The Life and Death of Riverside Int

For more than three decades, the world-famous Riverside Raceway fought the elements, politics, a Superspeedway competitor and economic downturns. In the end, it succumbed to housing development and a shopping mall.

In Part 1 of our two-part article, we covered the early years of Riverside: The building of the course, struggles to attract popular racing series and the people, fans and events that etched character into the Southern California road course through the 1970 season. In this, the final installment, we pick up in the early 1970s and wind through the stories that shaped the making and, ultimately, the demise of Riverside Raceway.

Since its inception in 1957, Riverside had struggled hard just to survive. By the late 1960s, thanks in large part to a strong management team led by Les Richter, not only had Riverside survived, but the track was thriving.

However, as the 1970s dawned, motorsports entered a rocky period. As a result of the fading performance car market and in the face of fierce competition from foreign carmakers, U.S. automotive manufacturer support of motorsports dwindled. At the end of the 1970 season, Ford announced it was ending its racing program. Other Detroit manufacturers soon followed suit. This pull-back dramatically affected those racing series that relied heavily on manufacturer support, most notably SCCA's Trans-Am Series that had exploded in popularity as a result of the pony car market's success.

The Ontario Effect

Ontario Motor Speedway splashed onto the racing scene in the late '60s with a reported $25.5 million invested into a state-of-the-art facility that was built about 35 miles east of Los Angeles, only 15 miles from Riverside. The track featured a 2.5-mile oval, shaped identically to that of the famed Indianapolis Motor Speedway, a super-wide pit lane that accommodated drag racing and an infield road course.

Anticipating the effect Ontario would have on its bottom line, Riverside's owners, in the late '60s and early '70s, poured millions into track reconfiguration, safety enhancements, the addition of permanent grandstands and dirt embankments to give the fans better viewing and improvements of the surrounding roadways.

At the end of 1969, management at Ontario announced that it had snatched the Indy car and NHRA drag racing events away from Riverside and would host both for the 1970 season.

Worse for Riverside, Ontario seemed to be luring away racing fans and their dollars. A painful example was the

The Times Grand Prix parade lap through Turn 8 in October, 1971 sees (by row) Denny Hulme (pole), Peter Revson; Jackie Stewart, George Follmer; Jackie Oliver, Lothar Motschenbacher; Sam Posey, Tony Adamowicz; Howden Ganley, Chuck Parsons; Hiroshi Kazato, Milt Minter; Bob Brown and Jim Adams.

STORY BY JOHN B. HEIMANN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB TRONOLONE

ernational Raceway

attendance for Riverside's 1970 running of the *L.A.Times* Grand Prix. At 45,000, the number of paying customers was half of what it had been the previous year.

Then, the Trans-Am cars halted their trip west to Riverside after the 1971 race, not to return for nine years. The 1971 Trans-Am race itself was a lackluster affair. Only AMC had a factory-backed effort that year and the other teams, made up mostly of also-rans, came to the race with year-old cars and no-name drivers, which didn't help Riverside sell tickets.

This combination of blows—the loss of three major events from its annual calendar and a high profile competitor in the neighborhood—may have had a devastating effect on Riverside if not for the skill of the Raceway's management.

"It was a track that had a head man who really knew what he was doing," says TV commentator and former racer Sam Posey of Les Richter, Riverside's general manager. "Because of his background in the National Football League, he brought a degree of professionalism and just a good attitude toward racing, the fans and the racers."

Beyond Richter's connection with the racing community was the strong relationship built with the city of Riverside and its environs. Deke Houlgate, former public relations man for Riverside, believes Richter's involvement with the locals was an integral part of the Raceway's ability to succeed, even in the face of stiff competition. "He joined the Chamber of Commerce, then created a division of the Chamber called the Raceway Booster's Club," says Houlgate. "Through the Booster's Club, he not only had a great volunteer work force that saved the track a lot of money, but it also created a great marketing tool to sell the track to other communities around the area. Those were racing people. A lot of them built their lives, their vacation time, all of their activities around what was going on at the Raceway. I still run into people today who say, 'I belonged to the Booster's Club. We had a great time out there and we loved doing the work and we sure wish there was a feeling like that now.'"

Still, the specter of Ontario loomed big and Riverside needed to take action.

For the 1970 season, Riverside and NASCAR came to an agreement to run a second Grand National race in June, the Falstaff 400, in addition to the traditional January run, which was still known as the Motor Trend 500. NASCAR racing was beginning to capture the fancy of racing fans nationwide, breaking out of its mold as a southern United States series.

