

A lap of the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix



Dave Farnsworth
dfarnsworth@roundel.org

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It is a drop in the bucket of time, a flashback to the halcyon past of legends, and a brief, brilliant chance to taste an experience that, for the most part, no longer exists: Come along for a lap through Schenley Park—one of the few remaining street courses open to the grass-roots racer!

Leaving the gratefully shaded false grid in an explosion of vintage cacophony, a symphony of ancient iron, your peripheral vision catches the brilliant palette of spectators lining the roadway, reduced to brief swatches of color as you accelerate by. What lies ahead is the grooved, striped, crowned, occasionally bumpy, crumbling, multi-lane surface of an urban street. Unforgiving curbs—some visible, some lurking under tufts of overgrown grass—line every inch of the park lane, a leisurely path, curving lazily through verdant woods, a relaxing drive for 363 days a year.

But for two days a year, this road sprouts hay bales, sawhorses, and nearly two dozen corner stations as it morphs into a race course, one calling up memories of the original Watkins Glen or Elkhart Lake, where the legends of your youth slung over-powered, under-tired machines—with temperamental and woefully inadequate brakes—down streets designed for much tamer traffic.

This is the annual Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix in Schenley Park.

As you leave the false grid, the long, wide uphill straight lulls you into a “piece of cake” sense—yes, it’s a street; there’s a speed-limit sign you ignore, and double-yellow lines you cross with impunity and glee. Cresting the hill toward the end of the straight, you encounter the tight second-gear—maybe even first—haybale-demarked chicane and pooh-pooh the whole nannyness of it all.

Powering out of the chicane, you straighten out a lazy two-lane zig-zag onto the bridge. Off its high concrete walls lies a valley; a roll cage might not be much help against the momentum gained in that four-story drop! On the bridge, however, your only thought is setting up for the closest thing to a high-speed sweeper on the course. A third of the way through that fast right-hander, you must manage a colony of bumps and pavement patches as your car jitters across them—a super-stiff suspension is not your friend here. Now head full-throttle into the wide, fairly flat final bit of the turn, sweeping right through the stop sign on the corner, foot mashed to the floor, heading toward the forest.

So far the course has been four lanes wide and fairly flat, camber not being much of an issue, but an acute second-gear uphill right-hander shoots you into the more intimidating part of the

lap; here the pavement, cosseted by trees, slims to a claustrophobic, heavily crowned, narrow, winding two-lane course uphill toward a two-foot roughhewn sandstone wall, mottled with a decades-old coating of lichen.

Beyond that stunted barrier are the tops of old-growth trees. You don’t really see them as you hug the inside of the long, curving left-hand bend, where as your car takes a set, it’s very tempting to tip the accelerator—but two-thirds of the way across the pavement, the camber drops abruptly, and that stone wall sits firmly a few feet past the curbing. Would the wall keep you from flipping down to the base of those trees, or just provide a bit of trajectory? Maybe it’s best not to tempt it.

After modulating the throttle and steering wheel through the sweeper that widens, tightens, then widens again and seems to go on forever, you pop out into the sunlight. The road weaves back and forth among ancient, sturdy old trees, each fronted by a single hay bale. The dappled stone wall reappears on your right, and what the organizers refer to as the Serpentine arrives. This right-left combo, essentially a pair of U-turns, is so tight that you just glimpse the apexes with your peripheral vision, and as you complete the final left U-turn, you can see corner workers literally a few feet away through the driver’s side window.

The road again unwinds and heads downhill. After the agonizingly slow Serpentine section, you upshift and go full throttle for the lazy S ahead—but take care; this corner has eaten a lot of competitors as the road dips—decreased traction, you know—away to the left, and your car wants to drift to the very off-camber right side of the road.

Keeping things under control, you swing right down the short start-finish-line stretch, slightly touch the brakes before the very fast bear right—through a blinking traffic signal—drift left, but not enough to clip the temporary Jersey barrier at the end the turn’s track-out, and power back onto the straight that began this whole 22-turn, 2.1-mile urban road course.

Driving Schenley Park, aside from being an incredible rare experience, provides a visceral sense of what road-racing was like in its earliest days. In the park, the organizers and racers all say the same thing: This is a unique opportunity to be part of a yearly celebration of racing’s heritage, best experienced at a seven-tenths pace.

But it also gives you an insight into the talent, courage and luck that it took to survive and excel in a sport that often turned deadly when the driving ratcheted to ten-tenths, an unforgettable voyage back in time.