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GREAT TRACK ALGARVE

There were as many ups and downs in its creation as there are in the dramatic layout of Portugal's state-of-the-art circuit. By PETER MILLS

Think of a modern Formula 1 circuit being hoisted up and dropped over a 'super-G' skiing course.

The result would be close in character to the spectacular, undulating Autodromo Internacional Algarve.

Nestled between the bustling Portuguese resort of Portimao and the small mountain town of Monchique, Portimao's blend of corners and gradients has created a circuit with blind apexes for some 80 percent of its lap. The turnstiles to this bastion of old-school motor racing opened at the tail-end of 2008, and as a new European track has few contemporaries.

Unlike the United States in the late '90s, where a surge in the growth of NASCAR and a booming economy fuelled the construction of a spate of speedways, or the more recent track-building efforts in the Middle East, the continent has had little demand for new racing circuits.

For Portimao's Autodromo to be realised, an inspirational driving force was required. Step forward Paulo Pinheiro, a mechanical engineer and former kart racer and Superbike rider. It was Pinheiro's vision to provide the Algarve with a state-of-the-art racing facility. His background in real estate and construction provided the experience and savvy crucial for dealing with Portugal's complex planning regulations and persevere through a long gestation period.

"The initial idea was mine back in 2000, and then I had to convince people

- basically the banks - to get the finance," says Pinheiro. "It was a long, hard process. As you can imagine, Portugal is a rather complicated country. It took eight years to get the planning permission, and then we did everything in 10 months. For the five years from our start in 2000 to '05, Portugal had five different governments."

"So we had to reapply for planning permission each year. It was a difficult time, but from March '05 everything started to go smoother. We got the final planning permission in '07, work started in '08 and we finished in November '08 for the first race."

"PORTUGAL IS A COMPLICATED COUNTRY. IT TOOK US EIGHT YEARS TO GET PLANNING PERMISSION, AND THEN WE DID EVERYTHING IN EIGHT MONTHS"

A key early ally was found in Maurizio Flammini, the creator of the World Superbike Championship and in the headlines of late for his desire to stage a Formula 1 race in his native city of Rome. Pinheiro cites Flammini's faith as instrumental in seeing the project through its tough times.

"The first contract we ever did was for World Superbikes," says Pinheiro. "Back in 2000 I had a meeting in Rome with Mr Flammini. I just had a plan on a sheet of A4. I said to him, 'This is the layout of the circuit we want to build, and I would like to know if we do it, would you like to hold a race there?' And he said, 'Okay, if you do it, you have my word that you will have a race.' For a long, long time it was the only

thing that we had. He was the first person to believe in us and that's why he is such a special person for us. Like his brother Paolo, we have a very good relationship with everyone at what was the FGS Group and is now the Infront Group."

Today, the tight-knit relationship continues. Superbikes remain the circuit's biggest draw, with even amateur two-wheel racer Michael Schumacher showing up on the grid for the circuit's inauguration. As part of its promotional activities, Pinheiro's Parkalgar company sponsored local rider Miguel Praia in the 2004 WSBK series, before its own team, Parkalgar Racing, was founded. Sadly, Parkalgar-supported Supersport rider Craig Jones was killed at Brands Hatch in 2008, and a corner at Pinheiro's circuit has been named in his honour.

Alongside Flammini, significant support was lent by the local municipality, the Portimao Camara, which donated land. On viewing architect Ricardo Pina's finished pit buildings, and the grandstands that line Pinheiro's layout, it is surprising to learn that little choice was offered regarding the location of the plot they received.

"We started with 42 hectares of land that was owned by the municipality," says Pinheiro. "Then we needed to buy more, and we ended up with 300 hectares. Part was bought by us, part by the municipality. To be honest, we had this land and we just had to get the best ▶

LMS enjoys switchback topography in 2009

World Superbikes staged track's first event in '08

HOME TEAM
STARS IN AIGP

Filipe Albuquerque's double podium in the 2009 AIGP meeting ranks as one of the 25-year-old's favourite racing memories. "I had reached first position, it was just a shame that my pitstop didn't go so well."