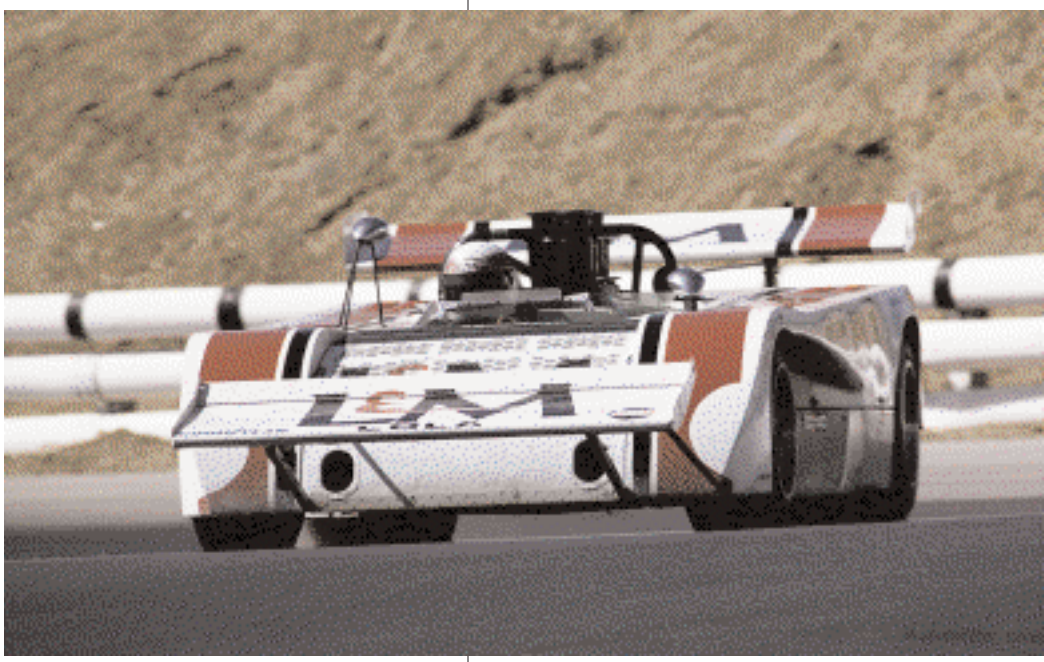
Richter recognized the importance of running NASCAR events at Riverside, even in the early '60s. As the Grand National Series—as it was then known—entered the 1970s, names like Petty, Allison and Yarborough were becoming as recognizable as those of Foyt and Andretti had already become. The two races per season, which continued through 1987, not only helped NASCAR develop a badly needed fan base away from its stronghold in the southeastern United States, but also helped Riverside pack the bleachers.

While the loss of the Indy car series to Ontario may have hurt Riverside's prestige, another open-wheel series, still in its infancy, was quickly gaining in popularity and couldn't have come along at a better time.

John Bishop and Jim Kaser (the SCCA's top brass from the mid-to late 1960s) recognized that racer interest for an affordable open-wheel series was strong. And there were plenty of talented road racing drivers available to fill the seats. More importantly, the pair found constructors such as Lola, McLaren and Dan Gurney's All American Racers ready, willing and able to design lightweight, single-seat formula chassis to marry with the popular 5.0-liter V8 engines being cranked out by Detroit. In that instant, F5000 was created.

As the series caught fire, chassis from Surtees, Lotus, March and Brabham entered the fray, and engines from Plymouth, Oldsmobile and Pontiac among others were supplied, adding to the popular Chevrolet and Ford V8s that helped jump-start the series. And teams such as Vel's/Parnelli Jones, Penske and All American Racers lent credibility and visibility to F5000.

The F5000 series, although not as big a draw as the Indy cars, was ironically a bigger economic success for Riverside. "We came to an impasse with the Indy car guys," says Les Richter. "They wanted too much



Above: World Champion Jackie Stewart lasted just 29 laps in the '71 Times *GP, driving a Lola T-260. He went out with oil in the cooling system. Right: The ever versatile George Follmer chalks up another win at Riverside in the October '72* Times *GP. That year, Follmer became the first and only driver ever to win both the Trans-Am and Can-Am championships, winning nine of 14 races run.*

money. They didn't want to honor our VIP guests, and a lot of little things like that added up, so we dropped them. The F5000 series, on the other hand, was a really good series where you didn't have many name drivers, but you had a lot of young, promising drivers. It turned out to become a series where the name drivers would be out west for an Indy car or NASCAR race and they'd skip over to do an F5000 race, which drivers did a lot in the early days to make extra money. What with the smaller purses and the good crowds we drew, it was a really good series for us."

Riverside not only reaped the rewards of this series with its throaty, powerful engines and sleek chassis, but also helped to popularize F5000. While the F5000 series' most successful drivers in its early years were names such as Gus Hutchison, Lou Sell, John Cannon, Sam Posey and David Hobbs, in its heyday of the mid-'70s the series was attracting the likes of Mario Andretti, Al Unser, Jackie Oliver and Jody Scheckter.

