

Tamping down the amps

GOING TO GREAT LENGTHS TO BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Story and photos by Randall Bohl

Arizona Motorsports Park is a gem of a road course track you may well not have heard about, though it's been in existence since 2003. This is a 2.25-mile 16-turn road course that can be divided into two separate 1.13-mile (9- and 7-turn) courses. The track, designed by Alan Wilson who also designed Miller Motorsports Park, in Utah (see elsewhere in this issue), as well as (Skip) Barber Motorsports Park, in Alabama, is located on Camelback Road just west of Litchfield Road, directly

off the south end of Luke Air Force Base.

Owned by driving enthusiast Dan Maloney and managed by Jim Baus, surprisingly this prime location has until now actually been the track's Achilles heel, due to noise levels. Thus, they held their first Sound Certification day on Saturday, September 17—a plan devised by track officials and representatives of Maricopa County to certify vehicles (cars or motorcycles) to participate in track events with a 94-decibel noise limit. Once

a vehicle is certified, a tamper-proof sticker is applied.

The track was completed in March 2003 and played host to a successful SCCA regional event. It has been used for ride and drives by automotive companies Honda and Porsche. And it was a testing site for 2003 CART Champion Paul Tracy.

At the time the closest homes were in the Pebble Creek neighborhood, where eyebrows were being raised about the sound levels coming from the new racetrack, and this became a topic for the HOA. Arizona Motorsports Park operates under a 30-year Special Use Permit, and although "unofficial" negotiations were underway between the homeowners and track officials, the County revoked the original permit in early 2004, after a little less than one year in operation.



Baus says of the ever practical Maloney, "Dan was infuriated, but in his infuriated kind of way, so we had to get some lawyers and see what we could do."

Six years passed while today's program was developed. Some facility improvements were done to stay within County guidelines, such as building a permanent restroom facility (which we might add is five-star). "In the meantime," says Baus, "Dan would come out once in awhile and drive some laps. You know it is his property, it's desert, you can ride your quad on it. Or he'd have family out on Thanksgiving afternoon, things like that. But he didn't even do that for awhile because he was worried. He didn't want anyone to say anything. It was a long time just biding time."

MAKING THE MEASUREMENTS

Fast forward (or slow) to August 2010, when the track's SUP permit was reinstated. Working with a representative of the County, the track has created microphone locations throughout the facility to monitor decibel levels. For this fall's road course testing, two were located 50 feet off the straightaway on the east track portion. One was located directly off the end of the runway at Luke Air Force Base, the other near the source of contention, the neighbors. There are also set microphone locations for other events on the 800x800-foot driving area and the skid pad.

The basic rules of the game are: the County considers anything over 99 decibels (db) a noise violation or "accidence." Arizona Motorsports Park has set the limit at 94 decibels due to the fact that if you have multiple vehicles in close proximity (i.e. racing), this number will push up to 97 or 98 db easily. The microphones are hooked to Cirrus decibel meters, which are time-synchronized and record every second, from the start of the day's events until shutdown. This data is downloaded at the end of the day and sent to a special website the County has set up for review of the day's decibel level recordings. For 12 violations, the track is put on probation. Then, for every three violations, the track can be shut down or more importantly the track, club or event organizer can be levied a \$10,000 fine.

Here's where the time-synchronized microphone monitoring of Luke Air Force Base comes into play. What happens to Luke if they create an accidence? "Nothing—and they can blow 107, 112, 113 all day long," Baus tells us. So the importance of that third microphone is that if Luke has an accidence at the same time as the vehicles on track—"give or take as much as 15 seconds"—the violation/accidence on track is cancelled out. A gimme or mulligan of sorts.

CERTIFICATION DAY

On this Saturday morning, about 30 cars and a half-dozen motorcycles were registered to test. Because the day's recordings of anything over 99 db would count as accidents, track officials had to do what we'll call an "earball" tech inspection in the paddock. We witnessed two Corvette ZR6s fire up. One was not allowed onto the track, as it was obvious it would be in violation. So we suggest using good judgment before making the trip out to test your own vehicle. One thing we saw was a Radio Shack handheld decibel meter, in use by Tyler Smith of XCEL Trackdays, that was quite accurate. This could be used for a little home testing to avoid disappointment in the paddock. But most drivers were quite pleased to get certified and viewed the laps as free track time.

Most of our observations in the metering tent were in the high 80s and low 90-decibel range, including BMWs, Porsches and a couple of Ford Mustangs, one of which was an ex-Bondurant School car. The only accidence we observed was by a Buell motorcycle, and you could hear it coming from the first turn. 102 decibels at the microphones and out came the black flag to avoid a second violation. After this, there was concern about sending any more motorcycles out on track, but Tyler Smith convinced officials to allow him a run with one of his superbikes, with his crewman trackside with the aforementioned Radio Shack meter. He passed with flying colors (and he was flying). One curiously quiet driver was asked to do a second three-lap run when his Mazda registered 77 and 78 decibels. There was concern the driver might be sandbagging a bit. Three more laps with a smile and the same readings confirmed that low-RPM rotary power and a huge aftermarket muffler make for a quiet race car.

READY TO ROCK

Operating with this system in place, Arizona Motorsports Park hopes to begin bringing in club events, corporate ride and drives again (although some higher-end performance cars will not pass certification, even in their OEM configuration), and drivers' training such as the T.E.A.M. Arizona motorcycle school and Team Safety Driving School.

Dan Maloney is passionate about his project. "Anybody else might have pulled the plug long ago," says Baus, "but he's funded the whole thing. He just really wants it to work. He has this vision. He loves driving. He loves when kids come out learning to drive. He told me a long time ago, if one kid comes out here and learns to drive and (it) saves one kid's life because he learned a maneuver or something to do (in a emergency situation), it's all worth it."

For more information on Arizona Motorsports Park, including additional Sound Certification Days and upcoming events, go to www.arizonamotorsportspark.com.

