http://www.NASAProRacing.com>). It was so much fun because the track loved the grunt of fast, higher-horsepower cars. Yet it also required the finesse of a tight road circuit like Buttonwillow. A

guy in his spec racer RX-7 and me played at trading leader because he was faster in the infield, but I pulled away in the sweepers. One of my favorite turn sequences was 3-4-5; when you get the apex of 3 right, you could press your right foot into the firewall, letting the car drift out as you rocket through 4. Then you stand "with both feet" on the brakes to enter 5.

The 14-15-1 combo was another I loved because you could use the



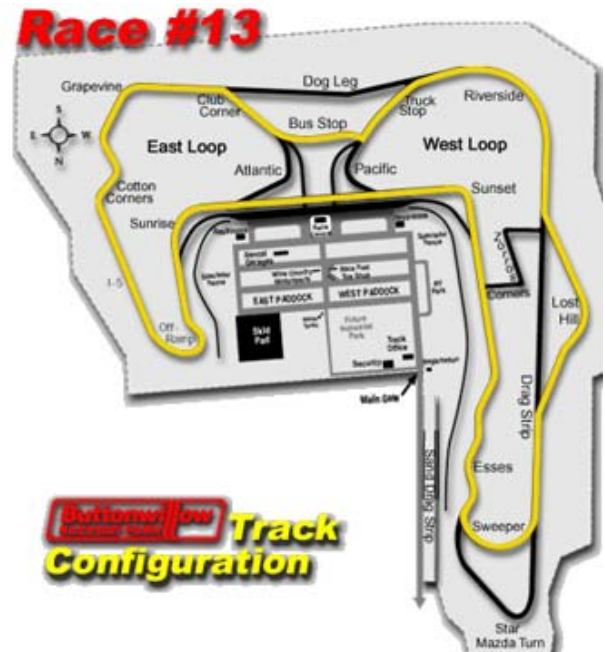
Las Vegas Motor Speedway, ALMS 2.41 configuration

same approach. Plus, you could either run high on the high banking of 15 for the feel of it, or run lower on the apron and save a little distance.

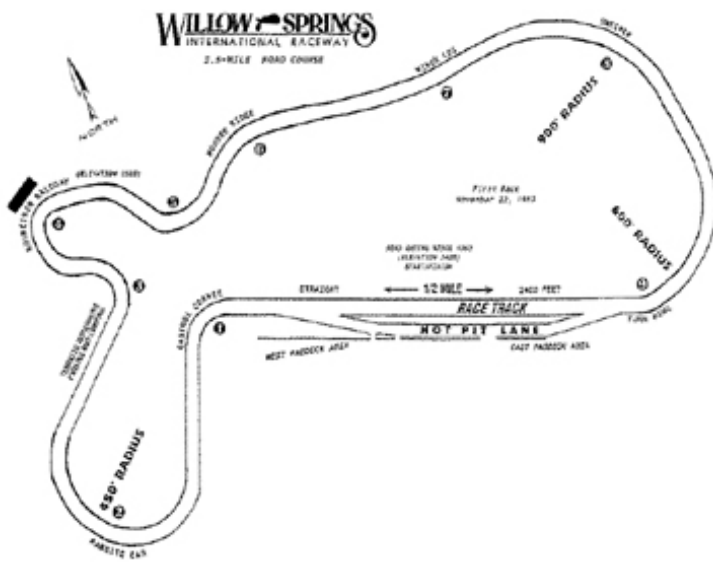
At his first open-track event as a spectator, my dad watched me from the Las Vegas Motor Speedway media building next to pit lane. He asked, "How fast are you going through turn 15, about 85 M.P.H.?" "Nope, dad, I was doing between 115 and 120". Another charm to this August event were the runs at night, under lights. You feel like you're running a different track because it's harder to see the apexes and there's no feeling of blue sky in your peripheral sight. At a peak temperature of 116 degrees F, all the drivers felt like they'd matched personal records.

Buttonwillow Raceway's a gas because it has two longer straights which are good for heavier, fast cars. But it's also exceedingly cool for the seat-of-the-pants feel across Lost Hill; your car crests the hill and gets light, then plunks down again into powered traction. Buttonwillow's a track with many elements, each having its own special character. With N.A.S.A. I've most often run the configuration known as "Race 13" on Buttonwillow's Website at <http://www.buttonwillowraceway.com/>.