In 1974, the estimated attendance for the F5000 event at Riverside was 50,000. Even though many of the fans came to witness the International Race of Champions (IROC) race run that same day, not many missed the open-wheel action. Crowds were more than 50,000 again in 1975 and 1976 for the F5000 and IROC shows.

Below: On the podium after the October '73 Times GP were (left to right) Charlie Kemp, Mark Donohue and Hurley Haywood.

Above: In October '73, the IROC was much more than just a NASCAR sideshow. Left: At the January 26, 1974, Winston Western 500, Cale Yarborough charges his Chevy out of Turn 6 to a victory. Rains had stopped the race on lap 63 a week earlier.

Riverside even endured a promotional stunt Ontario devised in 1971 whereby American drivers in F5000 cars were pitted against Formula 1's best to showcase Ontario's underutilized road course. Ontario put up a then-huge $278,000 purse and organized a TV package. But fan attendance was bleak and TV ratings were anemic. It was yet another nail in the coffin of Ontario that Riverside's people had to enjoy watching being hammered in.

But the potential the F5000 seemed to have was never fully realized. The SCCA and USAC had discussed unifying their two second-tier open-wheel series, but talks broke down in 1976. Instead, the leftover F5000 chassis and engines, of which there were plenty, would be covered with bodywork and become the foundation of the revised Can-Am series introduced in 1977.

IROC Is Born, Can-Am Dies

Despite the poor crowd of 1970, the anchor event of the season for Riverside International Raceway remained the *Los Angeles Times* Grand Prix featuring the Can-Am cars. The marketing pull of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper helped bring attendance levels back up slightly in 1971. Then in 1972, Riverside added 2.5-liter Trans-Am, Super Vee and motorcycle races to the schedule to boost attendance even more and it worked.

In 1973, Les Richter and Roger Penske put their heads together and drew up the concept for a racing series that would pit the world's best drivers, from all forms of racing, against one another in equally prepared cars running on both road courses and ovals. To make things fair, the finishing order of one race would be inverted to form the starting grid of the next and drivers would likewise switch cars, so that the last place finisher would start the following event in the winner's car and so on. And thus, IROC came to be.

Right: VM Editor D. Randy Riggs races a Can-Am through Turn 6 during a 1975 AFM event. Motorcycle club racing was popular at Riverside. Below: On October 3, 1976, "King" Kenny Roberts swept to victory on a Yamaha in the AMA National road race. Bottom: During the October 17, '76, SCCA Formula 5000 event, Jackie Oliver powers his Shadow-Dodge DN-6B out of Turn 6.

