



BOTTOMLESS LAKES

Las Ocho Millas 3

Cannon, Forester and Roberts (Healey, Datsun, Datsun) where the course runs near the bluffs. Forester's Datsun won.

America's most incredible road racing circuit

BY JAMES T. CROW

I WENT TO Las Ocho Millas 3 a few weeks ago—the third running of the Bottomless Lakes races near Roswell, New Mexico—and in a single weekend witnessed just about everything that road racing in America is all about. In some ways it was like going backward through time because it was all so different from the vaguely funless big-time racing that has become common the past few years. I'd been to two uninspiring U.S. Road Racing Championship races the two previous weekends and these, plus a reluctance to put up with the knerds at Laguna Seca the following weekend, convinced me

that Las Ocho Millas 3 was the place I should go instead.

It reminded me of years gone by, first of all, because it wasn't easy to get there and who goes to races that aren't convenient to attend any more? To get there Joyce and I helicoptered from Newport Beach to Los Angeles, took a Trouble & Worry Airlines DC-8 to Albuquerque, rented a car and then drove four hours to Roswell. On arriving in Roswell one of the first sights to meet us was a full-sized Security National Bank billboard advertising the race. (When was the last time you saw a bank advertising a road race?)

When we arrived at race headquarters we found a table full of workers who seemed to be enjoying themselves. At the typical big-time event there's a registration desk and the only thing you can be sure of is that they'd have been happier if you hadn't bothered them. But these people actually made you feel glad you came! SCCA Rio Grande regional executive Jim Phillips saw that we got signed in, described the circuit from a big map and answered our questions about how



Schwager's Datsun toward the top end of Lazy Lagoon.



Sander's Lotus 22 survived to win formula car race.

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

to get there, where to watch from and what to watch for.

It was shortly after dawn that we arrived at the circuit the next morning (it's been a long time since we did *that*, too) so we could make a few laps and get an idea about the course. It is incredible, the Bottomless Lakes circuit, amazing, unbelievable. Eight miles (well, actually 7.7 according to honest Jim Phillips), of well maintained 2-lane blacktop road around seven small, deep lakes. It's actually a state park and there are camping sites, picnic areas, a large concession stand, swimming pool, boat rentals and all the usual state park amenities. That the state of New Mexico permits, even encourages, road racing there is even more incredible.

There's only one road to the circuit and the circuit itself is also the only way to get in and out of the park. The course is driven in a clockwise direction so as you reach the Y you stay to the left and the road runs along the mesa above the lakes. Though there are a few gentle bends along here, the top speed is limited only by the driver's skill (and daring) and

the car's road holding and power. Whooooee, so fast and so much of it. On most road racing circuits there is one stretch where the driver can dump it in top gear and let it wind out but here there's mile after endless mile where your whole life could pass before you while you're scaring yourself to death.

At the end of the mesa section there's a downhill righthand bend, then the road goes past the pits, flat-out flat-out flat-out through some more fast, fast puckery bends and then you arrive at the Lazy Lagoon area. Here the road tightens, becomes one gear slower, and winds between the bluffs on the right and the willow-lined lake on the left and finally up again, climbing around a long turn up to the mesa. The Y is the slowest point on the circuit (there's a hump that can pitch you right off into deep white dust) and then you're back on the flat-out winding mesa road again. Oh, what those little rises and bends must do to the stomach at speed and how serious the natural road shoulders must look. Few American road racing drivers ever experience anything even resembling the open-road racing possible at Bottomless Lakes.

Before leaving the office, when asked why on earth I was going to Bottomless Lakes, I said that because it was the only true, natural-born road circuit in the U.S., I was going to see if the U.S. Grand Prix should be held there. And the vision of a field of Formula 1 cars there does make the mouth water.

Everything got underway predictably late and with predictable delays along the way. On a circuit of such length, a large mass of course workers is required and these were SCCA members and their friends, groups from the Albuquerque Sports Car Club, young men from the New Mexico Military Institute and whatever volunteers showed up looking for work. There were about 150 workers on hand to see to it the race got run and another hundred or so associated with the sponsoring Sertoma Club from Roswell to do such things as ticket and program sales, traffic direction and so on. When you can find 250 people who'll spend two days exposed to the wind and weather, you may be certain that a large measure of enthusiasm is present. And the Cal Club Region's workers complain about Willow Springs.

The entry at Bottomless Lakes was small and, I won't kid you, not really very choice. About the nearest thing to a big name was Bob Kirby from Southern California. Bob's claim to road racing immortality rests on a 9th overall (and first GT car) at this year's Sebring 12-hr in a Porsche 911S and though he has more charm, is more amusing and has a cuter wife than lots of bigger name drivers, his name doesn't have quite the same box office magic as, say, Jackie Stewart or Lother Motschenbacher.

