

Around the track with

SKIP BARBER

and The Club at Lime Rock Park

by jason feinberg, photos by tina guimar

As a kid, I had an immediate love for cars. My supply of Matchbox and Hot Wheels was endless. I would sit for hours pretending to drive my uncle's Tin Lizzie, and riding on the lawn mower or my grandfather's golf cart. There is something about cars and driving that is appealing to so many of us, something that makes them much more than just a mode of transportation. Where does the dream become a reality? Where can you go to really test your skills? Gone are the days of driving out to Bridgehampton's racetrack on the east end of Long Island. Well, I found the hidden treasure.

Tucked away in the rolling hills of Lakeville, CT, lies a hidden oasis where boys become men and more often, men become boys. Finally, a place exists where you can push the envelope and test your limits. Welcome to the Club at Lime Rock Park.

Lime Rock Park is considered the road racing center of the east. Its 50-year history is an exciting one, to say the least. When I first visited Lime Rock, I felt the adrenaline rush as pictures of legends like Carroll Shelby hung in the press box—Carroll took the 1969 Trans Am Victory at Lime Rock.



Skip Barber

The racetrack is unique in that it is in fact a park, with the feel of a nature preserve. It's the Route 66 of racetracks. It rises, bends and curves with the landscape and moves with the land. You won't find miles of endless parking lots, or even bleachers. Here you will find plush rolling hills of green, families sitting on blankets picnicking and, of course, the roar of some of the best cars ever built screeching around Lime Rock's one-and-a-half-mile track.

The park has hosted such great racing circuits like Trans Am, Formula, Grand-Am Rolex Sports Series, SCCA Regional, NASCAR Busch East Series, American Le Mans and now...you! Yes, you!

For car enthusiasts and racing amateurs, visiting a place like Lime Rock Park, Charlotte, Indianapolis, Watkins Glen, Daytona or Riverside is always great. But often, people don't get the opportunity to push the envelope with their sports cars and test their driving skills.

After a quick walking tour, the owner and legendary racecar driver/instructor Skip Barber greeted me.

Skip grew up in Philadelphia and started road racing early on. Road racing started in America in the early 1900s. It wasn't until after WWII that it became organized with the start of the SCCA (Sports Car Club of America). Back then, "It was not only popular but it was the fashionable thing to do," says Skip, who used to race his Austin Healy Sprite. It was unusual for an American to race in Grand Prix and Formula races since it was largely a European sport. In hindsight, he jokingly says it was stupidity that led him to race formulas rather than stock cars. Stock car racing, or NASCAR, was largely a regional sport that road racers usually looked down on because of all the typical clichés. "I'd probably still be racing if I had gone stock car racing," he admits.

Skip left the racing circuit in the mid-1970s to start one of the first and most successful racing and driving schools in the country, the Skip Barber Racing School, because, he says, "There weren't any coaches in racing." When people helped or gave you instructional information, they were usually wrong. Skip had a vision and realized that with his experience, there were a lot of things he could teach people about racing. What started out as something to just help people exploded almost overnight. "I never thought I could make a living out of this," he says, "as we moved across the country, we added programs, we had 400 employees and it became a significant service business."

I was curious as to why there is such success with racing today, particularly stock car racing. Skip credits the management of the France family, who run NASCAR. "The interaction between racecar drivers and fans is terrific. They drivers are very accessible."

I was surprised when Skip told me that nearly every major stock car driver was a graduate, with the exception of Dale Earnhardt Jr. Geoff Gordon attended twice, first when he was racing midgets and again when he moved to the stock cars.

Nine years ago, Skip sold the driving school and now focuses on his other love, Lime Rock Park. Skip has owned Lime Rock for 24 years. Today, the park is used by a number of car clubs, amateur racers, and the racing school, so much that the track is booked solid every day. Time has become a lost commodity. Skip wants to ensure two things: that Lime Rock Park will remain for the next 50 years and that there will be time for everyone to enjoy and



Photo courtesy of Lime Rock Park

use the track. For this, he has come up with a plan that will allow the dreams to come true.

