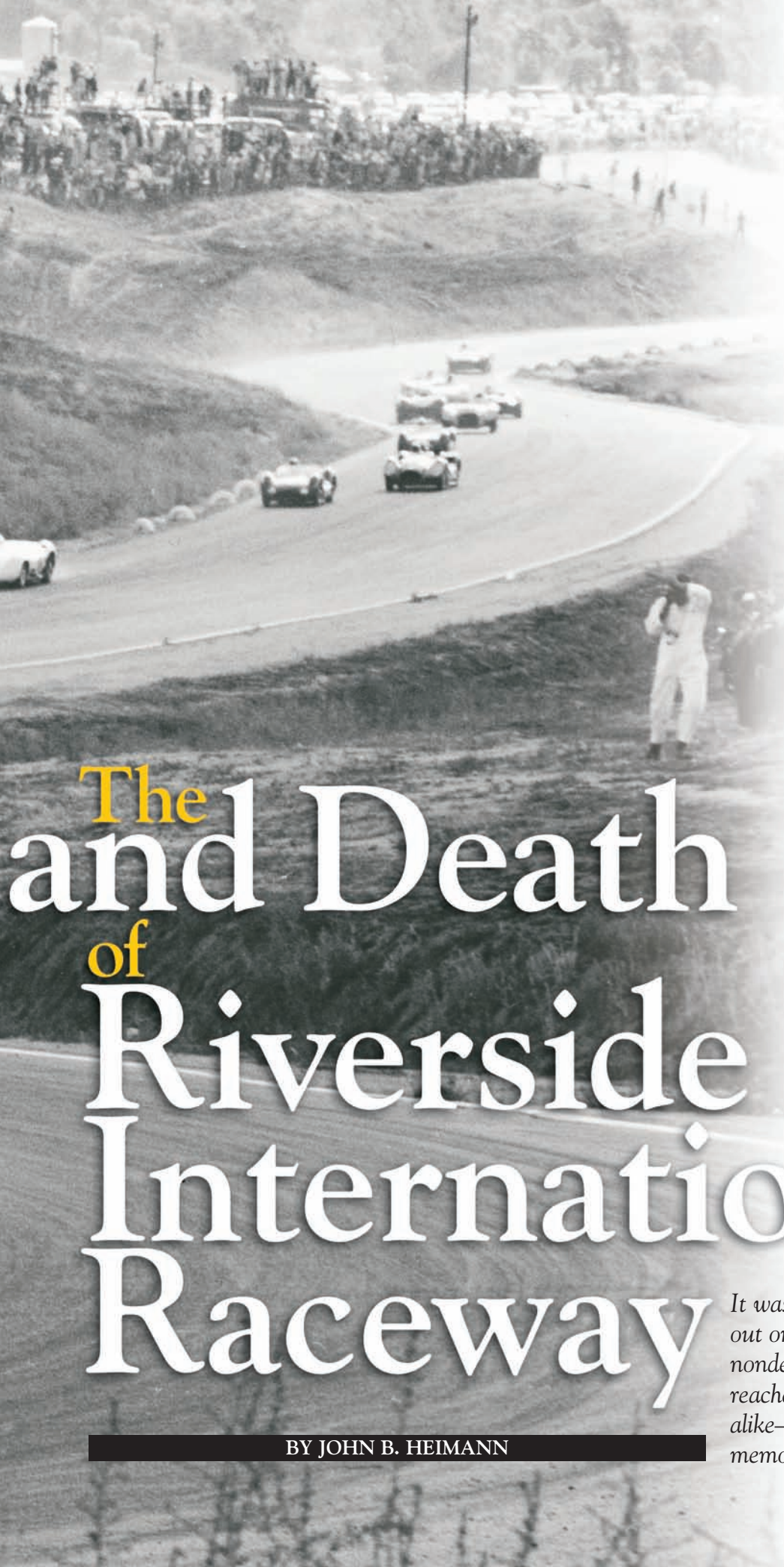


Life

Through Riverside's tricky, trademark esses, Dan Gurney leads Stirling Moss—both in Lotus 19s—while eventual winner Billy Krause in a Maserati T-61 keeps the pressure on in the October, 1960 L.A. Times Grand Prix.



This is the first of a two-part series on Riverside Raceway. Part 1 covers the birth and development of the track, its growth through the 1960s and up to 1970.

Before its birth, it was a turkey farm. Upon its demise, it became a shopping mall. But, between 1957 and 1988, thunderous machines from every one of America's premier racing series ripped through the desert air of Southern California at Riverside International Raceway. And the greatest drivers in the world would lay rubber to pavement at what was once the western United States' pre-eminent road circuit. Along the way, legends were born and stories written.

