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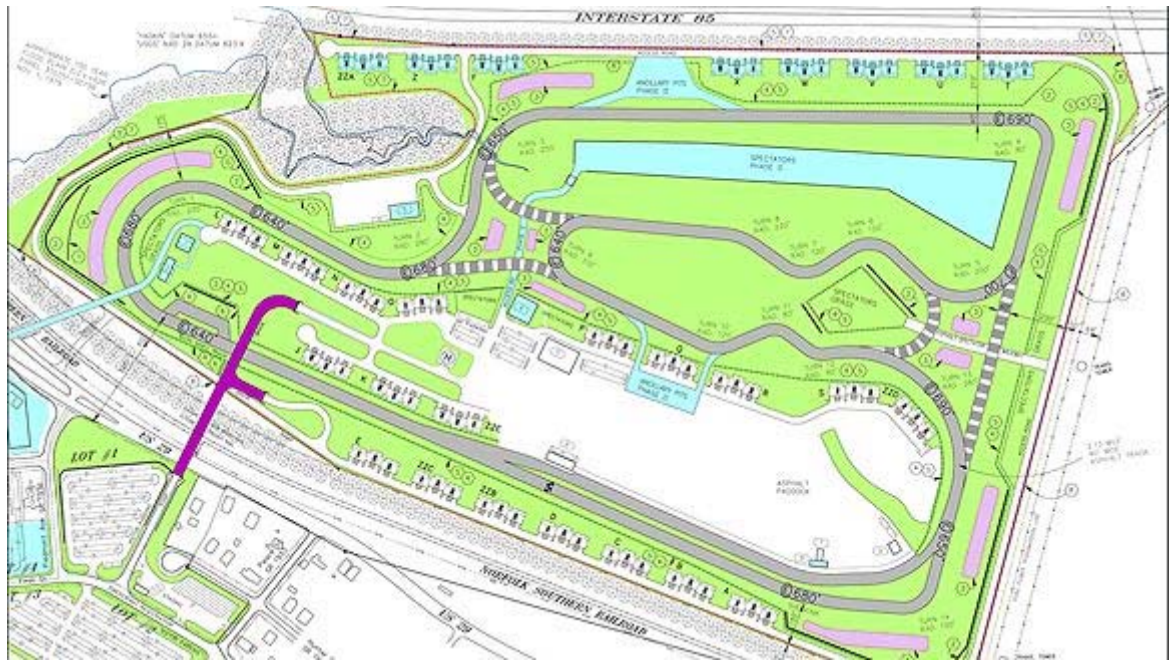

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## High expectations for High Rock Raceway's world-class road course

By Ryan McGee  
ESPN The Magazine

Elliott Forbes-Robinson has a problem.

Forget for a moment that the two-time 24 Hours of Daytona champion is standing in ankle-high mud and that his jacket is covered in pollen and burrs, compliments of a surrounding forest so thick it swallows light and sound. And forget that, living racing legend or not, no one's entirely sure how he's going to get his Gator 4x4 back to the office.



Plans for the development of High Rock Raceway.

Right now, EFR has only one concern on his mind.

"That drop-off is a bit more than advertised, isn't it?" He points, first to the sheet of paper in his hand, then down into the valley at his feet, a stark 30-foot decline that lands squarely in the middle of a marsh. "You hit that at 130 miles per hour and you'll end up having to go back and scrape your ass up out of that creek down there. Looks like we're going to need a remeasurement, huh?"

Welcome to the High Rock Raceway -- or, more accurately, the future site of the High Rock Raceway, a 2.15-mile world-class road course located in Spencer, N.C.

Yes, we said Spencer, N.C., and yes, we know you've never heard of the town or the racetrack.

But you will.

Welcome to High Rock, N.C., Speed Limit: 150 mph

On the left side of U.S. Highway 29, the dump trucks are hauling bricks out of the massive demolition pile that used to be a century-old textile mill. On the right side of the road, earth movers and land graders are starting to reveal the shape of the racetrack, a 14-turn FIA-approved road course designed for sports cars, motorcycles and, yes, NASCAR stock cars, slated to open in less than a year.

Standing in the middle of it all is Rich Combs. On one side of his wallet, he keeps business cards that read "High Rock Raceway President and COO." On the other is his SCCA racing license, earned with countless laps around Road Atlanta and in the Shelby Can-Am Series. Now, this most unlikely project is bringing together two of his greatest passions -- making money and going fast.

"When people ask me to describe High Rock, I tell them to picture their local country club," he says while standing in High Rock's makeshift office, a brick building that served as the mill's security office. "We have the same beautiful condominiums and amenities on the outside, but instead of surrounding a golf course, it surrounds a racetrack."

