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An Interview With Pete Hylton, Author of “Ghost Tracks

Why do you think this history is important to today's drivers?

I find that the newest generation of both drivers and motorsports fans have very little idea of what racing was like in its earlier days. It isn't that they are not interested. Quite the contrary, they seem to be avid readers of my articles, and are always quite attentive when I talk about it in the classes I teach, or when I speak at conventions. But they simply are not that familiar with the history of the sport they are involved in. I think that it is important for them to understand that the safety considerations of today's racing venues are the result of problems that arose with an earlier generation of tracks that paid much less attention to both driver and spectator safety. The progression from street circuits, to airport circuits, to early permanent facilities, to the current generation of tracks has been amazing, and it is part of what has shaped our sport. Also, it is useful to understand how many tracks failed from unreasonable expectations. By understanding that, we can hopefully keep today's tracks in business so that we can continue to enjoy our sport.

In your opinion, was there a saddest or happiest ghost track story?

Unquestionably, the happiest story in the whole book is Virginia International Raceway. VIR was, in its original form, one of the prettiest, and most popular road racing circuits in this country. It was home to many great events, including the SCCA President's Cup races. Then, for 25 years it was a ghost track, with grass growing through the pavement, cows grazing, etc. It virtually disappeared. Then, miraculously, it was resurrected from the dead. I have raced the new facility. It follows the original circuit and it is very scenic and fun to drive. I loved it. I wish it were a lot closer to Indiana so I could get my racecars there more often. That is certainly the happiest ghost track story. I think, for me personally, the saddest is Mid-America Raceways. I watched races there when I was in college, in the middle seventies. Later I drove there and did rather well, in the eighties. It was a neat track, racing through the woods, in some places so thick that it was tough as a spectator to get a good look at the cars. It was quite pretty in its own right. This past April I went back to do a reprise of Chapter One, and found that not only was the track gone, but the whole woods had been leveled to make room for some miserable housing development. When I took the picture that appears at the end of Chapter One, it nearly broke my heart. Acres and acres of nothing but leveled dirt, where there had once been lovely woods and a quaint little race track. I was depressed for a long time over that one.

In your opinion how are these historical tracks different from today's tracks?

They are only different in that time and technology have progressed. Thus we build our tracks differently now,

and we are more safety conscious. But there is actually a great deal of similarity between the old and new tracks. Mostly in that both were constructed to give racers a fun and challenging place to go play with their toys. Ultimately, that is what SCCA is about. We are people who love cars, and love driving them fast. For well over 50 years we've been looking for fun places to do that. So not surprisingly, there are a lot of similarities between the historical tracks and today's circuits.

How many of the tracks from your original magazine series have you been able to visit since the first articles?

I've checked in on a few of them, either by visiting myself or by contacting others in the area. The biggest changes were with the Chapter One tracks, which is why we added a sort of update on those particular circuits. Most of the rest have gone pretty much the way they were headed when the original articles were written. The one exception to that might be Marlboro. I was contacted just this summer by an individual who is trying to pull together a restoration of the original circuit as a sort of museum of early east coast racing. What a wonderful thing that would be.

Did you compete on any of the Ghost Tracks?

As I mentioned earlier, I both raced and spectated at MAR. I have a lot of good memories from there, which is why it was so shocking and sad to find what I saw on my latest visit. I saw the last Formula 5000 race at MIS. Other than that, I knew the facilities only by their histories, enhanced by both my natural love of historical things and my position for the last 10 years as SCCA's Archivist and Historian.

How did you get started racing?

I got hooked on racing so long ago that not only was A.J Foyt still driving roadsters, but he had hair. While I have followed all kinds of racing across the years, when I saw my first SCCA road race at Indianapolis Raceway Park, I was simply enthralled by the cars and the racing. I went to work in Timing and Scoring as a volunteer while I was still in High School. I was too young to work corners, and I was good at math. Back then you had to subtract all the times for the cars you were timing. I got to the point where I could time 8-10 cars with one stopwatch with a split second-hand, so it was a natural fit. I did my first drivers school while I was a senior in college and one of the first purchases I made when I got out was a VW Rabbit to go Showroom Stock racing with SCCA.

What car?

Almost all my race cars have been Volkswagens. I raced several Rabbits, a Jetta, and my most successful car a Golf GTI, affectionately known as "Thumper". That car and I have been together now for over 20 years of racing, and it is still winning for me. In fact, it holds a unique place in SCCA history itself. It is the only car to have won races in the Showroom Stock Category (SSC), the Improved touring Category (ITA), the Production Category (EP and GP) and even the GT Category (GT3). I also raced an SCCA Spec Racer for a few years and most recently the students at my university have assisted in building an MGB-GT which I have driven as well.

Do you recall your first race?

I remember it was in a Rabbit at Blackhawk Farms. I remember I did something dumb and got a dent. I think I finished last. It was not my most memorable race.