Riverside was and still is the only race course in the U.S. that can lay claim to having hosted Can-Am, F5000, Formula 1, IMSA GT, Indy car, IROC, NASCAR, NHRA drag racing, many forms of off-road racing, Trans-Am—even motorcycle, sprint and midget events.

Riverside carries with it a mystique that few racetracks, whether still in existence or long since gone, can claim to possess. "I think a couple of things contribute to the mystique," says Sam Posey, who raced Riverside in a whole variety of cars from the late '60s to the late '70s. "One, frankly, is the grandeur of the layout. You had turns at Riverside that were very distinctive. They had their own quality and character. As tough as anything, but unlike turns you found anywhere else in racing. You also had great history. There were some wonderful stock car races, especially through the '60s. The origins of the Can-Am happened right there. And you had those great, old hybrid cars like Ol' Yaller racing against the exotics from Europe—Billy Krause in a Birdcage Maserati—Phil Hill in a big Ferrari."

Riverside had an imagery that was unmistakable—from its trademark esses to tires painted white,

The and Death of Riverside International Raceway

It was distinct because of where it was, out on the edge of the desert near a nondescript town. Riverside's mystique reached to the core of racer and spectator alike—its layout magical and its races memorable.

BY JOHN B. HEIMANN

buried half in the ground, which for so many years acted as curbing in nearly every corner. Then there were the winds that blew across the desert, oftentimes creating a thin layer of sandy dust across the track's asphalt surface. And, of course, there was the racing. For those who experienced Riverside, their recollected memories are a vivid reminder of how special a couple of miles of asphalt can be.

Riverside, in its prime, was arguably the United States' most recognizable road course name. Yet, as popular as Riverside would eventually become, the building of the raceway almost never happened.

No Place to Race

During the 1950s, Los Angeles was fast becoming the car capital of the U.S. Car clubs flourished all over the Southland. However, the lack of a quality, permanent racing venue was a frustration for SoCal road racers and racing fans alike. Willow Springs Raceway was completed in 1953, but was woefully inadequate for professional racing with virtually no facilities and an uncomfortably rough racing surface.

Les Richter, who managed Riverside from the early '60s to 1982, recalls, "At that period, all types of racing were in demand, but road racing was especially popular."

"It was the heyday of the automobile. The car was still man's best friend," adds Dan Gurney, who dominated Riverside in nearly every type of car he raced in. "Before Riverside, there wasn't anything else near Los Angeles. You had some small tracks—Pomona, Torrey Pines near San Diego, Paramount Ranch, Palm Springs and Santa Barbara, but none of them had prestige."

This void had piqued the interest of several entrepreneurial racing enthusiasts during the mid-'50s. Indeed, two separate, multi-million dollar road courses to be developed in the Ontario, Calif., area in 1956 were in the early planning stages. Ultimately, however, those two deals would collapse. Yet, the dream of a raceway in Southern California would not die.

Enter Rudy Cleye. Cleye was a restaurateur and a winning amateur racer who had been involved in the California Sports Car Club (Cal Club) and the Southern California road-racing scene for years. He owned a successful restaurant in Los Angeles, the Grand Prix, which attracted many from the racing crowd. Cleye had in fact been linked with one of the two proposed courses in Ontario.

Near the end of 1956, Cleye formed the International Motor Raceway Association with the goal of bringing Formula 1 to Southern California. A 640-acre parcel of land was purchased in the desert 60 miles east of Los Angeles and Cleye announced his intentions of building Riverside International Raceway. As president of the new association, Cleye negotiated with Riverside County's board of supervisors and gained a building permit to begin construction of a track in the town of Edgemont.