Not just any racetrack, but the only dedicated road racing course in motorsports-crazed North Carolina. A course designed by Forbes-Robinson (with motorcycle input from two-wheel teaching guru Aaron Stevenson) that features a 10-acre paved infield paddock, in-house timing and scoring, and a 5,000-square-foot race control center equipped to handle everything from sports cars to Superbikes.

#### Home Track Home

Lining the track and paddock will be 120 "race condos," which feature living areas of 800 to 1,000 square feet, sandwiched by an observation deck up top and a tricked-out "dream garage" underneath. Just imagine it -- you finish dropping those new cylinder heads into your Mustang, then pull straight out of your condo and onto the track for a few hot laps.

Says Stevenson, who will operate Cornerspeed and Cornerspin, on-site motorcycle road and dirt racing schools: "It sounds a helluva lot more exciting than walking the back nine, doesn't it?"

Not surprisingly, 83 of the 120 condos already have been snatched up, at \$275,000 a pop, even though they won't be completed until 2009. Also available are 14,000-square-foot "team race compounds" designed to house medium-sized race teams, complete with office space, massive shop floors and corporate hospitality areas. Among the interested parties is Michael Jordan Motorsports, which fields three motorcycle teams.

Yes, that Michael Jordan.

#### Location, Location, Location

Snickers all you want about the little town of Spencer, but the locale couldn't be more perfect for attracting business from the NASCAR world. High Rock sits directly off I-85, only 30 miles north of Lowe's Motor Speedway, home of Hendrick Motorsports and Roush Fenway Racing. It's also only 20 miles south of Richard Childress Racing in Welcome and 25 miles east of Mooresville, home of every other NASCAR race team.

Can you say "testing"?

"We have talked to a lot, actually most, of the big teams about what we are doing," Combs says. "Once we're up and running, teams will be able to throw a road course car on a rollback and drive it over here instead of loading up a team hauler and driving to VIR [Virginia International Raceway], which is a hundred miles away, or Road Atlanta, which is four hours away."

Those teams and their drivers already have been burning up the phone line to Forbes-Robinson with design suggestions, eager to ensure that the characteristics of the courses they run, including this weekend's venue in Mexico City, are represented at High Rock.

"They'll see it all here," EFR says with the confidence of a man who has raced and won on every significant track on the globe. "We're installing a version of Watkins Glen's Bus Stop Chicane along our very long



**High Rock Raceway is coming right along, even if there is still plenty of work to be done.**

frontstretch. The Esses at Sears Point are certainly represented up in the higher part of the course, and there are plenty of elevation changes that will have the feel of a lot of different circuits."

One Sprint Cup team has even talked with Combs about moving its entire operation to High Rock, eyeing the tract of land that sits just south of Turns 6 and 13.

"My biggest challenge has been calming everyone down," Combs says with a laugh. "These racing people don't sit and think about much -- they make a decision to do something and then it can't get done fast enough."

#### Green, Green, Green

Among those Combs has to keep calm is thrill-seeker billionaire Richard Branson, who recently announced a partnership between the track and his Virgin Charter airline venture. Virgin Charter will be the exclusive shuttle service for the rich and famous around the nation to come play at High Rock, but Branson's interest came about strictly because of another unique facet of the track.

"We will be the first 'green' racetrack in the world," Combs says. "The design includes consumption-reducing materials, renewable energies, we're going to feature alternative fuels, and we have worked with the state of North Carolina as well as the EPA throughout construction. We're even recycling all of the materials from the textile mill demolition, shipping metal, bricks and wood to other projects all over the country."

The track also will be made available for free to companies and researchers working to develop alternative fuels and vehicles.

"We hope that when we bring racers in here from all sorts of other series, they can see how we're doing things," Combs adds. "Then they can take what we've learned and carry it with them to other tracks."

#### Let's Go Racing, Boys

Combs, the town of Spencer and the entire racing community of North Carolina now eagerly await the sound of race cars rumbling around High Rock. But for now, they'll have to settle for the boom of bulldozers and backhoes and the whistle of Norfolk Southern trains chugging by the frontstretch.

And, oh yes, the hum of a muddy secondhand Gator 4x4, driven through the Carolina woods by a man who has piloted million-dollar machines through Laguna Seca's Corkscrew and down the Mulsanne Straight at Le Mans.

Soon, that piece of paper in Forbes-Robinson's hand will be a real, live racetrack. But for now, he has to do something about that damn drop-off.

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