



SLEEK SPORTS CARS line up for Meadowdale Raceway's inaugural event. Rugged 3.3-mile course is tortuous gauntlet of turns, up-and-down straightaways.

By Dick Seid

DRIVING WEST OF CHICAGO along the newly-opened Illinois tollway, you come upon an endless expanse of gently rolling fields, red silos, brick-colored farm houses and falling herds of black and white livestock. But turn off the tollway at Highway 25, drive three miles north and you are smack in the middle of auto racing country where the roar of exhausts and the tortured whine of gear boxes drown out the peaceful sounds of the rural Midwest.

This is Meadowdale International Raceways, a new 3.3-mile racing circuit that is already one of America's most grueling and dangerous, and may well become the site of a U.S. Grand Prix that would make Chicago the racing capital of the nation.

Meadowdale might even be a misnomer for this course—it connotes a serene pastoral scene with gurgling rills

Meadowdale — GRAND PRIX of AMERICAN RACING

Tricky, tortuous, strictly for pros, Meadowdale track brings danger-jammed European road racing to Midwest.

CIRCLING steep Monza wall, sports cars compete in preliminary event at Meadowdale. Heavy dust clouds marred opening day racing at new Chicago track.

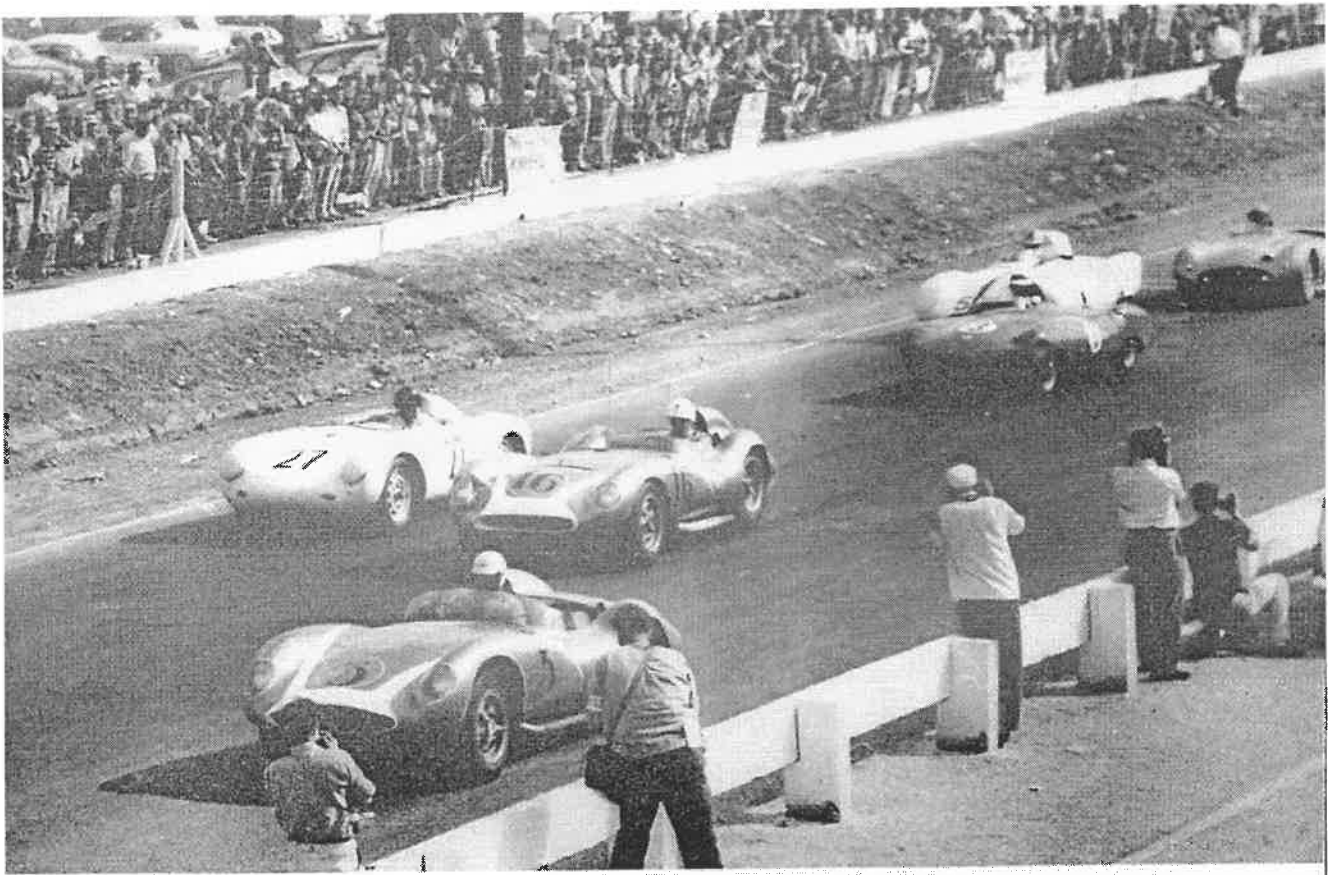


and fields of bright daisies. The twisting and rolling black-topped track would be more appropriately called Auto-drome of Speed. This one is for the pros.

It was laid out with torture to both car and driver in mind. Its developer and owner, Leonard W. Besinger, inspected the foremost tracks for sports cars in the United States—Sebring, Riverside, Elkhart Lake—and the top courses in Europe—Le Mans, Rheims, Monza—prior to devising the Meadowdale circuit. His purpose was to combine the most outstanding attributes of the world's great tracks (including the skill-demanding banks, turns and straightaways) in a new track that would provoke more excitement than the sum of all its parts. Besinger succeeded.

He started with 235 acres of hilly farmland in the fertile Fox River Valley at Carpentersville (about 35 miles northwest of Chicago's Loop) and literally carved out the course. There are turns galore—five left and seven right. Hills abound too; the ups and downs of Meadowdale are more than vaguely reminiscent of those dime rides at Coney Island. The most noteworthy of the turns (and justifiably so) is the "Monza Wall," named and patterned after the

