

The dictionary defines a *shrine* as “any place or object hallowed by its history or associations.” It is no wonder, then, that Thunder Road International Speedbowl in Barre, VT is a race fan’s true shrine.

Referred to as “The Nation’s Site of Excitement,” Thunder Road is celebrating its 50th Anniversary in 2009. Opened in 1960, Thunder Road stands as hallowed ground for racers and race fans alike. Thunder Road continues to operate as a legendary site of racing in a sport that too often relegates its legends only to memories.

For approximately seven Sunday afternoons and eleven Thursday nights per summer, Thunder Road packs the stands with an average of 4,000 people for a weekly show and as many as 10,000 for a special event. There are regularly over 100 cars in the pits. While other New England tracks are struggling to stay open, Thunder Road owners Tom Curley and Ken Squier enjoy stands and pits that are filled for each and every event.

Besides the track’s unconventional location three-quarters of the way up Quarry Hill in Barre, Thunder Road also has an unconventional night for weekly racing. When the track opened, Thursday was pay day at the granite quarries that Barre is known for worldwide. It made sense to schedule the night of racing so that people would come through the gates while they still had money in their pockets. Thursday night racing has remained ever since.

The city of Barre and the racetrack have long had a positive relationship with each other. As proof of the importance of Thunder Road in the life of Barre, the city blocks traffic from its Main Street Business District each year on the day before the season opener. Almost every car that races at the track lines the streets while thousands of fans and fans-to-be look at the cars and talk with the drivers and teams. At noon, drivers strap in and drive their racecars in parade-fashion the two miles through the remainder of town and up Quarry Hill to the track.

The natural lay of the track grounds allows fans to sit on a bank that is steep enough to allow full view of the track from any seat. Downtown Barre and the hills surrounding the area hang like a backdrop curtain to the racetrack surface. The main grandstands are constructed of solid concrete and built into the bank so that frontstretch crashes are not only seen up-close but also felt throughout the stands. It is a unique experience for the senses to not only hear and smell but also *feel* the on-track action.

Perhaps the track’s most legendary fixture is neither the stands nor any of the buildings on the grounds. Instead, it is the turn four wall. The site of hundreds of wrecks over the years, “The Widomaker” has challenged every driver that has ever raced past it. Legendary national racers Kenny Wallace and Ken Schrader have both raced at Thunder Road in their careers and both have commented that Thunder Road’s turn four wall is the toughest part of any track they have ever raced at.

It is hard to talk about the track without mentioning the word “family.” Drinking, smoking and coarse language are not allowed in the main grandstands so that families can enjoy the race without inappropriate behavior. “Bud Hill” is for those fans who want to drink.

Race fans from a few months old to those well into their eighties regularly populate the stands and banks of the track. Some fans have sat in the same seat locations for decades. It is common for fans to be in the stands hours before the first green flag is thrown.

Race attendees often span multiple generations. In some cases, those multiple generations are present both in the stands and on the track. ACT and Thunder Road Vice President and General Manager Darla Hartt says, “Many of today’s competitors are second and third generation drivers and many of the teams are a family operation. Our events are created as family entertainment.”

The names of those who have raced at Thunder Road is a “Who’s Who” of New England and national racing legends; Fadden, LaJoie, Dion, Lepage, Crouch, Craven, Dragon and Cabana, to name a few. Anyone who has had success racing in New England or Quebec in the last 50 years has raced at least once at Thunder Road.

Many racers have graduated from Thunder Road to racing on a national level. Despite a bigger audience, though, memories of racing at Thunder Road are never forgotten. For those who have raced at Thunder Road or witnessed a race as a fan, their reverence for the track is unanimous. It is commonplace to hear Thunder Road mentioned by both racers and announcers during national race broadcasts. Like Eldora Speedway in Ohio and Martinsville Speedway in Virginia, Thunder Road is on any true racers “must do” list.

For tens of thousands of race fans over the years, Thunder Road stands as a shining example of how a short track should be run. Says Dick Berggren, Executive Editor at Speedway Illustrated and a longtime pit reporter for Fox Sports, “Thunder Road is run the way every local short track in the country should be run. The show is fast and interesting, the pits are full of cars, and it’s great fun. You best be there early, because the best seats are quickly gone. A Thursday night at Thunder Road is a near-religious experience for those who enjoy local racing done right.”

There are few places in New England that bring about a feeling of reverence and awe every time they are visited. For baseball fans, Fenway Park is such a place. For race fans there is Thunder Road. “The place is magical” says former racer and now ACT and Thunder Road Director of Competition Dean Gallison. “I’ve been through that front gate a thousand times and yet every time I go through it I still get butterflies in my stomach.”