



THE DEEP SOUTH is no stranger to high-octane racing, and perhaps no southern state is more infatuated with fast machines than Alabama. Many of NASCAR's racing legends got their start at the old Birmingham International Raceway in the 1950s and '60s. Just 45 minutes from Birmingham are the Talladega Superspeedway and the International Motorsports Hall of Fame, living monuments to stock car racing.

Since its opening two years ago, a new racing facility in Birmingham has been turning heads all over the world. The Barber Motorsports Park, a European-style road racing course, has quickly gained a reputation as one of the world's finest racetracks. The track itself is 2.3 miles long and 45 feet wide, with 16 turns and 80 feet of elevation change. The surrounding land-

scape resembles a golf course, with green, grassy hillsides that provide excellent views of the action on the track. The park is located just minutes from downtown Birmingham and includes the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, a collection of more than 700 vintage and modern motorcycles, as well as a substantial collection of Lotus and other racecars.

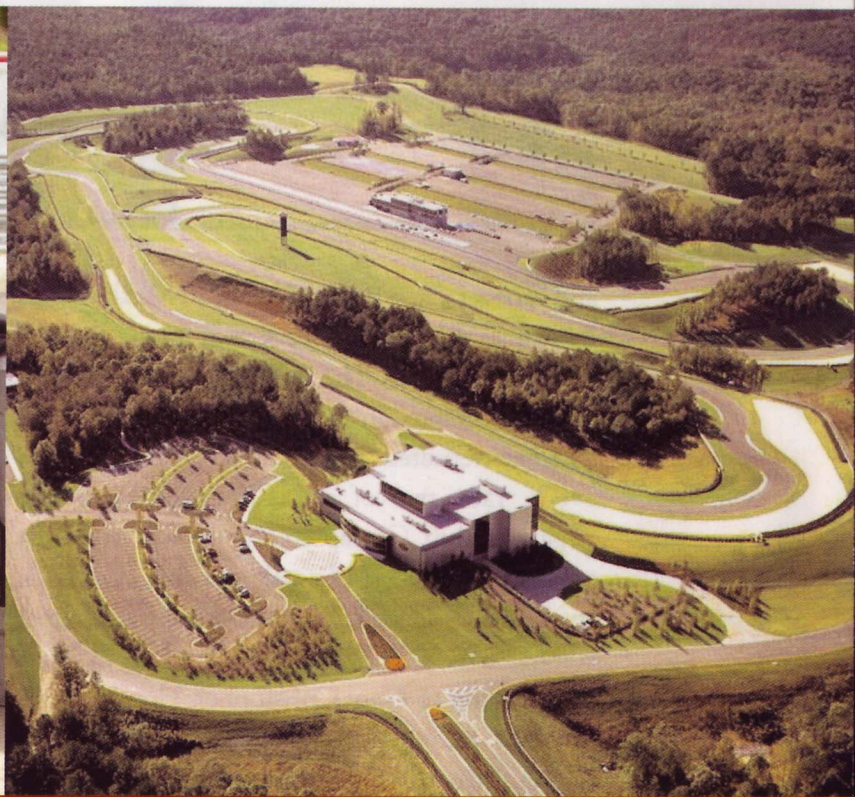
On May 14-16, 2004, the Barber Motorsports Park hosted the second annual Honda Superbike Classic, an American Motorcycle Association (AMA) event that attracted the best and the brightest motorcycle racing superstars. "As far as I'm concerned, we are standing in the absolute gemstone, and I mean that from an almost global perspective," says Bruce Porter, director of marketing and motor sports promotion for Orion Helmets, one of the world's oldest helmet manufacturers and an event sponsor.

Porter, who has been with Orion for 20 years, spends

THE FAST TRACK

Behind the scenes at the Honda Superbike Classic.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



close to half the year traveling to cities across North America. The native Californian is not only responsible for promoting Orion products, but also services helmets for all riders who use Orion helmets during an AMA event. A motorcycle enthusiast since he snuck into a local track to see his first race as a kid, Porter has seen road courses all over the world and believes Barber's rivals them all. "The museum is worth a trip halfway around the world just to see the accumulation of incredible motorcycles," says Porter. "It's truly excellent, and there's a decent sushi bar in town, too."

Everyone who talks about Barber Motorsports Park seems to have the same opinion—it is, without question, one of the premier road racing courses in existence. The track is wider than most courses, which allows for more strategic racing, which was exactly what was on tap throughout the AMA race weekend.

Up-and-coming hotshot Jake Zemke, a young, fresh-

faced Californian riding for Erion Honda, was edged out by Matt Mladin, a cagey Australian rider

for Yoshimura Suzuki, in Saturday's main event, the Chevrolet Superbike Championship. Zemke led the pack for the majority of the 28-lap race until becoming momentarily blocked by a rider one lap down. As he struggled to hold on to the lead, Mladin made his move and Zemke could only watch his lead slip away.

"I knew where he was going to make his move—it's where he'd passed me every time, going into four," Zemke says. "I knew I had to get a good drive coming up the hill from three to four. When I hit that dip in three, I lost the rear

Left to right: Miguel Duhamel trails Matt Mladin at the 2004 AMA Honda Superbike Classic; Johnny Rock Page with the CGI Direct ATM team; the Barber Motorsports Park, one of the world's best road racing facilities.



and it never came back.” He lost to Mladin by an incredible .011 of a second as a group of VIPs watching from the The Paddock Club—the park’s VIP club—erupted in stunned applause.