PHOTO D. RANDY RIGGS COLLECTION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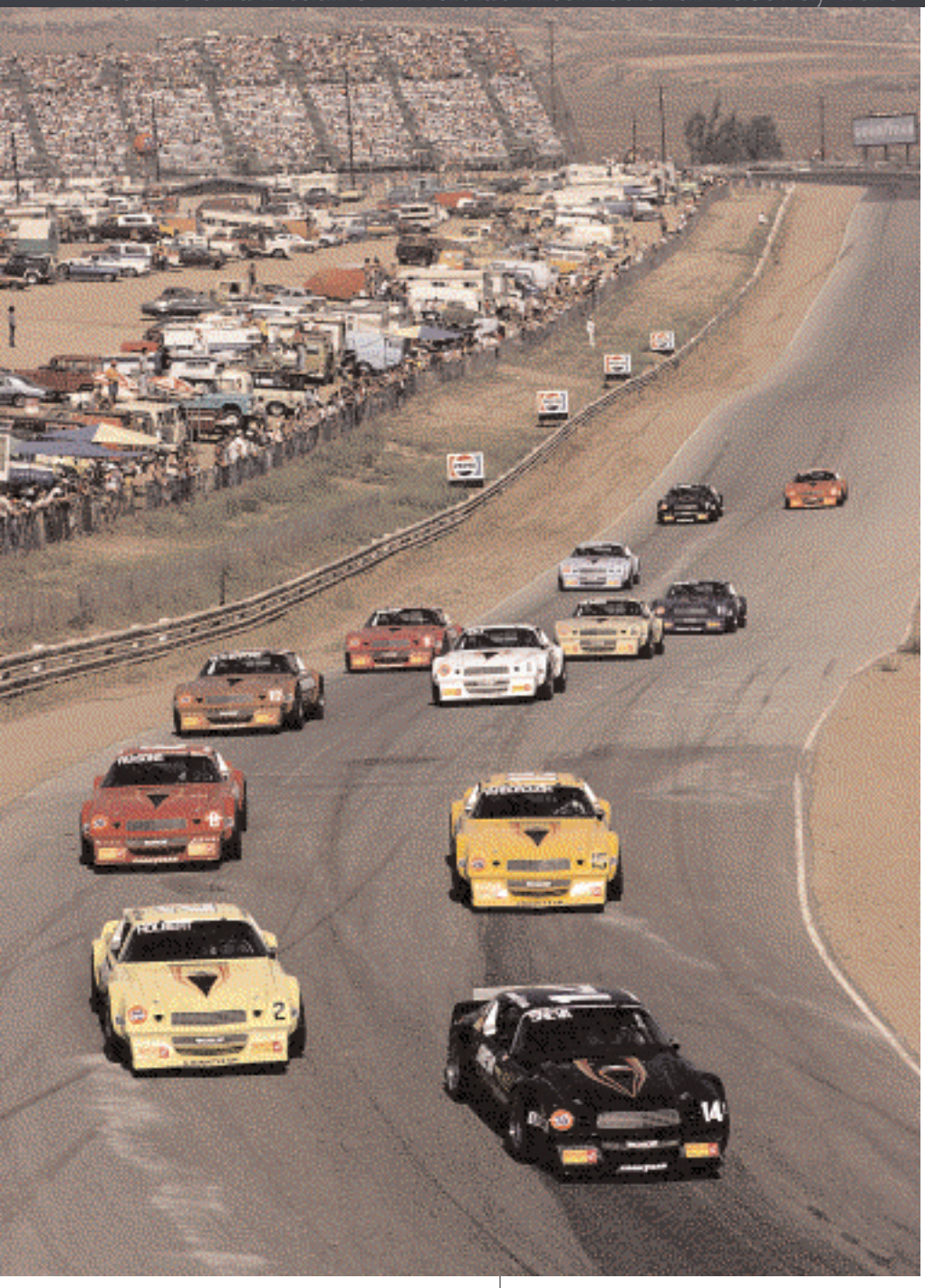
The first-ever series of IROC races were added to the *L.A. Times* GP schedule in 1973. Emerson Fittipaldi, Mark Donohue, A.J. Foyt, Mario Andretti, Gordon Johncock, Bobby Unser, Roger McCluskey, Peter Revson, Denis Hulme, George Follmer, David Pearson, Bobby Allison and Richard Petty were the drivers gridded for the three heats run in the inaugural event. Each raced in identically prepared Porsche Carreras the first year, before switching to Chevy Camaros that would be the mainstay of the series for years to come. Donohue won two of the three races with George Follmer taking the middle race.

IROC was an instant success with fans and the close racing between the world's top drivers made for great television. The series found a regular home at Riverside through 1979, and then made a single and final appearance in 1988 during the Winston Cup weekend, with Scott Pruett taking that last IROC win.

At the end of the '73 season, which concluded at Riverside, the SCCA announced that it was scrapping what had made Can-Am so hugely popular, and then caused it to implode—its unlimited sports car formula. In 1974 and for the first time since 1958, Riverside would not have an



L.A.Times GP. The event would eventually return, but under very different circumstances.

So, despite Ontario's presence and the tumultuous events of the early '70s, Riverside remained strong. "It was a happening," says racing legend Dan Gurney of Riverside's appeal to fans, "and the other tracks didn't host as many big league events as Riverside did. Even after the advent of Ontario, which was a fabulous oval, as far as ovals go, Riverside was still very, very strong and I think that can be attributed to the reputation the track had."

Ontario had poured a tremendous amount of money into its facilities, many times that of what Riverside had invested. Ultimately, it would be Ontario's debt load that would force the track to fold only a few years after it opened, while Riverside's gates remained open.

IMSA Makes Its Debut

When John Bishop left the SCCA in 1969, it was not under the most amicable of circumstances. The SCCA had voted to split its professional and amateur activities. Bishop strongly opposed the decision and subsequently left his position with the organization.

Shortly after his departure, Bishop got together with Bill France, NASCAR's founder, to discuss their mutual interests. In 1969, France assisted Bishop in launching the International Motor Sports Association (IMSA), which quickly supplanted the SCCA as America's premier professional road racing organization.

While IMSA continued to add events to its schedule each year, gain popularity with fans and prove to everyone that they indeed had a viable

Above: Richard Petty misses an apex during the January '77 Winston Western 500 on his way to a third-place finish.

Above: By October 1977, Camaros had replaced Porsche 911s in IROC and Bobby Unser won Riverside's 30-lap affair. Right: Can-Am II: Full coverage bodywork draped recycled F5000 cars. Patrick Tambay races his Lola T-333 CS during the October '77 event.

series, Riverside had been helped in its leanest of times by the SCCA and Les Richter was in no hurry to add an IMSA event to the schedule.