◀ we could out of it. When I saw all the slopes and hills, though, I thought we could do quite a good job."

The result of their labours has proved an instant hit. In less than two years of operation, the majority of Europe's top championships, including FIA GTs, World Touring Cars, the Le Mans Series, AIGP, Formula Renault 3.5 and British Formula 3 have visited its accentuated slopes.

"We have been running for two years and are trying to understand which championships work better," says Pinheiro. "I think we've managed to have a good pool of races up to now. Some are better than we expected, some worse. FIA GT and AIGP went very well, and this year we also had a bit of a surprise with the WTCC. Last year we had a very good race with the Le Mans Series, but maybe we need to change the date because in the peak of the summer this year it was too hot. It was difficult to convince people to leave the beach to come to the track. It's a wonderful spectacle - perhaps we have to adjust some things and look at moving the race to September."

Audi Italia GT racer and former Red Bull Junior driver Filipe Albuquerque is well placed to shed light on the track's secrets. In addition to his experience competing at the venue in AIGP and Superstars, when his schedule allows Albuquerque joins Portugal's top drivers Pedro Lamy, Pedro Couceiro and Tiago Monteiro as an instructor at Portimao's race school.

"It's really easy to compare it to some of the best circuits in the world," says Albuquerque. "I rate it as one of the top ones. I think it's a very nice circuit with lots of ups and downs. It's not like some of the other new circuits like Abu Dhabi, where everything has been built from zero with no [natural] conditions at all."

"There are many, many blind corners. A high-level professional driver would do well [to learn them] in one hour. There are small tricks because of these blind corners that require a little bit more knowledge than on a normal track. Like the Nurburgring - the long one - it is quite tricky because 80 percent of the track is blind, so you really need to know them. For example, the last corner onto the main straight is very hard. I think, besides in formula cars, you need to release just a little gas, and then you need to position the car very precisely. And it is blind. You go around it at more or less 200km/h. It is quite hard to do that with the gravity of the car going up, and channelling it onto the main straight. It really requires some laps and some experience of the track."

As an ambassador for Algarve, Albuquerque's rave review is no great surprise. But BMW Sauber Formula 1 driver Pedro de la Rosa, a consultant with rival venue Motorland Aragon, also enthuses over Portimao's qualities. The patriotic Catalan is unable to be swayed, however, into rating Algarve above his home circuit of Montmelo as a test venue, despite the Autodromo boasting

four configurations for F1 testing and a high-tech sprinkler system.

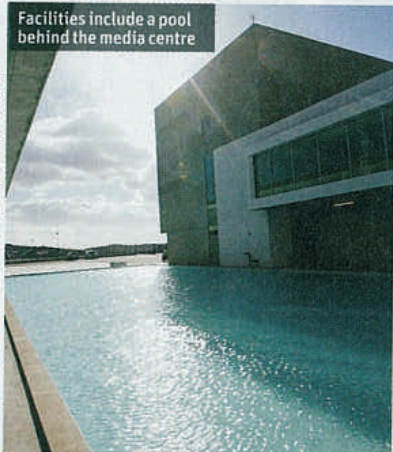
"For me, Portimao is a fantastic race track," says de la Rosa. "You can overtake on the long straight, and because of the gradient changes and the amount of blind corners it's interesting for the driver and fantastic for the spectators. From a testing perspective, I still rank Barcelona as the number one and Jerez as the number two. The reason is because in Portimao there are not enough long, third- and fourth-gear consistent-radius corners. That's where it's easy to get data."

"That's what makes Barcelona so strong for testing. It's funny, but even in the simulator when I was working with McLaren, Barcelona was our favourite. But Portimao is very nice. For testing it's a lot better than some of the other circuits we go to, like Valencia. I'm just comparing it against the best. Portimao has the capacity, it is safe, spectacular and good for racing. There are also a lot of really good tourist hotels in that area."