Zemke repeated his result in Sunday’s main event, race two of the Chevrolet Superbike Championship. On lap 20, Zemke was passed by teammate Miguel Duhamel and, his comeback stymied by “lappers,” Zemke never recovered, coming in second place for the second day in a row.

According to Gary Christopher, Honda senior manager for motorcycle press and motorcycle racing, the quality of racing at Barber Motorsports Park is due to the that fact that the course was designed to accommodate both motorcycles and automobiles, and is wider than many other tracks that host AMA events. “Here, the riders aren’t restricted to just one fast line, and they can choose many different lines through the corners, increase their speed, and reduce their lap time,” Christopher says.

This was the story all weekend—photo finishes, competitors running three-wide, and speeds approaching 130 miles-per-hour by guys (many of them kids, really) with an overwhelming passion for racing. These aren’t motorcycles as most people know them—these are 600cc *superbikes*, hauling hindquarters around the track at ridiculous speeds. And the best place to take it all in is in the infield.

The infield area of the track, called the “paddock,” is where the insider action really takes place, and almost everyone with an important

job related to the business, from bike dealersto equipment reps, have all-access passes. From here, local dealers and key players in the automotive industry, as well as their clients and sales staff, have a spectacular view of the track and the behind-the-scenes activity.

Just inside the fence from pit row is the paddock itself, where everything related to the race is set up—the winner’s podium, race control, media areas, team trucks, and sponsor booths are all located here. Access to the action surrounding the competition is an important part of the experience, and race and team sponsors take advantage of the up-close-and-personal nature of motorcycle racing in planning client and VIP hospitality.

Parts Unlimited, one of the AMA’s presenting sponsors and a sponsor of several important riders, including Jake Zemke, is a visible presence inside the paddock. On one side of their hospitality truck is a display area, where clients, dealers, and the public can take a look at equipment, gear, and even a few motorcycles. The other side is set up like a small open-air club, a place for invited guests to sit in the shade, enjoy a drink and a bite to eat, and meet Parts Unlimited riders.

For Parts Unlimited, as for most sponsors, Sunday is the biggest day for client hospitality. “We invite all the local dealers within a certain radius and we serve them lunch and cold drinks, and we have many of the riders that we support over for an autograph session,” says Alan

Left to right: Bruce Porter, director of marketing and motorsports promotion for Arai Helmets; a display of motorcycles and other merchandise in the hospitality area; spectators gather on the grassy hillsides to watch the races; Aaron Gobert (right) of the Graves Yamaha/Dunlop team talking with Les Washbon (middle), Dunlop motorsports technician, and Jim Allen (left), U.S. manager of road racing for Dunlop.



Rutherford, national marketing director for Parts Unlimited. “It makes the dealers feel like VIPs.”

This kind of close, personal contact is unmatched in any other major sport, and key decision makers and marketing strategists, such as Honda’s Christopher, know how crucial that contact is. Regarded as one of the most innovative minds in motorcycle racing, Christopher appreciates how important client entertainment and hospitality are to the growth of the sport. Above all, he understands that the majority of Honda Motorcycle dealers, representatives, and investors are fans of the sport, so it is critical that they enjoy their experience at a Honda Superbike event.

“Access is a major component,” says Christopher. “We can let the folks talk to our technicians and get more of the inside story, and they can meet our riders and talk with them in a very casual, informal setting.

They get an inside glimpse of racing that, frankly speaking, they’re simply not able to get in other kinds of racing.”

The paddock is a carnival of colorful buses, large trucks, and motorcycles, all adorned with the logos of key sponsors. The Honda team has lined up several trucks and buses down the length of the paddock, where technicians, mechanics, and riders discuss conditions, prepare bikes for competition, and suit up for an upcoming race.

“The team bus is set up as a mobile meeting room. It’s also the place where our engineers go to analyze data from different practice sessions,” Christopher explains. “It’s a great opportunity to bring clients into a special inner area that most people don’t get to see and have a business meeting with them right here at track side.”

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One company that recently became involved with the Barber Motorsports Park is Ducati of North America, another event and team sponsor, with riders such as Eric Bostrom, James Toseland, and Regis Laconi on its roster. Unlike many of the other motorcycle companies on the scene, Ducati didn’t participate in the inaugural Barber event in 2003. As a consequence, the team is still learning how to race on the track, according to Jim McKenna, national sales manager for Ducati North America.

However, even before they brought the Ducati team to Barber, McKenna says the

company already understood the importance of the facility to the marketing and selling of Ducati bikes. So much so, in fact, that the company decided to hold their annual dealer conference at Barber Motorsports Park in August, 2004. “We’re launching a new product and we want to incorporate getting out and riding the motorcycles at the meeting,” McKenna says. “There is no better environment for a Ducati than on a racetrack—they’re thoroughbred machines, and they respond the best at a location like this. We also wanted to hold our meeting somewhere everybody hasn’t been before, and having access to a world-class facility like Barber’s made our decision easier.” †