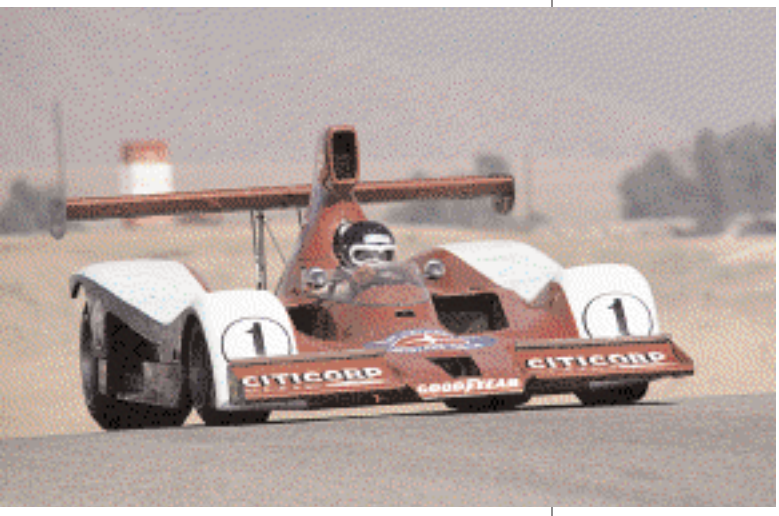
It was not until 1975 that the IMSA Camel GT series raced in Riverside, and even then, it would only be when Bishop agreed to take on all the costs of running the event. The crowd was big enough that IMSA made a profit and the sanctioning body looked forward to returning.

However, it would be another four years before IMSA would again take to the venerable Southern California road course. When the *L.A. Times* newspaper expressed its desire to resurrect the *L.A. Times* Grand Prix, IMSA, with its GT series now in demand, became the right organization at the right time to make it happen. In 1979, the *L.A. Times* Grand Prix and IMSA both returned to Riverside. The GP, now an April affair, became a new tradition that grew in popularity until its last running in 1987.

The Camel GT series at Riverside would witness brilliant drives by some of the era's best sports car drivers: John Fitzpatrick, the Whittington brothers, Al Holbert, Derek Bell, Pete Halsmer, John Morton, Rob Dyson, Price Cobb and others. In 1986, one of the most spectacular accidents ever witnessed occurred as Lyn St. James, Doc Bundy and Chip Robinson collided entering Turn 3. Both St. James' Mustang Probe and Robinson's Jaguar XJR-7 flipped. A tremendous fire erupted from St. James' car. Despite the carnage, no one was seriously injured. Less fortunate was Rolf Stommelen, who, in 1983, died of injuries sustained when the rear wing on his tube-framed Porsche 935 Moby Dick replica failed at the end of Riverside's long backstretch.

NASCAR Goes Big-Time

In 1979, a defining moment in the history of NASCAR took place. The moment was not the result of an organizational shakeup, a phenomenal new driver entering the series, rules changes or anything within its control. It would be CBS television coverage of the Daytona 500 and the spectacular last-lap dual, crash and ensuing fisticuffs between Bobby Allison and Cale Yarborough while King Richard Petty went on to take his umpteenth Daytona victory.

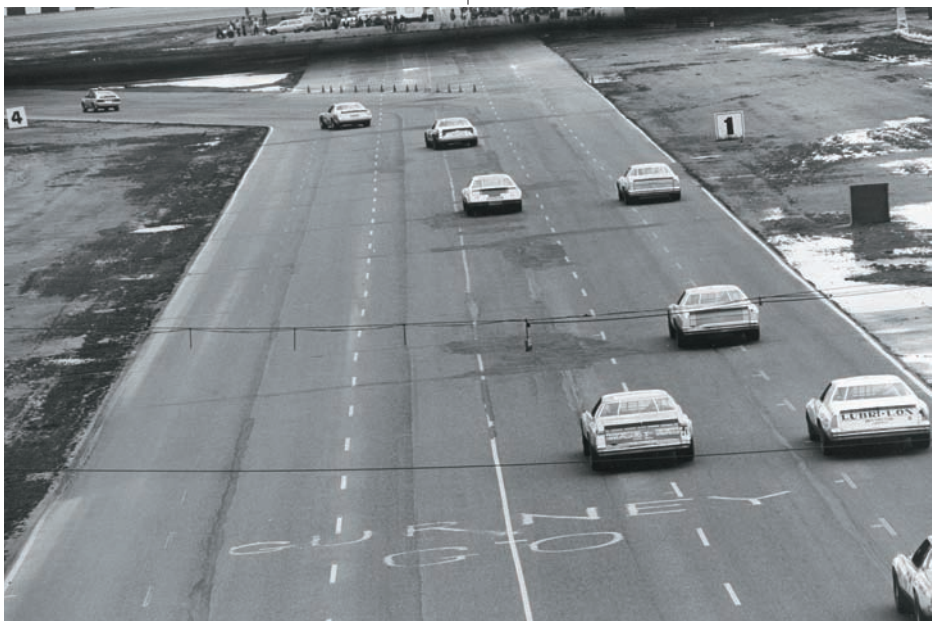


Above: IMSA's 6-Hour April '79 IMSA race was won by the Whittington brothers in a Porsche 935. Left: Jackie Ickx won the November '79 round of the SCCA Can-Am in a Lola T-333CS. Below: On January 19, 1980, NASCAR's big boomers head down the back straight approaching Turn 9 during the pace lap.