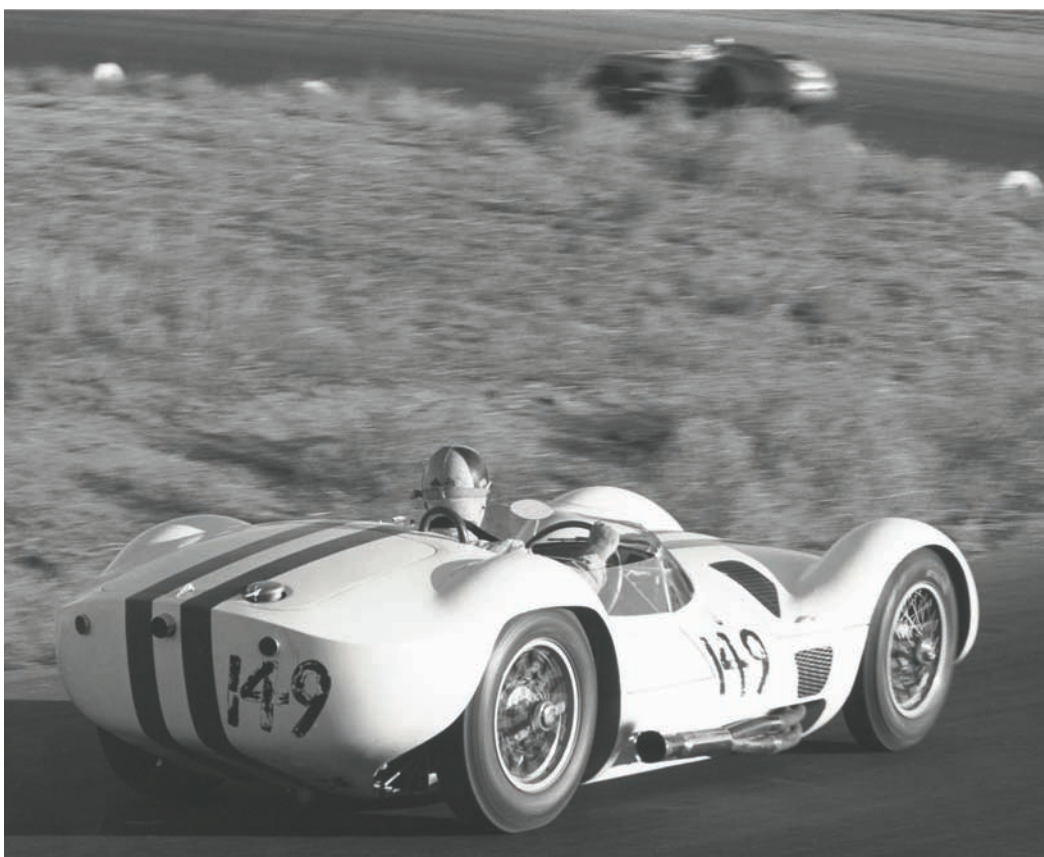
Cleye hired James E. Peterson, another successful Cal Club racer, to design the track and William L. Duquette to be the architect. Peterson's design was inspired by the great European tracks. "I would say

that the European tracks tend to have characteristics that are distinctive of where they are," remarks Sam Posey. "In that sense, (Peterson) achieved something. The track is very abstract and the desert is very abstract when you think about it. And no matter where you viewed the racing from, you sensed the speed. The cars really dominated your senses there."

Peterson smartly incorporated multiple configuration possibilities with long straights and connectors that allowed for various road course and circle track lengths. This at once meant the circuit could host circle track races, drag races and road racing events, including endurance races and club races.



Left: Only a typically smoggy July afternoon in 1959, Jim Jeffords flogs the famous "Purple People Eater" Corvette at the Kiwanis GP. Below: Bob Drake approaches Turn 7 in his Maserati Birdcage during a Cal Club Regional in Dec. '59.





Above: Phil Hill in a one-off Ferrari 412 battles Chuck Daigh's Scarab during the L.A. Times GP in Oct. '58. Hill DNF'd while Daigh won. Below: Riverside's early race programs are sought-after collectibles today.



What was planned was a nine-turn primary road course of 3.275 miles in length with an additional two-mile road course configuration at the northeast edge of the property that could be incorporated into the main road course for endurance races or used as a separate circuit, intended for club races. Circle track configurations of one-half mile, three quarters of a mile and one mile were designed, each of which used Turn 9 as the south turn. The pits were located on the outside of the track exiting Turn 9 on the start/finish straight.

Although Cleye had the funding to buy the land and have the course laid out on paper, he didn't have the money to begin construction. Unfortunately, Cleye was required to begin building within 90 days of issuance of the permit.

As luck would have it, one of Cleye's regular restaurant patrons, John Edgar, the colorful son of an Ohio-based industrialist, was a racing fanatic who had just come into a substantial inheritance. Edgar had been involved in racing for some years, mostly as a benefactor to various drivers, including Jack McAfee and Carroll Shelby. With \$100,000 in rescue funding from

Edgar, Cleye began construction of the raceway. According to John's son, Bill, the initial investment for building the track was just under \$500,000. And so Riverside was born.

However, what was planned and what was actually built were two different things. The two-mile course, intended for the northeast section of the track, never came to fruition due to financial constraints. Only a 5/8-of-a-mile long circle track was built, rather than the three planned. But the nine-turn, 3.275-mile road course came to be in the summer of 1957. It was a wide-open race driver's dream. A connector between Turns 6 and 8 allowed the course to be shortened to 2.6 miles. It was quick, too, with a long 1.1-mile back straight that led to the 180-degree final turn. This backstretch was also ideal for drag racing, which also would find a home at Riverside for many years.

"There were rumors that Riverside was going to be built," remembers Dan Gurney. "I used to go out there on my motorcycle and follow the bulldozers around as they were flattening what would become the circuit. As it actually started to turn into

reality, well, it was a dream come true. Here it was in my hometown and I had visions of sugarplums and I felt so lucky, like this was going to be a steppingstone to be able to become a professional race car driver.”