Algarve has been dealt no favours in its efforts to establish itself as a testing destination. Just two months after the track was completed, a predictably 'green' track surface awaited Formula 1 teams for their first visit in December 2008. Unseasonably heavy rainfall threatened to wash out January's following test, and the F1 teams have yet to return.

The current meagre F1 testing allowance explains why Algarve ▶

Facilities include a pool behind the media centre



Schumacher meets Max Biaggi on the grid in '08

Crowds mixed, but decent turnout to watch FIA GTs



F1 teams have not been back since rain-hit test



Track says it has coped well under spotlight of top series

PORTUGAL IN
FORMULA 1

Four Portuguese drivers have attempted to qualify for a world championship Formula 1 race, three successfully. Will Superleague racer Alvaro Parente or Motopark's Euro Formula 3 charge Antonio Felix da Costa emerge as Tiago Monteiro's successor?

has yet to enjoy the same level of winter track activity as in the heyday of Estoril, the former home of the Portuguese Grand Prix. Pinheiro denies that the regulations have adversely affected the business model of his €150million project. He concedes, however, that an easing of F1's mileage restrictions would be welcome for 2011.

"Obviously, it is better to have F1 than anything else," says Pinheiro. "It is a pity that the rules changed. We held tests in 2008 and '09 and we hope to have them again in 2011. The restrictions that they have nowadays make it a little more difficult to bring tests here, but I think we will do it in 2011."

There was a move to woo F1's powerbrokers with the staging of last year's standalone GP2 finale. The undertaking may yet prove shrewd, but local observers believe prohibitive costs mean the experience is unlikely to be repeated anytime soon.

"Oh, yeah, you bet!" says AUTOSPORT's man in Portugal, Paulo Manuel Costa. "They had the Secretary of Sports bailing

them out at the last minute in 2009; the word is the GP2 trucks were waiting outside for confirmation to get inside. But there were no free cookies this year, so GP2 dropped them from the calendar."

Pinheiro (below) confirms the thinking behind holding the event, which shared the billing with the FIA GT championship: "The idea was to have access to F1. With GP2, the organisation involved is the same as F1. So it's a good way to show whether or not you are able to stage an F1 race, I think all the comments made by the race director, the

drivers and everyone were very, very positive. So, I think we have proven now we are able to stage an F1 race. But, as you know, nowadays for a country like Portugal to hold a grand



prix is little more than a dream," he says, laughing. "We have to be realistic with the way our economics are nowadays. Maybe, with our proximity to the south of Spain, the way to do it would be to hold an Iberian GP. If we held one, I think it would be a smashing race, but we can only do what we can do."

For the time being Pinheiro is occupied with more achievable matters. A hotel and apartment complex is scheduled to be completed next March, while the kart track successfully staged a recent round of the WSK. And Mauro Sipsz's N'Technology company has signed a letter of intent to move into the Technology Park; the Italian team behind the Porsche Panamera Superstars project would move into what was intended to be the AIGP factory.

"The technological side is very important for us," says Pinheiro. "It creates the critical mass that is needed in the project. So, slowly, things are coming our way. Even in difficult times we have been managing to move forward, which is the main goal for any company."

THE TRACK

Location: Sítio do Escampadinho, Algarve, Portugal • **First event:** World Superbikes October 31-November 2, 2008 • **Circuit length:** Shortest version 2.153 miles; longest version 2.915 miles • **Lap record:** Nicolas Lapierre (ORECA Peugeot 908 HDI) 1m30.681s (114.833mph) on July 16, 2010 (using 2.915-mile layout)

Variety club

The circuit has 64 permutations, the longest version employed hosting the Le Mans Series events. Generous banking ensures that spectators are well accommodated.

Seeing is believing

Eighty percent of the circuit has blind apexes, but some-time track instructor Filipe Albuquerque rates the 125mph final corner as Portimão's toughest challenge.

Hilly landscape gives new track its special character.

Should Portimão regain the Portuguese Grand Prix, it would become the fifth circuit to host the event. The first event was held on the Boavista street circuit in 1951, using sportscar rules. Formula 1 followed in 1958.