It was a 200-mile-per-hour soap opera and the fans ate it up. The series had been re-named the Winston Cup by this time and, over the next several years, NASCAR took full advantage of its newfound popularity by tightening the rules to make for closer racing while promoting its drivers as the stars of the series. And a new batch of young drivers, more media-friendly than their predecessors, entered the Winston Cup at the same time. Guys like Dale Earnhardt, Darrell Waltrip, Terry Labonte, Tim Richmond, Bill Elliott, Rusty Wallace and Ricky Rudd were but a few. And these drivers not only knew how to win on the ovals, but they trained at some of America's top road racing schools to learn how to tackle the road courses.

It's no surprise, then, that those drivers dominated Riverside through the '80s. And, it should be no surprise that the Winston Cup races would draw huge crowds to Riverside. "NASCAR, well, they were angels from heaven," says Les Richter. "Stock car racing was becoming more popular in America. Their program just grew and grew and grew. It eventually became our best event as far as the number of people attending and money coming into the track."

What was a surprise to just about everyone in auto racing was Dan Gurney's 1980 return to racing in a Winston Cup car. It had been 10 years since Gurney raced professionally and there was no other venue where his coming out of retirement could have possibly meant more—to fans, to the track's management, to Gurney himself—than Riverside.



Standing in Gurney's way was a most unlikely character—Les Richter. "Dan, you've been out of racing mode for too long and a lot's changed," Richter told Gurney in an attempt to dissuade him from making what Richter estimated was a mistake. But Gurney persisted. So Richter tried to find another way out. "This is the deal," Richter offered the then 48-year-old former champion, 'You go up to Bob Bondurant's school in Sonoma, then I'm going to call him and find out what he says about you.' Some time later, I called Bondurant and he says, 'Oh! It was terrible! That son-of-a-bitch passed me and ran away! He hasn't lost a stroke.' So, we let him run. He started way back and he went through the field like Grant through Richmond. And the people in the grandstands, they were going crazy."

Remarkably, Gurney worked his way up to second before dropping out with a failed transmission on lap 79.