It's rare when one driver becomes inextricably linked to a single track; that a driver's performance at one course is so consistently outstanding that you can't think of one without the other. A.J. Foyt and Indianapolis come to mind. So too does Richard Petty and Daytona. Dan Gurney and Riverside are linked in this way. Gurney proved over and over that he could win at Riverside in any kind of car on any given day. And win he did, in NASCAR stock cars, champ cars, and sports cars.

Gurney's parents had moved to the area in 1947, purchasing a small orange grove and settling in. Gurney's first race was at Torrey Pines in a modified TR2 and his first win would come at Paramount Ranch in December 1957 in Frank Arciero's 4.9 Ferrari, both in Southern California.

“I ended up getting some of my biggest

breaks for my own personal career at Riverside,” says Gurney. “I drove Cal Bailey's Corvette and won a race there and because of that, I ended up driving Frank Arciero's 4.9 Ferrari. That got me noticed by Luigi Chinetti in New York, who watched all the Ferrari results.” The rest, as they say, is history.

The first race at Riverside, a Cal Club event, was held September 21 and 22 of 1957. Some 250 entries were received and a huge crowd of nearly 30,000 spectators turned out to christen the track. That first weekend had a bit of everything. Sadly, John Lawrence was killed that first day of racing when his MGA flipped near the end of the esses. Gurney got his win in the Corvette. And Richie Ginther, driving a Ferrari owned by none other than John Edgar, would pull off the win in Sunday's main event.

Jack Brabham had already sewn up the second of his World Championship driving titles when he raced a factory Cooper the U.S. Grand Prix in Nov. 1960.



*Above: Stirling Moss won the 1960 USGP convincingly in Rob Walker's Lotus 18.
Left: Moss seems to be thinking, "I'll just clock Big Dan to make sure he doesn't pip me for pole."
Right: Dan Gurney seems resigned to the fact that his BRM P48 won't last to the finish at Riverside's USGP.*





Left: In Oct. '60, towing all the way from Pa. came No. 83, Peter Ryan; No. 6, Roger Penske and No. 14, Bob Holbert—a well-prepared Porsche team for the Times GP.

Below: It's Oct. '64 at the Times race and Paul Reinhart's Genie MkVIII leads Jim Adams, Ed Leslie, Jack Brabham, Ken Miles, Trevor Taylor and Allen Grant.



Left: Drag races were held on Riverside's long straightaway, just north of Turn 9. Here Connie Kalitta's "Bounty Hunter" SOHC Ford Top Fueler (left) blasts off against the Radar Wheels machine on June 20, 1965 at Hot Rod Magazine's big annual to-do.



Riverside subsisted mostly on club races, sprint and midget car events throughout 1957 and the early part of 1958. But subsist was about all the track did, until the fall of 1958, when Riverside put together the one event that would turn everything around for the raceway and have a far reaching impact on sports car racing in the U.S.

The L.A. Times Grand Prix

"What made Riverside was the L.A. Times Grand Prix," Les Richter says emphatically.

In the late '50s and early '60s, professional sports car racing was in its embryonic stages. Prior to 1958, a number of attempts had been made to run professional sports car events, but with little success. The SCCA, the country's most popular sports car sanctioning body, was strictly an amateur club at this time and refused to sully its reputation by allowing members to take prize money for racing. However, the Cal Club, which would ultimately merge with the SCCA in December 1961, was more powerful than the SCCA in Southern California and had plenty of members chomping at the bit to run in a pro race. Riverside pushed ahead with its plans for a race in the fall of 1958, unsure of how many drivers and teams would enter. The track brought in the United States Auto Club and the Cal Club to sanction the event.

What Riverside's first pro race had going for it was one of the biggest newspapers in the country as the event sponsor. "The Los Angeles area was growing immensely," recalls Deke Houlgate, one-time PR man for Riverside. "So was the automobile business. The Los Angeles Times had a vested interest in promoting its image with the car dealers and manufacturers for advertising purposes. And the reason Riverside and the Times got together was because of a guy named Bill Dredge." Dredge, a car nut, ran the automotive section of the paper.

When Otis Chandler, marketing manager of the Times, was approached by Riverside to sponsor the event, he went to Dredge for his opinion. Dredge believed it would be an asset to the automotive section to have visibility at a sports car racing event. Chandler put Paul Schissler and Glenn Davis, former standout running back for Army's once dominant football team, in charge of promoting the event.

Thanks to the newspaper's powerful reach, the crowds for the L.A. Times Grand Prix sports car races during the late '50s and early '60s were remarkable. Les Richter estimated attendance at between 50,000 and 75,000 each year.