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STARTING 120-MILE FEATURE, racers churn for fast getaway. Scarab-driving Chuck Daigh edged Lance Reventlow for win.

38-degree banked turn at Monza, Italy. Besinger wanted to go the Italians one better, however, and so he had his "Monza" constructed a full eight degrees steeper than the one in Milano Province.

You might say it is Meadowdale's answer to the treacherous north wall at Indianapolis. Officials of the track point out that cars must negotiate the turn with their accelerators to the fire wall and that 140 m.p.h. speeds are required to make the turn "properly." At the inaugural running, many drivers found the wall so demanding that they took the turn at slow speeds and stayed off the embankment completely. Some drivers, those who made the turn at top speeds, reported "bottoming."

Coming out of this turn, drivers are faced with two-thirds of a mile of northbound up-and-down straightaway — past the pits and the paddock — ending in a sharp and wicked downhill right-hand turn. A formidable bump in the pavement at this point can easily break an axle or jar bridge-work loose in a driver's mouth. This vicious right-hander is destined to become one of the most well-respected turns in American racing circuits.

Heading south again, drivers enter approximately a mile of very steep "esses," comprised of three left and three right hand turns. Traffic is slow here due to blind curves and reverse road crown. A wide uphill right-hand turn takes the drivers out of the "esses." It skirts outside the "Monza" wall and appears to head straight up. The cars come out of this one (usually with all four wheels off the asphalt) and enter a short straightaway that culminates in probably the cruelest hairpin turn in the country —

named "Doane's Turn" after the track's technical director. "Doane's" is entered after negotiating a left-hand "dog-leg" curve; it is a flat right-hand hairpin built on a 210-foot radius and has the dubious distinction of having claimed Meadowdale's first fatality. Another straightaway, shorter still, brings the drivers back to the "Monza" wall and completes the circuit.

