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## Going to the Glen

Realizing a childhood dream, our Editor-at-Large Egan laps at the playground of Gilles.

By Peter Egan



Going To The Glen

Peter Egan And Phipps Photographic

With the I-Pass transponder resting on the dash of our blue Econoline van, the tollgates of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania had opened magically and let us pass, all but scattering rose petals in our path, and now we were in western New York, with the hardwood forests of the Finger Lakes region in spectacular fall color.

It was a beautiful autumn morning and we were on our way from Wisconsin to a village called **Watkins Glen** at the south end of Seneca Lake. As Barb and I drove along, our spare Hewland gears jingled softly like silver spurs in their flat wooden box, and my new/used vintage black 1978 Crossle 32F Formula Ford rolled smoothly along on the trailer behind us.

After a 16-year layoff from racing, I'd raced this car for the first time just three weeks earlier at the Elkhart Lake Vintage Festival. Having managed a solid mid-pack finish (if any mid-pack finish can be said to be "solid") without embarrassing myself too badly, I ended the season all pumped up and wishing I didn't have to put the car away for winter.

As it turns out, I didn't.

When we got home from Road America that Sunday night, I casually perused some online schedules and noticed a club called the Vintage Racers Group was putting on an October 14–16 race at Watkins Glen. Not only that, but the chairman of the event was an old friend named Bob Girvin.

1978 Crossle 32F Formula Ford

"Would you like to go racing at Watkins Glen?" I shouted to Barb—who was just then dumping the weekend's melt water out of our ice chest.

"Sure!" she said. "But I'll have to call our pet-sitter again. She just left a few minutes ago." On that note, I immediately registered online and mailed off a check for my entry fee.

Watkins Glen.

I'd never driven the circuit before, and had been there for only one race, the 1979 U.S. GP. My buddy John Jaeger and I rode out there on motorcycles from Madison, Wisconsin, and almost froze to death in the October gloom. We arrived at the track on Friday, just as Gilles Villeneuve did his now-legendary qualifying lap in the rain.

We stood on Corner 2 and watched several cars half-heartedly motor around the course in the appalling conditions. Suddenly we heard a shrieking engine note that sounded like a hydroplane at full tilt and Villeneuve's red Ferrari appeared from over the top of the main straight. Sideways, with the power on and 30-foot rooster-tails of water arcing off his tires. He howled up the hill and slithered out of sight.

After he went into the pits, the announcer's voice came over the PA system and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, Gilles Villeneuve has just qualified the Ferrari nearly 10 seconds faster than the next car on the grid."

It was a masterful show of genius, but perhaps an unnecessary one, as Saturday was dry and qualifying times improved markedly. Villeneuve still won Sunday's rain-and-crash-plagued race, however, after a big dice with Alan Jones, whose Saudia-Williams-Ford lost a wheel nut after a pitstop.

Jones won the following year, and then it was all over; the Glen's 20 continuous years of F1 racing came to an end. According to an excellent new book titled Formula One at Watkins Glen by Michael Argetsinger (son of track founder Cameron Argetsinger), the event was undone by financial woes—and unchecked vandalism in the infamous "Bog" section. Our own Rob Walker said the restrooms were so bad the mechanics tried to blow them up. After 1980, the U.S. GP moved elsewhere.

Still, to me Watkins Glen was the U.S. GP, and all other venues since have seemed disappointing in some way. It was a real road course in a spectacular setting—the kind of place historically important road races are meant to be held. It was also a bit longer and faster than most, with a slight aura of danger about it.

Or more than slight, in some cases. François Cevert was killed there in 1973 when he lost control of his Tyrrell in the high-speed Esses and hit the Armco. The Tyrrell team withdrew, and teammate Jackie Stewart retired from racing.

Some 38 years later, Barb and I arrived on a Thursday afternoon and checked into the legendary Glen Motor Inn, which has a restaurant and motel with a swimming pool overlooking Seneca Lake. The place is famous as a hangout for all the F1 teams during the glory years. Owner Vic Franzese (himself a former Can-Am driver) told me he remembered years when the entire grid was staying at the motel. "Jim Clark and Colin Chapman used to always stay in that end unit," he added.

### The Glen Motor Inn

Those were the days, when a World Champion driver and constructor shared a motel room to save money. If they still did, maybe Watkins Glen could afford to host a GP. Barb and I got a room two doors down from the old Clark/Chapman digs.

Late that afternoon, we towed out to the circuit, which sits imposingly on a hilltop—kind of like Oz, but with bleachers—and got our car through tech inspection. As we unfolded our canopy in the paddock, it started to rain and blow like crazy, so we signed up for a spot in the big paddock garage. Pure luxury, otherwise known as dry feet.

That evening we dined at another Watkins Glen institution, the rustic Seneca Lodge, a big log inn surrounded by cabins in the woods. We had dinner with a table full of Volvo drivers, mostly racing P1800s and 122 sedans. Many of these drivers looked suspiciously Nordic. But then I look Irish, and my Crossle was built in Ireland.... Coincidence or genetic destiny?

Friday morning the rain stopped and I finally headed onto the track for my first practice session. Having never been around the circuit before, I had the confident, dashing

style of a guy looking for a light switch in a dark hotel room—compounded by an intermittent engine miss from a loose plug wire—but after about three exploratory laps, it all started to make more sense.

Fun track! Fast, swoopy and challenging, with banked corners and big elevation changes; a euphoric roller coaster of a circuit.

That afternoon it rained heavily, and I asked club President Bill Hollingsworth III (a fellow Crossle 32F driver) if he was going out and he said, "Vintage Dunlop Formula Ford tires don't work well in the rain, and there's a lot of Armco out there. All you can accomplish is to tear a corner off your car and spend \$5000 fixing it."

On that exculpatory note, Barb and I went off to dinner. We ended up back at the Glen Motor Inn, where we had superb Italian food at a picture window overlooking Seneca Lake. We spent some of the \$5000 we'd just saved on crash damage by sampling Finger Lakes region wines.

### View of Seneca Lake

In my race the next morning, I was gridded 11th out of 17 and worked my way up to 7th overall before my clutch broke with two laps left. No power to the transaxle. I coasted off the track and got towed in. Dang.

Ah well, I'd reached my natural Darwinian position in the race order, passing all the people I could catch and unable to reel in the cars ahead of me. I'd still had more fun than is normally allowable by law, except in Nevada, and I loved the track.

Barb and I loaded up the broken Crossle, said goodbye to the many nice people we'd met in the VRG and headed for home early the next morning.

As we cruised through the Alleghenies, I realized I'd done a total of only 12 laps around the Glen. Not much to show for a week away from home and 1600 miles of towing. Still, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I'd wanted to race at this track since 1961, when, as an 8th grader, I cut a photo of Innes Ireland winning the GP out of this very magazine and pasted it into my scrapbook—which I still have. It was the first GP win for both Innes and Team Lotus, and the first Grand Prix at the Glen. Fifty years ago.

The snow can arrive now.

I need the winter to fix my car and get ready for next season. And most certainly another try at the Glen. I think I may require at least another three or four laps to get it really down, the way Gilles and Innes did.

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