The entry list for the first event was huge. Despite SCCA warnings to its members that anyone participating in the Riverside race risked expulsion, plenty of amateur drivers signed up. So successful was the 1958 event with 70,000 fans in attendance (won by Chuck Daigh in a Scarab MKII), the SCCA relented and allowed its members to participate in the race the following year. Over the next several years the field would be filled with the biggest names in sports car racing: Jack Brabham, Jim Clark, Masten Gregory, Jim Hall, Phil Hill, Innes Ireland, Bruce McLaren, Stirling Moss, Roger Penske, Hap Sharp, Carroll Shelby, John Surtees and, of course, Dan Gurney, to name but a few. And the races featured most, if not all, of the best sports cars ever built.

Riverside's first attempt at running NASCAR stock cars also came in 1958. Unfortunately, the initial foray into stock car racing was less than the blockbuster success the L.A. Times Grand Prix was.

Bill France Sr., whose reputation as the tough-nosed head of NASCAR was in the process of being built, created a ruckus at his sanctioning body's first Riverside event, the Crown America 500 on Memorial weekend. At the time, stock car racing's appeal was limited mostly to the southeastern U.S.

The weekend's big draw was three 500-mile events—the first, a sprint car race held on Friday. The midget and stock car races were left for the latter part of the weekend. While a huge crowd showed up Friday to watch the sprint cars, few showed up for the weekend's other attractions. France had urged the promoters, Galard Sloanaker and Charles Curryer, to run the stock car race the same day as the sprints, but they refused. France showed up in person to collect the guaranteed prize money, in cash, and held up the start of the race until the money could be collected from the various gates. While France got his money, the promoters and the track took a bath on the weekend to the tune of about \$50,000. Parnelli Jones' '56 Ford sat on the pole and led 147 laps until he crashed in Turn 6. Eddie Gray was the eventual winner.

Changing Players

The famous saying coined by Briggs Cunningham, "How do you make a small fortune in auto racing? You start out with a large one," could apply just as easily to John Edgar and his investment position in Riverside. Edgar quickly tired of the continued losses and in 1960, sold his

interest to the investment syndicate of R.G. Lewis, Ernest Johnson, Don Ford and Dean Mears and "was damn lucky to get his money back," said Bill Edgar recently. Eventually a real estate investment group run by oilman and L.A. Rams team owner Ed Pauley with partners Fred Levy and entertainer Bob Hope

Right: Racing on to his fourth straight win in the Riverside 500 in January 1966, Dan Gurney speeds through Turn 8 in a Wood Brothers-prepared Ford. In '67, Ford politics moved him to a Bud Moore Mercury Comet, but a blown engine ended his day.



became involved. Several years later, Pauley, Levy and Hope stepped in to run the entire operation.

Les Richter played for the L.A. Rams football team from 1954 to 1962. In addition to his on-the-field responsibilities, Richter oversaw a number of real estate properties owned by Pauley, Levy and Hope. "One day, they told me Riverside was my baby. It was my responsibility to try to solve the problems the track was having. That was the beginning of a great time in my life," Richter explains.

What Richter inherited was a mismanaged mess. With an absence of big-time auto racing at Riverside, save for the L.A. Times GP, it's a miracle the track survived. "There were a couple of years there where we used to read the profit and loss statement upside down so the parentheses would always be at the top," says Richter. NASCAR stock cars didn't race at Riverside from '59 to '63. Drag racing, just becoming a big time professional sport in the late '50s and early '60s, was not profitable for the track at this time.

"We had a lot of assistance during those early days to keep things together," explains Richter. "The California Sports Car Club was very instrumental. They ran many club events there. We also did a lot of automobile testing for the big manufacturers."

Despite the track's financial struggles, management was able to attract the

Formula 1 circus in November of 1960 with hopes the prestige of the international event would attract fans. Stirling Moss won the only United States Grand Prix to ever be run at Riverside. Despite the coup for the track, the Grand Prix drew only 5000 spectators, far fewer than expected.

With financial support from the new owners and the revenue generated from the L.A. Times Grand Prix, Richter was able to put things in order and get through to 1963 which would prove to be a keystone year in the history of Riverside.

Stockers to the Rescue

With NASCAR's popularity on the rise, Les Richter realized a regular NASCAR event was essential to the survival of the track. Despite the earlier problems, Richter was able to negotiate with NASCAR's France for the stock cars to return to Riverside for not one, but three events in 1963. A 500-miler (sponsored by *Motor Trend* magazine) was run in January, a 400-miler in November and a regional 250-mile event held in between in May.

