

Earlier this year a group of American Sevens assembled for a weekend of circuit driving and general Seven-type camaraderie. Clark Taylor tells of the great times they had...

On the Streets of Willow in the seat of a Seven

OUR STREETS OF WILLOW weekend, back in April, really started a couple of months before when the Los Angeles Shelby American Automobile Club (LASAAC) mailed their event flyer and posted it on the Internet. Our new, and loosely formed, Southern California Caterham Club took this event on as our own! The club website, <http://www.californiacaterhamclub.com> was soon buzzing with chatter about who was in and making sure our Sevens made it within the 60-car cutoff. The attraction of this event is almost unlimited track time in a casual non-competitive atmosphere on a road course ideally suited to the nimble handling attributes of a Seven. So essentially, this event turned into a terrific opportunity to meet and drive on track with our growing contingent of Southern California Seven owners, get to know our cars better, learn some track skills, and have some FUN!

You've heard it in the Neil Diamond (and also The Mamas and the Papas?) song: "it never rains in Southern California." (*Albert Hammond's is the version that was big in the UK... Ed.*) Well, there's something about a Sevens weekend that encourages Mother Nature to wring the moisture from her atmosphere. Weeks of beautiful clear skies mean nothing once an event is booked. Maybe we've found the answer for ending the drought! True to form, while driving to the track in the wee-dark hours of April 17, the air became chilly and the wind picked up as I climbed Highway 138 into the San Gabriel Mountains toward Wrightwood. On the road up ahead I could see taillights fading bright to dim as they passed in and out of the gathering clouds. And did we get wet? Yes, very wet! Luckily I had installed our Seven's weather equipment the night before. The hood, those tiny little straight-blade wipers and the windshield demister work very well, thank-you. Graciously, the weather began looking better as we descended into the high desert towards Rosamond and the Willow Springs International Raceway, leaving the rain behind! At least for awhile, that is.

At the track, we met the LASAAC event organizers and made it through registration and scrutineering. As promised, Mario Veltri, the event organizer, placed most of our Sevens in the 'white' or intermediate group so we could run together.

While organizing our pit area, it was good to see some familiar faces, and to meet new friends who previously had only been an Internet handle. William Sours brought his motorhome/trailer, so right away we had a comfortable home-base. Then Brad Underdahl and his son Nacho (is that his real name?) arrived towing his car on a trailer. Jokingly, I asked him "didn't you hear about the *No Yellow Cars* rule?"

One by one the faces and cars began to come together, Magnus, Jon, Michael, Gert, Brad, William and Clark. Our long-time friend and exceptional Caterham enthusiast, Michael Bedard and his friend Tim showed up a little later in the morning, sans car. Michael's experiencing some technical difficulties with his Cosworth powered car that just couldn't be resolved in time. But true to form, no two cars in our pit were identical in specification, ranging from mild (or as mild as a crossflow

live-axle Seven can be) to wild (Brad's screaming yellow Superlight and Magnus' first ever supercharged Zetec SV).

The Streets of Willow is often used as a training facility, and Danny McKeever's *Fast Lane Driving School* uses it in training the celebrities who race at the Long Beach Grand Prix Toyota Celebrity Challenge! As such, it incorporates a flat skid pad area, and offers multiple track configurations.

FOR OUR LASAAC event, a typical lap begins from the pits near the Start/Finish line, and sends the cars up a slight incline towards a sweeping off-camber right hander that can be taken flat-out. However, firm braking from high speed is necessary to successfully negotiate turn two, a right hand hairpin at the high point of the track. Dropping quickly toward turn three, another 180-degree hairpin leading back uphill, it seems the quick line is a wide entrance and then carrying as much speed back uphill into four as you car can generate. Four is a transition turn that varies depending on track configuration. For us it was a quick right left with a bump, so controlling wheel spin was important. Five and six were linked right handers, and during the weekend we discussed and tried many lines through these turns to find out what allowed the fastest exit speed onto the short straight before a right-left chicane.

