



It takes a village

Just what should the Changi Motorsports Hub have and how will it develop Singapore's racing scene? Our man, **Eli Solomon** has a few suggestions

"THE MAIN THING IF YOU WANT A race in Singapore is to look for the circuit first. Singapore is a small place...No use to talk about anything else."

The late Goh Teck Phuan, organising secretary for the Singapore Grand Prix series between 1966 and 1973.

Grassroots motor racing happens not when you have new cars, but when you have small advertisements and scrap yards. That's how Singapore came to have dozens of "Specials", race cars built locally, often cobbled together with a leftover chassis and an appropriate engine and clad in attractive aluminium bodywork. A local motor club and an enthusiastic bunch of members meeting in a pub helped. When you have a local base, you work up to the big event,

very much like Singapore's first ever circuit race – the Changi Circuit race of 1957. It took a few more years before Singapore was able to hold its first Grand Prix in 1961 but the foundations were already there. Having a permanent circuit adds a further dimension by addressing the needs of industry and local participation, far deeper than what an annual street event can do.

Those who have raced around the world and who know the workings on racetracks understand the difficulties involved and the need to be practical. The dreamer dreams of a top class track with full facilities. The businessman looks at things differently – a track that's merely incidental to the whole project that incorporates commercial projects, not necessarily motor-related. Do the guidelines set allow for

commercially viable project or will bidders shy away from this monumentally complex venture?

The Singapore Sports Council, tasked with orchestrating this entire exercise, has listened to feedback and when the RFP was announced in March, the site was for over 41-hectares of land, double the original allocated, additional land in collaboration with the Changi Aerospace car park. Bidding closes on 27 August 2009, leaving the interested parties barely five months to put together a top-class package. It is expected that the results for this will be made in the first quarter of 2010 with completion of construction in the last quarter of 2011 and an operational facility in first quarter of 2012, by which time today's cutting-edge motorsport technology will have become commonplace.

Top Gear Singapore took a look at a couple of permanent circuits of similar length that have provided generations with exciting races from Formula 1 to Formula 5000. We also looked at what would make an ideal racetrack and what sort of facilities both driver and spectator would demand and what could possibly make this exercise both interesting and sustainable. Suffice it to say that the smaller circuits that drew in the enthusiasts generally came up short on all other counts.



Short Circuits - 2.5km to 3.5km

Torontonga Park is situated on the outskirts of Invercargill in New Zealand. The circuit lies a short distance from the local civilian airport but it is best known as the southernmost racing circuit in the world. At just 2.61km in length it has had the distinction of having run the Tasman Series races in the 1960s (where the F1 elite spent their summer), F5000, GT and every other form of motorsport for decades. On a circuit with essentially one modest straight, the F5000 cars run no less than 156kph average speed with the faster GT and Sports Cars about 10 percent slower per lap.

Raupana Raceway, located in Christchurch, has several configurations of its 3.33km Grand Prix circuit. During summer annually, enthusiasts make the pilgrimage between four race circuits (one a street race) in New Zealand's South Island over the course of four weekends, often driving overnight to get from Raupana to Torontonga Park via Dunedin (where the street race is held). As a circuit the facilities at Raupana are somewhat friendlier to the driver and crew, with proper pit buildings where Torontonga's is made up of what tentage a driver and his crew can put up. The grounds are also less inhospitable, particularly during foul weather. Both circuits offer exciting racing and the driver often does not notice the facilities around a circuit until it's time for a beer or a quick meal or the final presentations. Modern does not feature in either but no driver the author has met has complained of the surroundings.

All this makes for a very bold and well thought out plan for what Singapore wants, but it also suggests that such a circuit will be merely incidental to the whole concept in order for it to be a viable proposition. Therein lies the distinction between what motorsports is to some and what it means to others. Combining the Sport Council's objective of promoting Singapore as a sports hub, grooming its youngsters to become the best in the world and creating awareness are primary goals that have been set. Motorsports has somehow found its way into the agenda so the pursuit is going to have to take a deep breath and understand that for a permanent circuit to exist on the island, it is going to have to incorporate a multitude of >



Torontonga, often referred to as Terrible Tonga (for its inclement weather) offers spectators very modest facilities indeed. There is a small clubhouse with some historic records on display where you can sense the depth of history. There are no multi-million dollars facilities anywhere in sight but it works and it provides everyone with exciting races and an opportunity to race throughout the summer months.



Some of the cars that have raced at Torontonga Park include Formula 5000s with over 500hp in their 5.0-litre Chevy engines. Touring cars, single-seater Formula Fords, Formula 2 and Formula 3000. Occasionally an important Formula 1 car shows up and is given an airing on the circuit. On several occasions, the odd race driver from Singapore has raced there as well (bottom middle and right in 2004, 2005 and 2006).



The Repara Raceway has several circuit configurations for its 3.33km track, allowing for various sorts of racing including historic single-seaters as seen in the photo of a Formula J Brabham BT18 in the hands of the writer



Grand Prix Circuit - 3.33km Lap record 1.25



Club Circuit - 2.45km Lap record 1.06.353



B Circuit - 1.7km



A Circuit (trial) - 1.2km



Malaysia's Grand Prix is an annual street event. Its Grand Prix museum is situated a short distance from the main straight in a purpose-built building. In 2003 it was revamped for the 50th Anniversary events which featured two back-to-back race weekends in November. The museum's static display incorporates vintage, race cars and motorcycles, including one car that won the Singapore Grand Prix in 1966

functions, from year-round sustainability in a distinctive design to training and education, incorporate commercial businesses, R&D, lifestyle and possibly even a museum, dreadfully boring if all that is on display are rickety vintage cars dripping oil and the odd racing tyre.