The pits were moved from the outside of the track that year to the inside to make access to the garages easier. The January NASCAR race included drivers from USAC, NASCAR and the SCCA. A.J. Foyt, Troy Ruttman and Dan Gurney lined up alongside NASCAR regulars Fireball Roberts and Joe Weatherly. With a crowd of more than 50,000 looking on, Dan Gurney's familiarity with Riverside and his pure driving talent paid off with a win. Gurney would go on to win three more 500-milers, running his string of consecutive victories to four and added another win in 1968.

When asked what he considered his greatest memory of Riverside, Gurney

doesn't hesitate, "That series of stock car victories. The thrill of running with the Wood Brothers when they were in their prime—that was just a very rare opportunity and it was enormously rewarding and enjoyable."

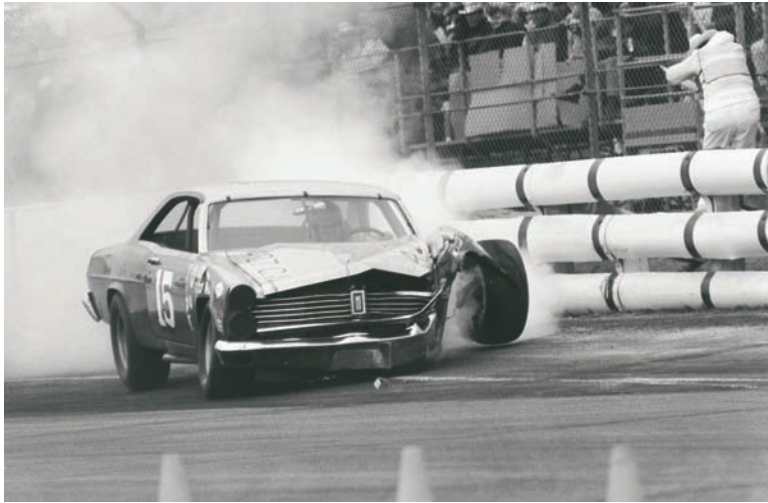
Suddenly, Riverside had two big events to bookend each season, both of which

drew big crowds and top name drivers. The track had momentum. The arrangement the track had with Petersen Publishing for the Motor Trend 500 NASCAR event would extend to NHRA drag racing in 1964. The Hot Rod Magazine Championship Drag Races ran six years through 1969 before the now defunct

Ontario Motor Speedway convinced the NHRA to run the Supnationals event at its facility late the following year. Though the drag races never drew anywhere near the number of spectators the sports car or stock car events did, they still helped the track expand operations and get them to the next benchmark year in the track's history—1966.

Riverside became one of the premier venues in the United States for showcasing the modified formula sports cars and was largely responsible for the sport's growth. As this class of racing, popular with drivers, manufacturers and fans alike, took hold, the SCCA formed a separate championship sanctioning body, the United States Road Racing Championship. The USRRC ran a limited slate of races, running at Riverside once a year from 1964 to 1968.

However, when John Bishop and Jim Kaser took over leadership of the SCCA, they realized the importance of adding professional racing series to the SCCA's activities. SCCA Pro Racing was born and