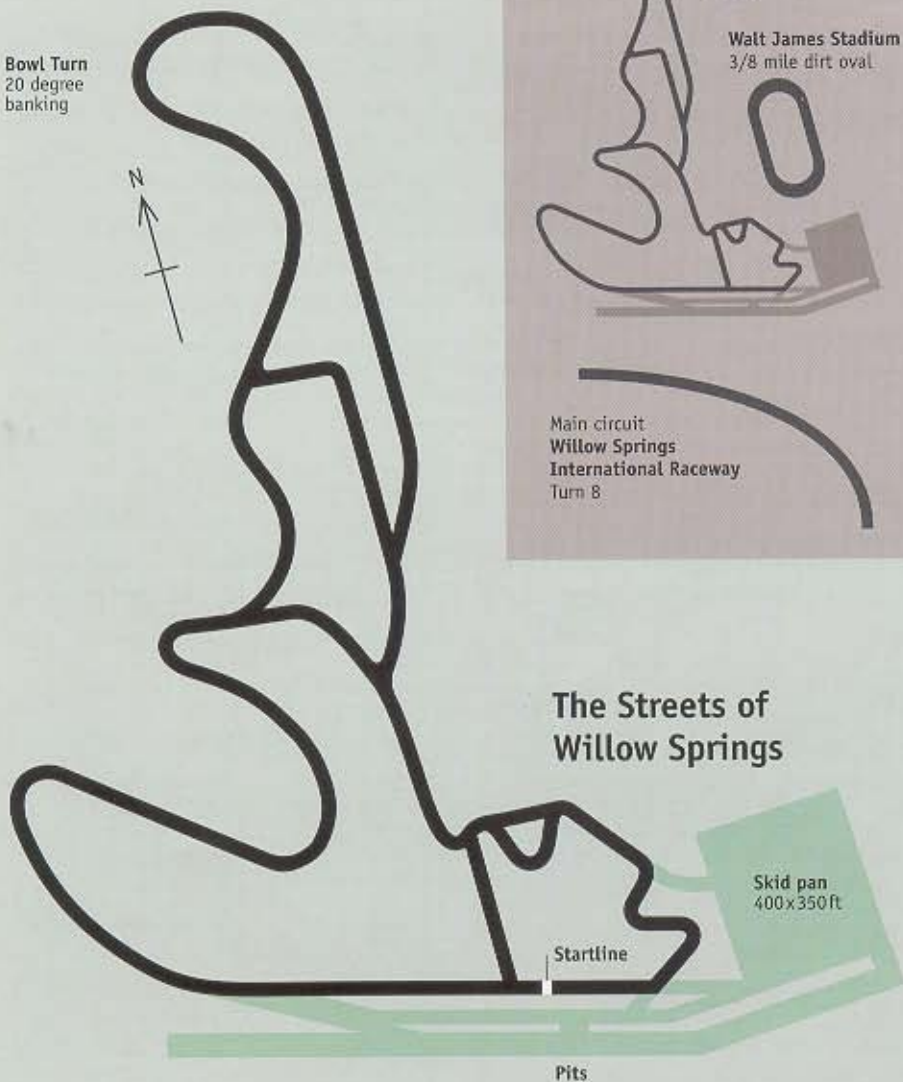
The Sevens all handled the chicane superbly, taking us to turn 9, a demonic off-camber left (looped it here chasing Brad's beautiful yellow Superlight!) that sent us through a few more quick right-left-rights and onto the skidpad 180. The right-hand skidpad corner led us back onto the straight towards the Start / Finish line for another lap of high-desert hysteria!



Although European enthusiasts may know only of the larger Willow Springs International Raceway, alongside is a multi-track motorsports facility.

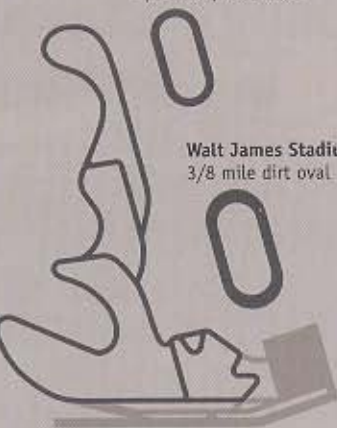
The 'Streets of Willow Springs' is a 1.8-mile road course with multiple configurations, sited just to the North of WSIR. Note that the aerial photograph of the whole site is taken looking to the East.