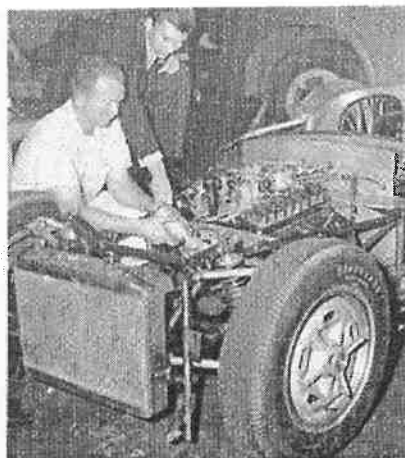
It is a tough course, demanding tremendous endurance and agility from both car and driver. As yet, Meadowdale has left no margin for drivers' errors — there are no escape roads and three-foot dirt embankments border the six-foot shoulders to hem in the track, leaving no room for cars to spin out. It is almost as if drivers are instructed, "You will *not* spin out!" And to make certain that competitors stay on the track, concrete retaining walls fill in the spaces between dirt embankments, causing drivers to carom back onto the course in the event of spinning.

The inaugural races, held one Sunday in mid-September of last year, gave promise of spine-chilling excitement to come. From the green flag signaling the start of the first race for production F, G, H and modified H sports cars to the checkered flag proclaiming victory for Chuck Daigh in a Corvette-powered Scarab, thrills abounded. Not only did the fall Meadowdale meet mark the debut of a Grand Prix-scale autodrome in the middlewest, but it also witnessed the predominance of an all-American sports car over previously invincible European models — Ferrari, Maserati, Jaguar, Mercedes, etc.

Lance Reventlow's Scarabs were the titans of the track that dusty September day. Developed in 1955, the \$50,000-

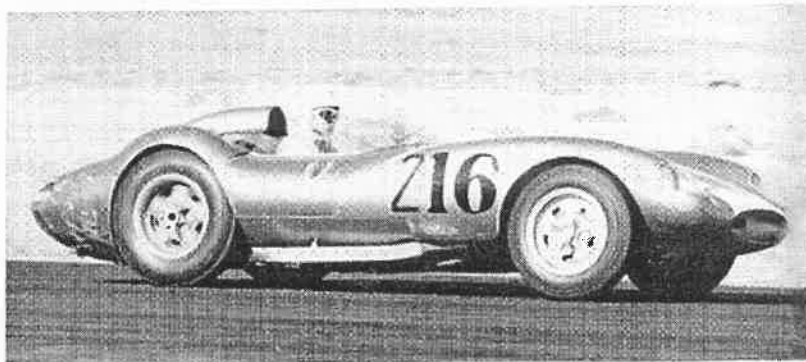


PITCHED at 45 degree angle, Monza wall is steeper than famed Italian counterpart. Here, owner Besinger (top) assists friends in climbing wall.



< CHECKING his chief mechanic's work, Reventlow watches as Daigh toils on Scarab engine. Duo finished one, two in inaugural race.

TESTING SCARAB, Reventlow takes trial run at Minden, Nevada. Developed in 1955, Scarab was first raced in '57, has regularly whipped supposedly superior European cars.



FERRARI DRIVER Robert Walker flipped over, crashed, died of broken neck, head fracture on way to hospital. Fatal accident occurred on Doane's turn when dust-blinded Arkansas driver lost control of car.



racers were not officially entered in competition until early 1957. Even then, the multi-million-heir Reventlow, son of Barbara Hutton, the five-and-dime store queen, realized that further changes were in order.

"This car is strictly for racing, and it is not going to be manufactured for mass production," Reventlow explained at Meadowdale. "I made a lot of changes in the engine and design but it's still a modified car. We beat the Jaguars in earlier races but it was very important to see what we could do here because of the 'Monza' turn."

They did alright. Reventlow and Chuck Daigh, his chief mechanic in the manufacture of the five liter plus racers, entered the final race 135 laps around the grueling circuit open to the 35 cars posting the fastest lap times in the previous races) in twin Scarabs and proceeded to lap everyone in the field except the third and fourth place finishers. It seems the big-engined Scarabs had sufficient guts to out-drag everyone else on the straightaways and they did just that. Daigh took an early lead and was out in front for the first 12 laps until his boss passed him on the long straightaway. He regained the lead on the next lap, however, and held it until the 25th lap when hunky Lance passed him again. But on the next lap, Daigh resumed command for the rest of the race. They finished one-two with Daigh clocking 1:22:54 with an average lap time of 85.55 m.p.h. Reventlow was second by less than half the length of Daigh's Scarab and he was lucky to do that well for the low-headed son of Barbara Hutton was plagued by considerable mechanical troubles, including a broken radiator and a



snapped exhaust pipe. Nevertheless the Sunday outing proved that the American Scarabs had definitely "arrived" as Formula 1 racers.