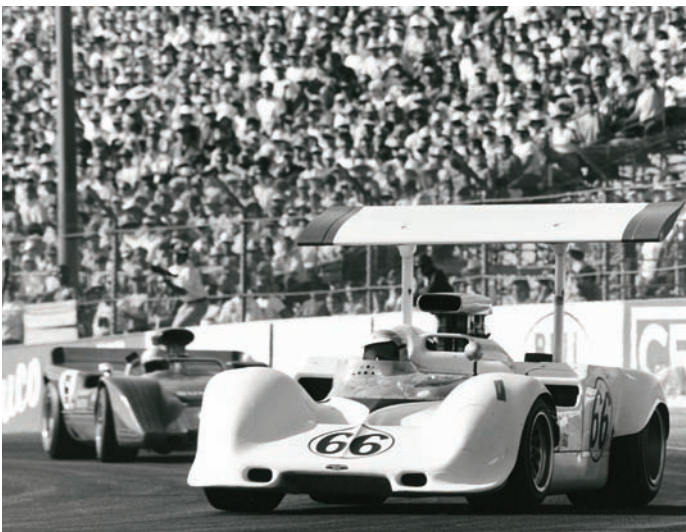
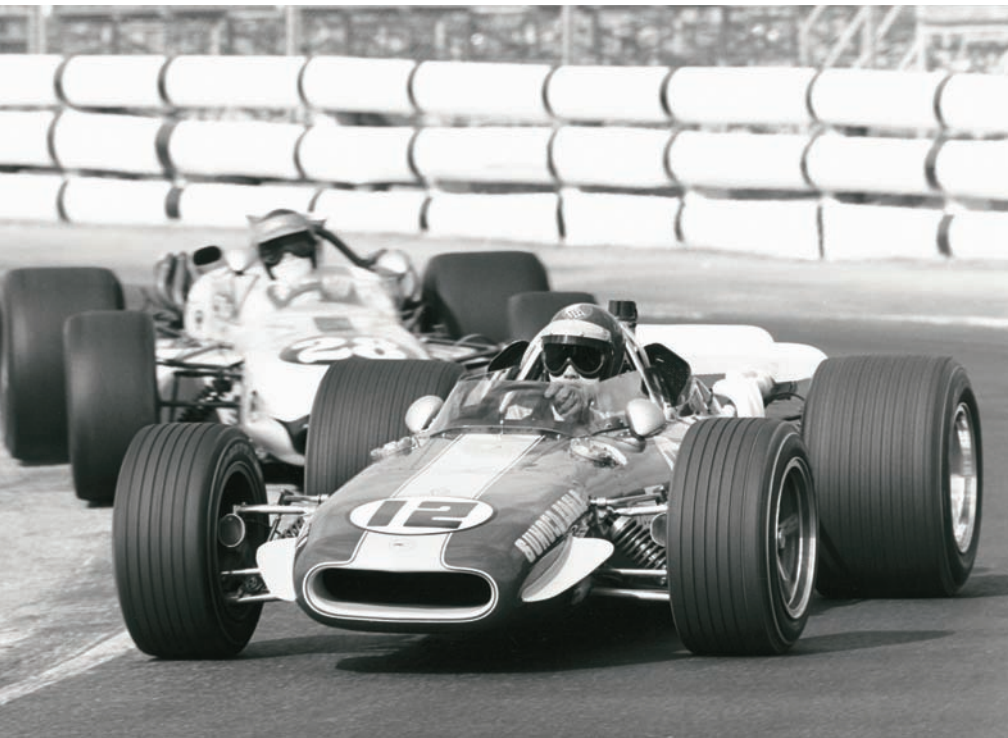
Left: Curtis Turner clobbers the Turn 6 wall on Lap 15 after losing his brakes during the Jan. '67 Motor Trend 500.

Below: Parnelli Jones (No. 115) and Dan Gurney battle through Turn 6 in the same race—Jones going on to win with Gurney 14th after a blown engine.





Left: Dan Gurney and his Eagle are greeted by his father and a host of well-wishers in Victory Lane after winning the USAC Rex Mays 300 on Nov. 26, 1967. Below: Mark Donohue couldn't best winner Dan Gurney during the 1968 running of the Rex Mays 300.



Left: Big Banger American sports car racing was always at its best at Riverside. On Oct. 27, '68, Jim Hall's Chaparral 2G leads Mark Donohue's McLaren M6B in Turn 6. At the finish, they reversed the order as both chased winner Bruce McLaren home.

in 1966 they launched the Canadian American Challenge Cup. The rules were essentially the same as those used in the USRRC; however, the Can-Am series boasted what was at the time one of the biggest sponsorship deals ever announced in racing. The S.C. Johnson Company contributed a then-unheard-of \$25,000 in championship points funding.

Participating tracks added \$5,000. With additional race purses of around \$30,000 per event (that went up as the years went on), the Can-Am was suddenly the second richest series in the U.S., behind the Indy cars. This helped Can-Am draw many of the top names in racing worldwide and speed the popularity of the series.

The L.A. Times sponsorship fell to the Can-Am cars and, "It was the biggest draw we had at the time," says Les Richter. For eight glorious years, the Can-Am cars streaked through the desert, pushed by the seemingly untamable horsepower of the dominant Chevrolet engine, until the SCCA announced rules changes in 1973. The Can-Am cars would not run at Riverside for three years beginning in 1974.

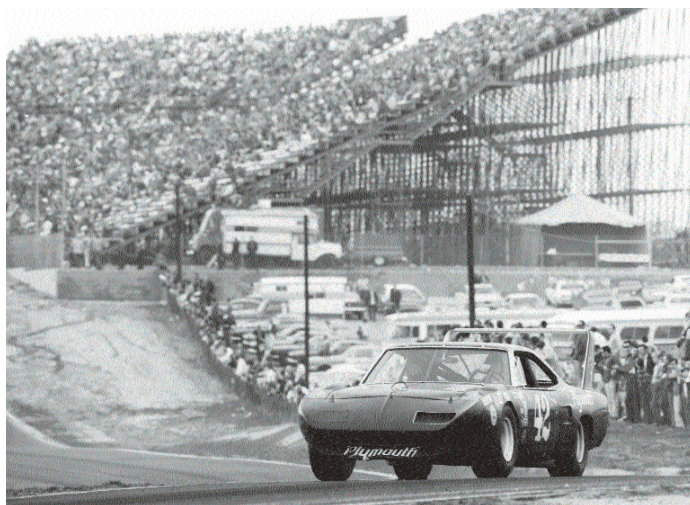
Bishop and Kaser also understood the importance of creating a professional sedan series that could take advantage of the booming pony car market, driven largely by the Ford Mustang's huge commercial success. Thus, the Trans-American Sedan Championship was born. The Trans-Am cars ran at Riverside from '66 through '71 and would return for several events years later. In '66 and then from '69 through '71, the Riverside Trans-Am was the track's last race of the year. Riverside would be the manufacturers' championship decider in '69 (in favor of Chevrolet) and the exclamation point on one of the most thrilling Trans-Am seasons ever—1970.