The Club at Lime Rock has a new unique membership for 300 people that will guarantee significant track time for 50 years. Here on Long Island, the only place one could have raced a car is the gone but not forgotten Bridgehampton Race Track. Mr. Barber wants to ensure that this does not happen to Lime Rock Park.

There are a number of benefits to becoming a member of The Club.

Access: You will have access to the track 20 times a year (12 peak and 8 off-peak dates).

Track time: You can book track time on any of the 60 annual club dates (based on availability). Your guests (with a fee) are welcome to use your car, or their own.

Vehicle dynamics: A skid pad and an autocross course, partly irrigated to simulate rain conditions, are available for better understanding the chassis dynamics of your car and working on your driving skills.

VIP tickets: Members will receive four VIP tickets, with hospitality, to every major spectator event held at Lime Rock Park. These races are history in the making; many are aired on national television.

A home for your track car: Another benefit of being a member is the convenience of having your car stored nearby. If you wish, the planned concierge service will have your car waiting for you in pit lane.

Member clubhouse: Initially, the clubhouse will be located in the paddock near the new pit lane. Members and guests will have access on all club track days. The clubhouse will afford members a place to relax, review their driving sessions, and compare notes.



Photo courtesy of Lime Rock Park



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Member pit lane: A new and separate pit lane will be added for the exclusive use of members and their guests.

The beautiful Berkshires: Families and guests can enjoy the surrounding splendor of spring, summer and fall, the many scenic attractions, and the unrivaled art and antique shopping of the Berkshires.

As an integral part of the future of Lime Rock Park, your membership will help fund significant improvements at Lime Rock Park including track paving, new bathroom facilities, the new club pit lane, and the clubhouse. Lime Rock Park is a terrific place now and The Club at Lime Rock Park will ensure its future as a premier racetrack for the next 50 years.

The price for memberships is \$100,000 plus tax and monthly dues of \$550. While that may seem expensive, the membership is for 50 years. If you do the math, it comes out to \$106 per race.

After our lunch, we walked over to the track where Skip drove us around for a slow tour. I felt as if I were driving along one of the residential streets outside. Skip was very thorough in describing everything about the surface, the turns, the hills and the beautiful landscape. After a few minutes we returned to pit row where Formula One driver Simon Kirkby pulled up in a Mazda Miata and asked if I wanted to go for a ride. I eagerly got into the car and immediately wondered if the five-point seatbelt, helmet and roll cage was necessary. I mean, this wasn't a Lamborghini, it was an off-the-shelf Miata. The one thing I underestimated was that a Formula One driver was

at the helm. It's one thing to watch races on TV or from the stands, but it's a completely different experience when you're the passenger.

We set off out of the pit lane to catch the end of the straightaway. As we approached turn one, we hugged the inside in order to line up for turn two, still accelerating. Turn three was a sharp left, which any inexperienced driver would have taken at about 30 mph, but not Simon! As we made turn four, we accelerated to about 100 mph, only to make a right turn up the hill on the back of the course, where we caught some air (see photo on the right). With his foot back on the gas, we flew forward, cutting across turn six only to approach a very low bridge, which I was certain that we would hit, when suddenly the road (and my stomach) dropped and we flew down hill towards a sharp turn seven. With a hard turn on the steering wheel and tires screeching, Simon handled this with ease. This led us to the main straightaway where I thought we would be returning. Simon stepped on the gas again. I wasn't sure if I should look at the speedometer or look at the end of the straightaway, which was rapidly approaching. As we blazed by pit row, I managed to turn to Skip and the rest of *The Boulevard* crew, so they could see the permanent smile on my face. As I turned back, we were already at turn one again and back around the track. After a quick lap we returned to the pits. I climbed out of the car, my knuckles white and my heart racing, but my smile still frozen on my face. I immediately had a new appreciation for all racecar drivers.