Clockwise is my favorite, but counterclockwise is like running a different track. Taking Riverside on the edge of adhesion, nailing perfect apexes in Cotton Corners, or nipping the curb at the Bus Stop all have their appeal and charm. 23 apexes over 2.4 miles is a workout, and at the end of NASA's 20-minute sessions I'm plenty happy. Buttonwillow's asphalt has a big-league feel, but it might go unnoticed. There aren't huge grandstands overlooking the field and no massive midways with hot dog stands. I noticed in AutoWeek that C.A.R.T. teams sometimes run tests there, including driver auditions.



Last but *not even* least, Willow Springs Raceway's big track remains my favorite. It will be always because it was my first track. Although the first time I was scared half-witless, I loosened-up after some good instruction from Gary Underwood of Citrus Ford. Nine turns through many banked corners, as fast as you dare go in a Mustang, is an alluring thing. When I get the apex of 9 done right, I can zip through it about 87 M.P.H. on street tires, plant the gas pedal and top 120 before I brake for Turn 1. I'm also very fond of the Turns 5-6-7 combination (<http://www.willowspringsraceway.com/images/WillowSpring.GIF>). In a fast, rear-drive car, when you cut a nice path into 5, you ease into the throttle after 5. Then I plant my foot against the floor just before Turn 6's Monroe Ridge. Of course, before you top the ridge you can't see where you're going, but you let the car drift wide to the edge of the track. Now, you're full throttle and Willow lives up to it's motto of "Fastest Road In The West" as you're picking an apex for 7's Wing's Leg. Whhooooee, Batman!!



Last time out, I was happy to discover that I could keep ahead of an instructor, John, in his E-36 M3. John's a funny guy, and gives me pointers like, "Did you know that turn eight, contrary to popular belief, has an

apex"? Like the rest of the N.A.S.A. instructors, he loves to take the time for you to get it right and understand what he's teaching you.

I've many new friends as a result of my positive addiction to this sport. Marlon Mitchell of Marlo's Frame & Alignment (<http://www.Fly-Ford.com>) now handles my brakes, suspension, chassis and alignment. His dad started the place, and Marlon has his own stable of fast Fords. Marlon is a founder of the new Valley Mustang Club, and also a very active member and past president of Mustang Owners of California.

Coldfusion Technologies' Mark Veldhuis (<http://www.ColdBrakes.com>) provides the brakes that Marlon maintains for me. Since my car is also driven on the street, I need brakes that handle the track once a month. Mark says his rotors have double the life of non-cryoed rotors, and I believe him. I've been very happy with their cryogenic rotors and Wagner pads, and neither the rotors or pads get ground to a pulp because I'm not using race-spec materials. He's running his rotors and pads on police cars with excellent results, and is also running his rotors on race cars.

I'm also very grateful for Ryan Flaherty's and John Lindsay's help from NASA (<http://www.NASAProRacing>). Ryan and John are clearly among the best racers around, so they organize some of the best open-track events around. Their instructors and professional organization have given me an ideal environment in which to learn high-performance driving. Thanks also to Jerry, their HPDE coordinator for his excellent help.

Another fringe bennie for me has been the inspiration of watching American Iron races, BMWCCA and US Touring Car races during the NASA events. Once in a while I even get the chance to talk with nationally-known racers such as James Sofronas from Speed Channel's World Challenge (<http://www.world-challenge.com>). NASA is now getting ink in national magazines in addition to 5.0 Mustangs and Super Fords, Muscle Mustangs and Fast Fords and Grassroots Motorsports. There was a May 2002 piece in Car and Driver.

John and Ryan also won their class this year in the new Open Track Challenge (<http://www.OpenTrackChallenge>), running John's car from the NASA American Iron Series. There's an article in the November 4, 2002 issue of AutoWeek which mentions their names and American Iron.

Modifications to Mike's modest '97 Cobra include:

- Baer stainless steel brake lines
- ColdFusion Technologies brake rotors and pads
- B&M Ripper shifter
- Eibach sway bars
- Tokico Illumina shocks & struts
- Hooker mufflers
- K&N air filter
- 275/40-17 BFG Comp T/A's on '95 Cobra R's in front
- 275/40-17 Kuhmo Ecsta Supra 712's on '95 Cobra R's in rear
- Ford export fender flares