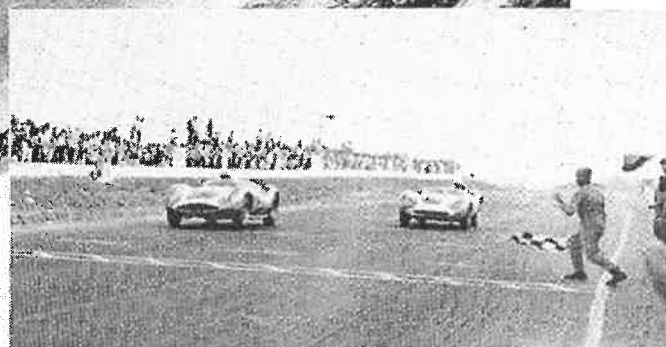
There was tragedy too. The first casualty occurred during the time trials on Saturday, when the driver of a Triumph 3 slammed his car into the clay wall at "Doane's Turn." Fortunately, he stepped out of the wreck with only minor bruises.

In the ninth lap of the third race the next day, Robert Walker, an Arkansas insurance executive, looked behind him as his Ferrari approached the deadly "Doane's." A gust of dusty wind made him lose control of his car and he flipped end over end and pummeled into a pile of hay. Walker was dead of a broken neck and fractured skull when he arrived at a nearby hospital minutes later.

In the feature race, John O'Connor of Chicago, driving an Austin-Healy, hit a wall on the 18th lap and spun into the infield. He was luckier than Walker—only his car was demolished.

Estimates of the attendance at the inaugural running ranged from 50,000 to 200,000. Actually there are no official figures on the number of enthusiasts that swarmed over the track, but a safe guess would be in the vicinity of 100,000. They were everywhere—lined up along the straightaways, looking almost straight down into the drivers' cockpits from the infield at the "Monza" turn, sitting on the many rolling hills and crowding the paddock and pit areas. The soft drink and beer concessions had a field day—literally. Strong 30-m.p.h. gusts (Continued on page 56)

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ROARING past checkered flag, Chuck Daigh edges Reventlow by half length. Winner averaged 85.5 mph.



CONGRATULATING VICTOR, Besinger shares winner's circle with hostess Lee Phillip, Reventlow, track official.

grand prix of american racing

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churned up dust (one driver reported entering every turn completely blind) and all throats and tongues were caked with the stuff. The concessionaires reported sales of more than 100,000 soft drinks alone—a good indication of a healthy turnout.

The crowds were anticipated. Besinger, who is primarily a home builder and "suburbia" developer, conceived Meadowdale In-

ternational Raceways as the first major autodrome easily accessible to a big city. Chicago had long been one of the nation's leading auto racing centers, and it was inevitable that some entrepreneur would eventually develop a race course that could accommodate all types of automobile racing from Indianapolis-type bumble to the scurrying midget racers.

Besinger built Meadowdale partly because his sons badgered him to do it. Early in 1951, his eldest son scooped out a miniature sports car track from a gravel pit on the Meadowdale property (the race course takes its name from the Besinger-built housing development). The young Besinger and his friends used their junior-sized track for a proving ground for their sports cars. A second son developed an interest in drag-strip racing and then road racing. He persuaded his father to accompany him to the Road America races at Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin. It was at Elkhart that Besinger first thought favorably of a major track in the Chicago area. Shortly thereafter, a business associate who was also a sports car enthusiast approached Besinger with the idea of "fulfilling a Chicago-land need" by building a major auto course. Besinger considered the proposal seriously and soon began making inquiries. He set up a heavy schedule of conferences with long-experienced race drivers and track experts. They advised him to visit the foremost tracks of the U.S. and Europe and see for himself what constitutes a large-scale car

circuit.

After making an extensive fact-finding tour, Besinger was ready to embark on the Meadowdale Raceway project. This was in June. He entrusted the building job to his home-building crews. Special road construction equipment was appropriated and the mammoth task of building a 3.3-mile course with precipitous banks, snake-like curves and extra-long straightaways was under way.