Though the championship for drivers wasn't formally established by the SCCA until 1971, for all intents and purposes, one existed. To this day, SCCA record books contain drivers' championship points for those early years. The unofficial battle for the 1970 title was between Mark Donohue in a Penske Javelin and Parnelli Jones in a Bud Moore-prepared Ford Mustang.

Donohue had a slight edge over Jones coming into the Riverside race. Early in the race, Jones' car was heavily damaged on the right side when he made contact with a backmarker. "I dropped back to ninth," explains Parnelli Jones "The car was understeering real bad. It was especially bad in Turn 2 at Riverside, but they had this curbing on the inside of the



Above: Vic Elford's Chaparral 2J was on the pole for the Nov. 1970 running of the Times GP. Denny Hulme won in the No. 5 McLaren M8D. Left: Dan Gurney finished sixth in a Petty Enterprises Plymouth for his last run in a NASCAR event, the Jan. '70 Motor Trend 500.



turn and so I'd hit it and get my car up on two wheels so it would turn. I've seen pictures of the car with the wheels two or three feet off the ground. I managed to get back up through the field and catch George Follmer, who was leading the race. I had a real battle with him. He finally missed a shift and I got by. If I had to pick one, I'd say that was the best race I ever drove."

That final Trans-Am event of 1970, the Mission Bell 200, was also the race where Dan Gurney would announce his retirement as an active driver. It was most appropriate that Gurney would run his final race at the same track where he started his brilliant career. He finished fifth in an AAR Plymouth Barracuda behind teammate Swede Savage.

USAC Champ Cars

Another feather in the cap of Les Richter and Riverside came with the addition of the Indy cars in 1967. The champ cars hadn't run in Southern California in nearly 20 years. With the Indy cars, Riverside could now claim to have racing events from all of America's top racing series.

The USAC Champ cars ran their season ender at Riverside for three years straight. Dan Gurney would win the first two in '67 and '68 and Mario Andretti would pull off a win at the end of his sparkling 1969 season. Gurney calls his '67 Champ car win one of his greatest, "That was a real Hollywood script kind of thing." Gurney had to make an extra pit stop due to a punctured tire. He made up a huge

deficit and pulled out the win against drivers likes Jimmy Clark and John Surtees.

Though the Champ cars were arguably the top series in the U.S., the Riverside event didn't bring in enough fans to justify the relatively large purses. "They wanted too much money for what the event drew," Richter says of USAC. The 25.5-million-dollar Ontario Motor Speedway was being built and could host a Champ car race in 1970. As they had done with the NHRA, Ontario seduced USAC away from Riverside.

Surprisingly, the F5000 series, which came to Riverside for the first time in 1969, drew crowds that were nearly as strong as the Indy car crowds. The smaller purses for the race and fresh, young up-and-coming talent proved a successful combination for everyone involved.

From the late '60s through early '70s, Riverside's owners made a huge investment in facility improvements. "We put about a million and a half dollars in Riverside, which was a lot of money back then," says Richter. "We did some repaving, added permanent grandstands and eventually a media center atop the grandstand at the start/finish line. But, we did manage to get the Goodyear tower for only a dollar. It was at Los Angeles International Airport and it was like an erector set. We took it down, put it on a truck, took it out to the racetrack and put it up at the start/finish line. Later we moved it to the esses where the whole track could be seen better." A left-hand kink was created at the end of the backstretch that made Turn 9 a longer, sweeping turn, instead of the hairpin it had originally been.

As the 1970s dawned, motorsports was entering a tumultuous time. The pony car market was dying. The U.S. automakers were struggling and their investment in racing dwindled.

Riverside hosted its last professional drag race in 1969. The Champ cars left the same year, not to return for another 12 years. Trans-Am and Can-Am were on the verge of huge troubles that would threaten the existence of both series. Yet Riverside, which had come so far in just over a dozen years, would not only weather the tough storms, the track would flourish. The raceway still had NASCAR and F5000 and the L.A. Times continued its important sponsorship of the annual fall race.

In the next issue, the second half of our two-part series picks up in 1971 and follows the ups and downs of Riverside's remarkable history to the closing of the track in 1988.