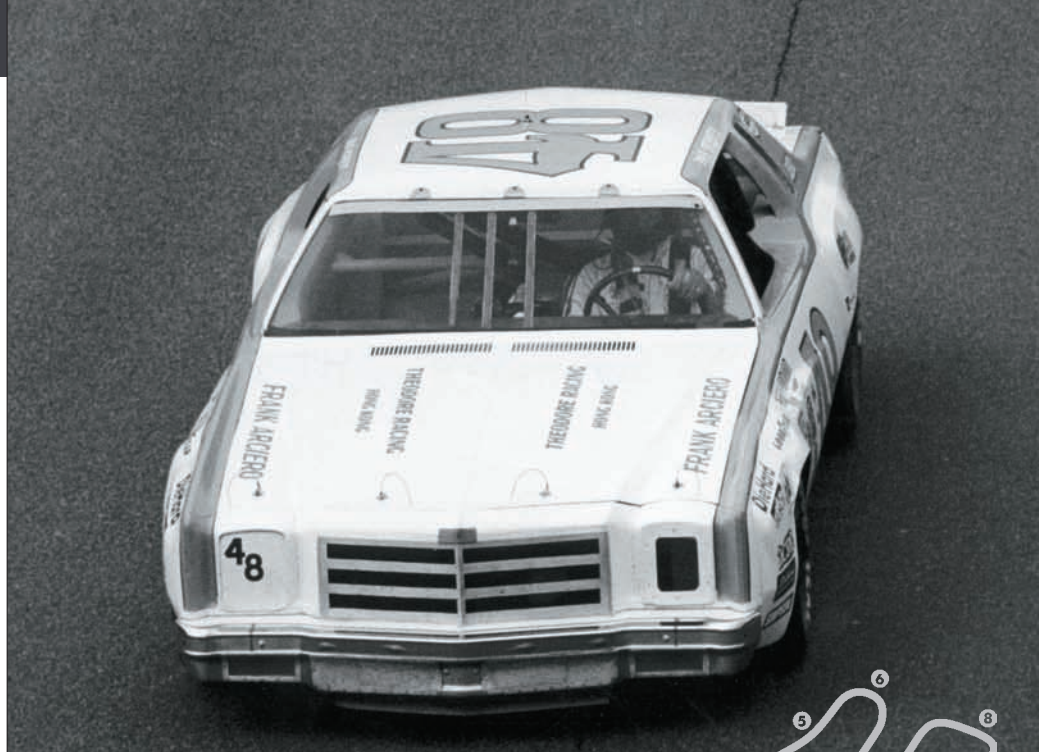
Can-Am, Trans-Am and Indy Cars Return

The name "Can-Am" still conjured up potent images in the minds of those in the racing fraternity. It was with the hope of recapturing Can-Am's magic that the SCCA launched the new Can-Am series in 1977. Originally, the new Can-Am cars were nothing more than F5000 chassis with new bodies. In 1980, rules allowed for new cars to be manufactured.

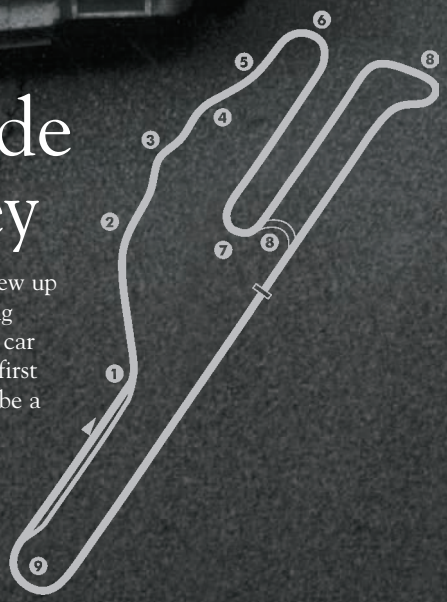
The revised Can-Am ran at Riverside from 1977 through 1984, taking one year off in 1983. Though the series spawned some remarkable driving talent including Keke Rosberg, Alan Jones, Al Unser Jr., Bobby Rahal and Danny Sullivan, the series never caught on. The magic of the original Can-Am was never recaptured and the series died a quiet death at the end of 1984.

Trans-Am, on the other hand, eventually recaptured at least some of its past glory through the 1980s and into the early 1990s when the SCCA moved toward rules that would both attract American manufacturers and help teams build affordable production-based cars.

Riverside would pair the Trans-Am events with Can-Am in 1980 and 1984 while running Trans-Am as the headliner in 1983 and 1986. In 1980, Trans-Am was still struggling to get manufacturer and sponsor support, and driving talent was minimal. However, by 1983 the new rules were working, sponsors took notice and a talented new crop of road racers entered the series.



A Lap of Riverside with Dan Gurney



Dan Gurney was the maestro of Riverside. He grew up in the area and literally watched the track being born. With five NASCAR stock car wins, two Indy car wins, and a victory in a sports car race in 1957 (his first professional win), who better than Gurney to describe a lap of Riverside.

"Turn 1 was a left-hand turn that went over the brow of a little hill. It probably didn't rise up more than six or eight feet, but nevertheless, at the exit of Turn 1, the car was a little light, so it was a tricky turn to get through. Turn 2 was a right-hander beginning the esses. You had to stay out to the left a long way then cut across the apex very accurately, keeping your speed up on the exit and be lined up for a little left-hand jiggle, which wasn't more than 10 degrees. Then you had a right-hand turn—Turn 3—which was very tricky. It also had a little bit of a rise. Even though it was only a few feet, it sort of launched the car, so it got a little bit loose there as well. Turn 4 was an easy little left. Then you had a right-hand jiggle. Then hard on the brakes entering the left-hand Turn 5. You turned right up a little hill to Turn 6, where the grandstands were. Turn 6 was a double apex turn.

"In some of the races, you'd go straight across from Turn 6 to Turn 8, but for an Indy car or a sports car race, you kept turning right on Turn 6 about 170 degrees and then down the hill to Turn 7. Turn 7 had a little rise right at the braking zone. Over the top of the rise was the 180-degree left-hander, which you couldn't see very well. There was a short straightaway going up to Turn 8, which also had a little bit of rise in the first half of it and the braking zone for that part was in the turn. The second half of Turn 8 was off-camber and tricky, but it was also very important because it was the beginning of about a one-mile straightaway.

"The straightaway was a little bit downhill and it took you under the footbridge. Turn 9 had been a hairpin, but then they put in a left-hand kink at the end of the back straight (*in 1969—Ed.*) which was pretty much flat for everybody. Then you would enter Turn 9 which had quite a few lines that you could take.

"You never were absolutely sure that you did it correctly. Whether you were in a sports car or an Indy car or a stock car, it didn't seem to make much difference. But I think it was a good turn because there were opportunities to pass. At the exit of Turn 9 were the pits on your right on the short front straightaway and you'd be headed toward Turn 1."