How a bidder incorporates all of this will be revealed in the first quarter of 2010. Whether there will be warehousing facilities for vehicles, an R&D centre for university use, shopping facilities, a hotel, marina or even a heritage centre showcasing over 80 years of Singapore's racing heritage will depend on how a bidder structures his proposal. A Heritage Centre is a key attraction as one enters a circuit complex makes far more sense than most would think, particularly so if the designer is able to blend audio and visual with physical content such as some of the racing cars that raced in Singapore. This immediately presents the circuit operator with another rich vein - historic motor racing - with races such as the Tasman Revival, Phillip Island Historic, Goodwood Revival, Goodwood Festival of Speed, Monaco Historic and the numerous races held throughout the United States all year round to emulate.

Recently, Top Gear Singapore spoke with Alex Chan, Chairman of the Singapore Sports Council, the key organisation behind the Changi Motorsports Hub. Our objective was to understand how motorsports had suddenly become part of Singapore's sports psyche. We asked some intriguing questions such as how Motorsports fits into the local government psyche that once rated the sport as taboo. Alex explained that sports had come up the agenda as an integral part of society and more and more as an integral part of the economic and recreational life of Singapore. Motorsports, which is not an Olympic sport, still applied the same rules of competition. It caters for a broad spectrum, from the elite all the way to the base of the pyramid. It is now seen as a major economic activity, well run and well promoted. Alex underscored that public sector and government involvement was necessary now if they did not want the sport to degenerate totally into street based and subterranean levels, with local competitors moving outside Singapore. The people who own and run the track need to be given the best chance of a good business proposition of not just running a track, but its ancillary businesses as well.

"When the sport is allowed to penetrate and proliferate you will get your community bases. As part of the spec'ing we actually state that the public and the community must have certain types of access. Whatever they [the bidders] submit, we will assess."

What was abundantly clear was that until Formula 1 presented itself in Singapore, the Sports Council did not have the Singapore Motor Sports Association (an NGO) on its radar of National Sporting Associations (NSAs). Mr Chan was clear that the motorsports association was going to be quite key to the

whole milieu of things. It has to be.

"When we engage the SMSA now they've not had the facilities so this becomes one of the key elements of their facilities - which is why you then have...karting, drag racing, Grade 2 race track, driver education, all the different things which are absolutely essential for the healthy development of the sport."

The Chairman was very clear about the SSC's involvement when he said that they "would not impose anything other than governance" upon the SMSA. An NSA by definition is not a club, which would explain why the SMSA is nothing like the old Singapore Motor Club or the Singapore Motor Sports Club after that. There are no regular newsletters, no organised events, no magazine. It functions as the ASN for the

country and under it come the various car, motorcycle and karting clubs.

The Sports Council Chairman noted that because Singapore is a small country, with a motorsports centre of gravity it seems to make a lot of sense that the assets will be located at the new Motorsports Hub in Changi. There will even be a small space for a museum, a feature which bidders in the tender may have to accommodate. This may be in the form of a Heritage Centre or as a dreadfully boring static display. It may take on a totally modern meaning, promoting historic motor racing, hosting exhibitions of cars that raced in the region, and perhaps even catering to the preservation of the heritage of the sport in Singapore (and Malaysia, prior to 1965) in

conjunction with the National Archives of Singapore.

The SSC has spent a lot of time trying to understand what Motorsports lifestyles and motivations are as well as map out the competitive landscape. The 41-hectare site is sea facing, ideal as a compact track and as an excellent venue for many leisure activities. But a track is just a track. The SSC's objective is to create a hub - the first step in the grand plan to affirm the city as an Asian leisure destination and to develop motorsports and entertainment industries. Changi's association with motorsports dates back to Singapore's first circuit race in 1957 (see *Top Gear Singapore*, March 2009). We look forward to racing at Changi again. □

Historic race events

Using Singapore as a stopover ahead/after Australia/Europe/USA



An example of Alfa Romeo at a track day at Laguna, mixing it out with Subaru, Mitsubishi, Lotus/Alfa and Lotus



The Southern Festival of Speed (four weekends in summer in New Zealand) Foot are noted for a race weekend at Ruapuna (Christchurch), Levin (Tairāra), Teretonga (Lower Otago) and Dunedin. Marshalling done by volunteers. Facilities noted



An example of a one-make display at Teretonga Park during the SPOC in February



An example of an F1 McLaren, the Colibri/Concorde, in action in New Zealand during a typical historic race weekend



The grid for the main Tairāra Festival race held at Eastern Creek in December 2006. Included Formula 1 cars such as the Lotus 49



Musco Historics - run in 2003 as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations. There were three separate races for the following Historic race cars (in Lotus 32/44, Lotus 720, C-Type and D-Type Jaguars etc); Mazda (racing cars); UK Classic Car Club



A Ferrari F1 at the United FIA GT race, which also saw a support race for historic cars



About the writer:

Eli Solomon is a motorsport historian and author of *Snakes & Devils - A History of the Singapore Grand Prix*. He has raced at Ruapuna as well as Teretonga Park in a Formula 2 Brabham BT18 and is familiar with the historic racing scene. Eli operates Singapore Rare Books LLP, specialising in Southeast Asian material as well as motoring and motor racing.