Bowl Turn
20 degree
banking



Willow Springs
Speedway
1/4 mile paved oval

Walt James Stadium
3/8 mile dirt oval



Main circuit
Willow Springs
International Raceway
Turn 8

The LASAAC schedules regular 'passenger' sessions throughout the day, and I commend them for providing these sessions. For one, they allow all of us who are participating the chance to introduce friends and family to our Motorsport passion. They also allow us to ride and learn from one another, and I believe this is its greatest benefit. During the weekend, everyone's driving skills improved immensely from our ride-alongs and pit-lane discussions. In fact without his car being available, Michael Bedard very generously spent the entire weekend riding with us, driving and coaching. He also shared his knowledge of chassis set-up and helped make some adjustments on some of the cars. By the end of the weekend, what started out as an enthusiastic but ragged bunch ended up driving crisp smooth lines and dominating the event!

Is there anyone who would dispute the fact that not all Motorsport activity takes place on the track? Some of the best racing takes place on the bench while we're sitting still! (*Yeah, just the same here! Ed.*) After our last track sessions on Saturday, William invited us into the shelter of his motorhome for a glass of wine and conversation. Whew, that was some excellent wine! A day outside, and those first few sips, I don't know about the others, but I was flyin'. Under the influence of this liquid courage and despite the chilling breeze and light rain that sometimes fell during the day, I clipped all the apexes perfectly and thundered down the straights! Sorry, slipped into a moment of personal glory there. After calming down a little, we adjourned to the *Golden Cantina* for dinner, a terrific little restaurant tucked away in the Rosamond SkyPark. Sleep was wonderful Saturday night. It came swiftly and soundly at the Inn of Lancaster. >

On Sunday morning we awoke to blue skies, calm air and the promise of a warmer day. At The Streets, you couldn't help noticing a more casual atmosphere. We knew the routine, and the track sessions clicked off on schedule. While on Saturday we encountered traffic, most of our Sunday sessions were pretty much traffic free. Saturday was about learning and orientation and dicing with our friends, while Sunday was a pursuit of the elusive perfect lap... and of course getting our group photo during the lunch break!

If you've ever time-trialed, you know it's easy and natural to get one or two corners right, then lose concentration and blow it. To an observer those little baubles may seem insignificant, but they're all tenths on your lap time. And unless it's a big one, you're the only one recognizing the mistake, but the clock remains impartial. That lap, that perfect lap, came to me during the third track session of the day, not too long after our lunch break. I knew it when it happened, and that was a wrap for the weekend!

Scenes from the paddock at the Los Angeles Shelby American Automobile Club trackday, with William Sours' motorhome providing a "Team HQ" for the Southern California Caterham Club



So there you have it. The largest Southern California – West Coast gathering of Sevens in history, and it was a huge success! Through the medium of Colin Chapman's genius, we met, made some new friends and explored our limitations. I don't know about the others, but I took home some memories that will stay with me for life. Memories of fun on the track, of extending and pushing myself and the Seven, and knowing in some little way we've all helped each other become a little bit better!

With the buzz of happiness and satisfaction from a great open track event at the Streets of Willow, we packed up our Sevens for the trip home. Little did we know that more adventures were on-tap!

In Brad Underdahl's own words, here's what happened:

Had a nasty moment on the trip home: on the 4-lane street that goes from WSR to Highway 14 at, 50 mph, the trailer started jerking violently from side to side – not unlike the fishtailing that sometimes occurs when traveling downhill – except the road is about dead level on that stretch. The guy behind me said that the trailer was up on one wheel a few times and he was convinced that it was going over – he had lost a racecar the same way! However, I managed to get it stopped by the side of the road with several crunches during the process (nosecone?).

Upon inspection the front of the trailer had slid under the truck. It was off the ball, the electrical connection was MIA and the chain had snapped. The trailer was completely disconnected from the car and how I kept it behind the truck and got it stopped I'll never really know. But I did! No apparent damage to the Seven, although it could have been totaled! The F250 Pick-up shows no ill effects either. The trailer has some damage on the front, but nothing irreparable, especially considering that one ton was being flung about at 50 mph!

All in all we were very lucky on this one. A few minutes later Magnus and Michael appeared, followed by Gert. After 10–15 minutes of consultation and repairs I was back on the road. William and Jon S. also stopped to help. (Author's note: Rumour has it that when Gert produced the necessary bolt for Brad to make a fix to his trailer, Magnus chided him for not having a 'black' nut and bolt to match Brad's trailer! *Yeah, we all know someone like that! Ed.*)

The remaining 200 mile drive was a bit edgy for the driver...