Seventy entrants had been hoped for and four races had been scheduled for each day. As it turned out, only 50 made it to the starting grid for the Saturday 3-lappers and the composition of the races was juggled to reduce the number of events to three. But these drivers were there for fun. There were SCCA National points at stake in the Sunday races (and it should have been a relatively easy way to pick up some points toward next fall's amateur run-offs at Daytona except that nothing is all that easy at Bottomless Lakes) but they had to be there for fun. It was too far from everywhere, too inconvenient to get to, too dangerous once you were there and too dirty in the pits to be there for any reason except pure amateur enjoyment.

After driver orientation from the back of a truck, familiarization laps and practice, practice and more practice in such quantities that no driver could claim he hadn't had a chance to learn he should be careful, the first Saturday race was readied on the starting grid.

I'd been up around Lazy Lagoon earlier in the day but by this time I was back at the other end of the circuit. I watched the cars leave the grid, then re-read my light meter, shuffled my feet and waited for the cars to come around. On an 8-mile course you wait a long time. But this wait was even longer. Finally two cars came to the flag station at the top of the



Big-car race was won by Kent Bagnall in Cobra. Dick Carbajal, second here in Corvair-powered Piranha, later flipped at the Y.

hill and stopped. It was an awful silence. After a while the two cars drove on down to the starting grid and stopped again. I walked up to the flag station and learned from the workers (quiet, eyes avoiding each other, listening for the next squawking words from the CB 2-way radio that an Alfa had crashed in the turn 4 area, smashed into a bank, flipped several times and then rolled back onto the road and burst into flames. The fire was quickly extinguished, a doctor in a following race car performed an emergency tracheotomy and the driver was taken to the hospital. There was a long delay while the road was cleared and cleaned up, then the race was re-started and the program went on.

At the drivers' meeting the next morning, chief steward Alex Keller made a dignified announcement that the driver,

Ken Haynes of El Paso, had died during the night.

Unfortunately, this too is part of road racing. A part we don't like to talk about very much, a part that is especially tragic in the amateur branch of the sport where it's all supposed to be sunshine, sportsmanship and good, clean fun.

The races were finished late and the hospitality hour at the Crossway (courtesy of Lone Star Brewery) didn't get started until almost dark. It caught on, though, and traces of continuing merriment were still echoing across the swimming pool when we went to bed.

On Sunday I was surprised at the number of spectators that came to the races. All together there must have been 2500 people—more than had been at the USRRC race at Las Vegas two weeks earlier—and they paid \$1.50 to get in and a quarter for an official program.

It would be nice to report that the 2500 spectators saw a full day of tremendous racing but that wouldn't be true. After Saturday's races there were even fewer cars running (there were five, or was it six, cars off the road and in trouble on Saturday) and only 42 cars made it to the grid in the three, 7-lap races. There was some in-the-pack dicing but 16 cars on an 8-mile course can't come around often enough to keep the interest up, let alone at a fever pitch.

BOTTOMLESS LAKES



THERE WERE anomalies everywhere at Bottomless Lakes. The results sheets carried no first names, for example. But there *were* mimeographed results and I can remember races where the only results that ever appeared showed up on the side of a privy the next day. Handwritten.

I couldn't help remarking too on the New Mexico State Police cars on hand. There were five men assigned to duty at Bottomless Lakes that day and there were three more State Policemen who were there on their own with their scuba gear in case anyone got into a lake. The police cars were used to open and close the course, and for communication, and that, friends, is what is known as cooperation from the local authorities. I can't help thinking it does a lot more good for the police image than all the bumper stickers in the world. And I couldn't help comparing the lean, good looking New Mexico State Policemen with the soft-bellied bullies with their polished clubs common to all too many tracks.

By the time the last race was over, there were more cars dented and flipped but no one was injured. The wind continued to blow, the dust in the pit area continued on its way toward the last turn and the spectators quickly dispersed from their parking areas. Cars were readied for the long tow home, an occasional course worker inquired about the possibility of getting a dash plaque (all gone) and the trophies were handed out to a scattering of applause.

Back at the motel, the crowd was gone, hardly a racing car left in sight and by dinner time the only evidence there had been a race in the area was an occasional trailer or towed car heading out of town. Late that evening while I was taking a picture of the billboard west of town, I saw Tom McBurnie and his wife in their van towing his Porsche on the first leg of the long haul back to Santa Barbara, Calif., and believe me, I didn't envy them a bit.

By the next morning, except for the billboards, you'd never have known there'd been a race around Roswell.

As I said before, I'm glad I went to Bottomless Lakes. It's what so much of U.S. road racing is all about.