The comeback of the Indy cars, after a 12-year hiatus, was in 1981, several years after team owners had come to an impasse with USAC over the control of the series and formed Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART). CART's proclivity toward mixing road courses with the ovals and their need to have exposure in the lucrative Los Angeles market made Riverside a natural.

However, the races were run in August under the blistering desert sun and fewer than 10 cars finished any of the three events run in 1981, 1982 and 1983. As Les Richter succinctly puts it, "It didn't fulfill their desires." When the Long Beach Grand Prix Association's Chris Pook couldn't come to terms with the Formula 1 gang for the 1984 running of the GP, CART gladly moved to Long Beach to race in the more forgiving month of April.

Above: Rick Mears during the California 500 in August 1983. Left: June 13, 1982, winner Tim Richmond cools off Linda Vaughn at the Budweiser 400—the original "beer bust!" Below: In October of '81 Michael Andretti was honing his skills at Riverside in SCCA's Super Vee division.

This Is the End, My Friend

Off-road racing made its debut at Riverside in 1973, thanks to Mickey Thompson. Thompson's Short Course Off Road Enterprises (SCORE) attempted to replicate desert racing, with its various classes of car, in a stadium environment. The idea caught on. A 7.5-mile course was created at Riverside using part of the permanent road course and mostly off-road sections, including a healthy chunk of the never developed land at the northeast corner of the property. Off-road racing introduced the rest of the world to Rick and Roger Mears, Robbie Gordon and Ivan "Ironman" Stewart.

Next to NASCAR, SCORE had the longest running event at Riverside. How ironic, then, that the last professional race run on the full road course at Riverside—the NASCAR Winston Cup event held in June of 1988 and won by Rusty Wallace—and the SCORE International Off Road

World Championship round in August of 1988 would be the last professional races ever run at Riverside.

There were various club races held for nearly a year beyond that and the Skip Barber Racing School continued operating, even as sections of the track were being torn up.

It had been back in 1983 that the future of Riverside was decided. That year Les Richter sold his financial interest in the track to real estate developer Fritz Duda. Even as Riverside hosted a full slate of events under the direction of new general manager Dan Greenwood, there was a feeling of foreboding always in the desert air.

Urban sprawl had increased land values in this once deserted land and Duda made clear from the start his plans to plow the racetrack under to make way for property development. The fate of the track was sealed.

Duda and others discussed building a new racetrack in neighboring towns, but nothing ever came of it.

So, it was at dusk, July 2, 1989, that silence fell on Riverside. The last racing laps would be run on the road course during a Cal Club event, placing a final period on the story of Riverside International Raceway.

For those who Riverside touched—the drivers, team owners, track management, media and fans—the loss of the track was a painful experience, but one that those on the sidelines could do nothing about.

"Hated it. Just really, really hated it," Sam Posey says of Riverside's closing. "I remember flying over the track, I don't know, maybe 10 years ago. Looking down you could still make out a bit of the track. You can read that Riverside has been turned into a shopping center, but if you don't see it for yourself, you remember it as it was. When I saw it and saw that it was gone, it was really depressing because you realize that you'll never go home again."

Dan Gurney, whose career began and ended at Riverside, had similar feelings when the track was plowed under. "It was

PHOTO D. RANDY RIGGS

Above: The Paul Newman/John Fitzpatrick Nissan makes tracks in the April '87 IMSA GT. Left: In May 1990, Skip Barber ran its last racing school at Riverside. Below: By May of 1990, the track had been plowed under in several places and a major street intersected the famous old straightaway.

like losing a friend who you had known for a long time and it was like losing a little part of one's life," Gurney says. "Riverside seemed like it had all kinds of reasons to remain a viable track and yet, they just decided—an arbitrary thing—that they wanted to get rid of it. It was too bad, but you can't dwell on it. It does happen in life and there have been plenty of similar stories."

Les Richter is somewhat more reconciled about the track's closing. "You have to look at life as it is," says Richter "At that stage of my life, I was doing other things in motor racing, but it was still sad to see the last race at the raceway."

Riverside's place in the growth and development of professional sports car racing in the United States cannot be understated. It was the first road course of any consequence in the western U.S. and Riverside remains one of only a handful of tracks in North America to rise above the status of being a mere venue. Riverside helped to write the history of motorsports.

Great moments in racing are created by some magical combination of the racetrack, its participants, the event and its witnesses. It's impossible to estimate how many lives have been touched by Riverside. One thing is certain—more than 30 years of racing at that one track, many magic memories were indeed created. And somehow, memories of Riverside will always include a glint of sun off the top of a race car and the sly, boyish smile of a winner in Victory Lane. ◆