



## F1 Circuits Past and Present – Watkins Glen

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Hello and welcome, you are listening to F1 Circuits - a mini series from Sidepodcast. So far throughout this series we've covered a variety of tracks that have been and still are on the F1 calendar. Today we're looking at a country that is woefully under-represented on the calendar at the moment. The US Grand Prix may have a future in F1, but for now we're looking at it's past at Watkins Glen.

The story begins with a lawyer and sports car enthusiast called Cameron Argetsinger. He used to visit his summer holiday home in the Watkins Glen area of New York, and decided it would be an appropriate place to hold a race. He talked to the local government, and got the necessary approval so that in 1948 the first Watkins Glen Grand Prix could be held.

The street circuit was almost 11 kilometres long, and went right through the centre of the town. Spectators would line the streets, cheering on their favourite drivers. As you can imagine, it wasn't long before an accident occurred. In 1952, a spectator was killed and the prospect of the Grand Prix was reimaged.

Instead of a street circuit, the racing moved to a dedicated track south of the town. The length was drastically shortened - initially using existing streets for a 7 and a half kilometre jaunt, but cut down further when the permanent circuit was installed - now just under 4k. The original street track in Watkins Glen became a listed property on the National Register of Historic Places .

Formula One came to Watkins Glen in 1961. The previous two years, the US Grand Prix had been held in Florida and then California, but both had been rather muted events. The track was prepared for an international level race, as they were anticipating Formula Libre, but it was still a challenge when they were given just six weeks to get ready for F1 to arrive.

The track proved immensely popular and the weekend was a success - made even more so by the fact that no less than seven American drivers took part. One of them, Dan Gurney, finished second, so the fans were happy. Thus began Watkins Glen's twenty year occupation on the F1 Calendar - all the way through to 1980. It's high prize money and challenging circuit made it very popular, and it won a few awards for best organisation as well.

The track was not left unchanged, as safety improvements gradually crept into the sport, so the Glen had to accommodate them. In 1971, the track was extended with four brand new corners, whilst also being resurfaced and widened in places. These changes helped to an extent but as Formula One got faster, so the circuit couldn't keep up. The kerbing in particular was seen as a problem.

In 1973, Francois Cevert was killed during Saturday practice, after hitting a kerb and crashing heavily into the barriers. The high-profile incident raised more safety concerns, but it was for financial reasons that the circuit was eventually taken off the calendar. Reports suggest that organisers had not managed to pay debts to the teams - some saying it was close to \$1 million owed.

The US Grand Prix took a break, and returned in Pheonix and later Indianapolis. It is currently off the calendar, although plans are underway to see it return. Watkins Glen fell into disrepair for a while, until the International Speedway Corporation bought the track from Argetsinger and began to restore it.

The ISC welcomed all kinds of racing, including NASCAR, Can-Am, the International Race of Champions plus Champ Car and Indy Car.



In 2007, a fire destroyed one of the hospitality buildings that contained a lot of original artwork and motorsport memorabilia. Although they could not be replaced, building works were commenced with a brand new media centre recently completed. NASCAR celebrated the 50th anniversary of their debut at the Glen in 2007, and that race was voted the best of the year by Sports Illustrated. In 2008, it was the 60th anniversary of the first ever Watkins Glen race, on the original circuit. Although no longer in Formula One, there's so much history on this track that it will forever be a favourite.

That's all for this episode. We've got just one more track to look at tomorrow, and it's a good one. Please leave your thoughts about any of the locations we've visited so far over on Sidepodcast.com, and join me tomorrow for the final F1 Circuits episode.

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