Seventy-eight pits were constructed, all enclosed, with gasoline, electrical and water outlets in each. In addition, private dressing rooms were provided for drivers to relax before and between races. The pit facilities, several hundred feet in length, allowed room for the pit car of each entrant behind the competing car under the roof and access to the open pit area immediately in front.

Meadowdale did not limit its racing fate to sports cars. In late October, a 222-mile stock car marathon attracted 38,000 fans.

In this race, Fred Lorenzen, a Chicago carpenter, zoomed a 1956 Ford across the finish line after besting 41 competitors around the circuit 70 times. His time was 2:47 for an average speed of 83.41 m.p.h. Jim Bryan, winner of 1957's Indianapolis classic, drove to second money in a 1957 Mercury. Daigh and Reventlow, the Sunab flashes, also competed in this American production car contest. Daigh, in a Ford, finished third; Reventlow, also in a Ford, was unable to go the distance. Jim Rathman, winner of the 1958 Monza race, was scheduled to drive but an accident the previous day prevented his entry.

One of the features of the October card at Meadowdale was an exhibition run of the

John Zink "Special," the car driven to victory in the 1956 Indianapolis Speedway and in the 1958 Monza marathon. The purpose was to demonstrate what a powerfully-torqued "Indy" car could do on the undulating Meadowdale course. Tony Bettenhausen, Chicago veteran of 500-mile competition, piloted the "Special" at a missile-fast clip, roaring off the steep-banked "Monza" into the long straightaway at a neck-breaking 166 m.p.h.! Bettenhausen was trying to establish an unofficial record for the infant course. He did, despite the fact that the car is engineered to negotiate left turns only, as on the Indianapolis oval. The tremendous speed of the Zink car (once timed at 180 m.p.h.) made the difference.

The successes of Meadowdale's inaugural card and the following month's "222" have left owner-promoter Besinger with ideas. He has disclosed plans for a 24-hour endurance run this summer, which would necessitate lights along the circuit and which would raise danger and excitement to the maximum. With the success of the Zink "Special" around the motordrome, Besinger envisions a race featuring Indianapolis-type cars for this summer. The nation's top midget drivers may also be featured in a contest this year (the Meadowdale course is one of the few in the United States that would allow the midgets full throttle approximately 110 m.p.h.). A 500-mile derby is another possibility, probably in the stock car division, similar to the successful "222" but obviously more than twice the distance and consequently more than twice as challenging.

And then of course there will probably be a repeat of the sports car race. By summer, however, track officials hope to have the area grassed and landscaped, with the topsoil staying put. With this accomplished, only a tornado would be inclement enough to add to the challenge of the twisting track.

Eventually there will be grandstands for 150,000 spectators and parking accommoda-

tions for 50,000 automobiles. As it stands today, the racing area can hold at least 150,000. Pedestrian bridges and underpasses have been constructed at many convenient places, allowing viewers to walk to any vantage point around the track. The track itself is below spectator level practically all the way around and the viewing points—although few provide a real panorama—are sufficient for dramatic visual following. The hills at the "esses" are high and give excellent visibility of the drivers cornering and heading for the next bend.

That it is a hellish course there can be no doubt. Both cars and drivers are put to the extreme test on the 2.3-mile loop. There has been a fatality already and *that* on the inaugural day. While the Zink "Indy" car looked tremendously impressive at Meadowdale, the track has yet to prove itself suitable for competitive Indianapolis-type racing. Twenty-four hour endurance runs? They are still untried at Meadowdale. So are a stock car "500" and a midget race. Some think Meadowdale's plans are too grandiose on the basis of two successful runs last autumn.

There has been criticism too—mainly by those who object to opening a sports car meet to the *hoi polloi*, to making a heretofore esoteric event into a "spectacle." Meadowdale's officials answer by saying that sports car racing—or *any* racing for that matter—should be and *will be* open to anyone who has interest enough to pay the price of an admission ticket (\$5), regardless of his other interests. The gate receipts of the first two meets certainly tend to support the officials' stand.

If Meadowdale is still an infant, then it is an oversized and howling one. But if spectator enthusiasm (measured by the tremendous turnouts) is any indication of things to come, Meadowdale is already on its way to becoming the center of U.S. Grand Prix racing. The infant looks like it will become an adult overnight. # # #