Well, do you have any particularly memorable races?

Definitely. My most memorable race was in Thumper, that Golf that I talked about. I was racing in ITA that season and I was up against a very good driver in a BMW which was simply faster and better prepared than Thumper was. I had been chasing him all year, and I generally only won if he had car trouble. But I figured the race at IRP was my best bet, because it was my home track, and I knew it as well as anyone. Early in the race I realized that I could easily out-brake him at the end of the backstretch, Turn 6, because he braked early and I knew I could go quite a bit deeper. But I opted not to tip my hand early in the race. I decided to simply try to stay with him and use my advantage at the end. We ran 15 laps so close it was amazing. I passed him several times at various parts of the track, and he almost invariably passed me back at the next corner. But I never tried at Turn 6. I spent the whole race backing off the gas early at that corner and letting him think he had the advantage. I knew all I had to do was stay close till the last lap. With a couple laps to go, we came upon a slower car in a tight corner. The BMW got by before the corner, which was going to leave me trapped behind, and force me to loose ground. I thought "Damn, there goes my plan." Thumper said to me "like hell – go inside." On the inside of the slow car was a curb and inside that was grass. And son-of-a-gun, if Thumper didn't go inside both the slow car and the curb, and we passed him with all four wheels in the grass. I came out right on the BMW's bumper again, and when we got to Turn 6 on the last lap I used my breaking advantage for the first time, went flying into the lead, and he had no chance to get back by me before the checkered flag. Afterwards, somebody asked my why in the world I pulled such a crazy move. I told them "the car said I could." It pays to have a good relationship with your car.

In your opinion, what is your highest achievement in racing?

I've won a number of races, but none of them huge. I've never been a National Champion, and never will be. But SCCA did award me the club's highest honor, the Woolf Barnato Award for lifetime achievement at the 2007 convention. Although I have served the club in many capacities, I think mostly they were saluting me for keeping our history alive through my magazine articles and books. I consider that a high honor and therefore probably my highest achievement.

Your daughters have followed in your tracks, correct?

My oldest stepdaughter, Vicky has raced my Spec Racer, and Thumper, and now the new university MGB-GT. She was Rookie of the Year in Indianapolis Region her first year and has won a couple of races. My thirteen-year old, Aeron, raced go-karts when she was 5-7 years old, winning a couple races. Now she is crewing for me on the current cars and points out to us all regularly that she is eligible to try her hand at SCCA in just three more years.

Does your wife race as well?

Wendy refers to herself as "ground support and entertainment." She manages our camp-site, makes sure we are all well feed at the track, chases parts when necessary, and is general cheerleader for us all. She also is the Iron Chef for Indianapolis Region's SCCA races, sometimes grilling Saturday night dinner for several hundred people.

Tell us about your cars?

Well, I told you about Thumper, and then there were the various Rabbits (Bunny, Junior, and Speedwell), the Jetta (Punkin), the Spec Racer (Lucky), oh and there was a Datsun named "Fritz" that I usually try to forget about. But those are just my race cars. We also have a fleet of vintage MGs. There is a 1948 TC with a documented racing history, named "Maggie," a 1970 BGT that I drive to campus a lot (Brigit), a 1976 Midget (Crumpet), a 1969 Spridget (Ebenezer), a 1964 MGB (Isabella), and the new BGT racecar, named 'Catherine.'

Oh, and there is another BGT stashed away somewhere that Aeron made me buy so she and I could restore it for her to drive when she gets her license. It is a horrid green color and she named it "Kermit." People look at me strangely sometimes and ask me why my cars all have names. I usually give them an incredulous look and simply say "you mean you don't name yours – how do they know to come when you call them?"

Racing seems to have entered about every aspect of your life. You and your wife operate a business called The Old MG Bed & Breakfast . Tell how that came to be.

I claim I bought it because I love my wife, and she always had a dream of running a Bed & Breakfast in her retirement. She claims I bought it because of the detached five car garage and workshop. You decide.

You've also turned racing into your career, haven't you?

After 25 years as an engineer in aerospace, I changed careers four years ago and now I teach full time for Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Two years ago I was asked if I thought it was possible to build a motorsports program on campus. I hate to move slowly, so in that time I've created several new classes, a Motorsports Technology Certificate program, and several motorsports projects, including the student built MGB-GT that we've been talking about. This summer they appointed me campus Director of Motorsports and I'm off designing a full Bachelor of Science Degree in Motorsports Engineering for implementation by 2008. It occurred to me just a short while ago that after over 30 years in the sport, I'm earning my living at it for the first time.

Are there more Ghost Tracks whose story has not yet been told?

Quite a few, actually. In fact, the editor at SportsCar magazine wants me to keep going as long as we can, because the articles are among the most popular ones printed each year. Since this is something I love, I can imagine nothing better than writing about it and having people enjoy the articles. So yes, I expect the series to continue.