

By Liz Swanton

Of the track

Street races versus permanent circuits is always a great topic of debate, so we thought it was time to find out what some of our leading drivers think... and what they would do if they could design a track from scratch.



Ask an Australian race driver to name his favourite circuit Down Under and you can probably guess the answer: Mount Panorama. Six-time Bathurst winner Larry Perkins is no exception, describing it as 'fantastic, and the sort of traditional race track that was found all over Europe in the 1950s and '60s'.

"They're all slowly dropping off into extinction but Bathurst is still there," Perkins says. "It's high speed,

it's got extremely challenging corners. It has off-camber, long radiuses. You name it, Bathurst's got it."

Perkins also finds it easy to name his favourite track overseas, saying he grew up dreaming about racing on it: the old Nurburgring.

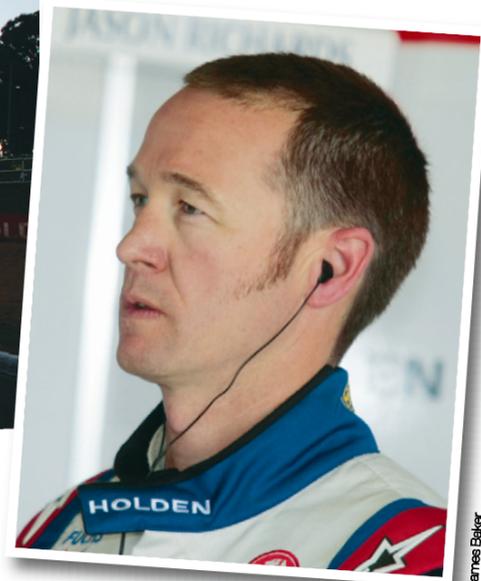
"I made that dream come true, when I drove it in 1974. It's staggeringly good, 193 corners, or something like that. It has everything and there wouldn't be a driver in the world that doesn't have

DRIVERS' FAVOURITE CIRCUITS



Clay Cross

Murphy on Bathurst: "It's an exciting track and the legendary status adds to it. I love the type of track it is, the undulations, the difference in heights, the corners, the fast straights."



James Baker

that at the top of his list. It's no longer a current track, but I am fortunate enough to have raced on that one, in F1 and F3."

Like Bathurst, the old Nurburgring is mentioned time and again and the same messages keep coming through. Not only is the sense of tradition a big part of both, but perhaps more importantly, the blend of elements that give these tracks their character, their challenge – and the enormous sense of achievement when you've nailed the perfect lap.

"Bathurst is the best track in Australia but it is a bit of an unfair comparison with anything else because it has a great history," says the recently retired Mark Skaife. "It's an unforgiving, incredibly fast circuit with a lot of character and all the things that race drivers like. When Bathurst comes around, you can't wait to get there, not just because of the event, but also because of the track itself."

Greg Murphy is another driver synonymous with Bathurst. There are four wins on the

resumé and, of course, the honour of the fastest lap – 2m06.8594s – set during qualifying in 2003. It's hardly surprising it tops his list of favourite local circuits.

"It's an exciting track and the legendary status adds to it. I love the type of track it is, the undulations, the difference in heights, the corners, the fast straights," Murphy says.

"You need to have a lot of respect for it because it pushes drivers to the limit. You have to be on the edge, to be 10/10ths, even 11/10ths everywhere, to get the best lap out of it and when you do, it's extremely rewarding."

For James Courtney, a Bathurst win is still a dream, but one he shares with many of his colleagues, and like them, it is his favourite Australian circuit.

"Not just because it's a challenging circuit, but because it's such a long lap. There's more chance of making a mistake, so it's more rewarding to pull out a really good lap."

"There's not much not to like. Lots of places to pass, high speed sections, tight sections, it's undulating, it's just got every type of corner you ask for aside from a dirt one – and I don't really want those," he laughs.

"Although sometimes you do get a bit of dirt – as Mark Winterbottom found out in 2007!"

Courtney's replacement at SBR – Alex Davison – also names Bathurst as his favourite Australian track. The big surprise is where it rates, given Davison's extensive international experience over the past few years.

"If you ask me for the best track in the whole world, you will get the same answer! Bathurst is a really unique blend of every circuit you could ever race on and it's one of those tracks that no matter how many laps you do, even when you're in a really good groove, you're still pushing yourself and you still manage to scare yourself every few laps but you get rewarded for taking a bit of a risk."



Lowndes on Adelaide: "It's unique. There are so many variables in the lap – kerbing, concrete walls, different bitumen surfaces, manholes, painted white lines. And I still classify it as the toughest race we do in a year."

"Most tracks, even Phillip Island, you find the limit fairly quickly and you get in the groove, but Bathurst you are always pushing yourself, and you can always find a little more when you do. It's one where you really do have to concentrate because it is so easy to make a mistake if you drift off a little bit."

"Every year you go up there, it's steeper than what you remember, and narrower than what you remember. It keeps the blood pumping and you never get sick of driving it."

"In fact, the most fun I have ever had on any race track in the world was in a Carrera Cup car around Bathurst on new tyres in qualifying in 2007. I actually can't remember where I qualified but I will never forget the feeling."

As a four-time winner, you would expect Craig Lowndes to mention Bathurst and he does, but he has another local favourite – Adelaide.

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bitumen surfaces, manholes, painted white lines. And I still classify it as the toughest race we do in a year."

When it comes to international tracks, the choice is huge. James Courtney is one of the current V8 crop who has experienced many of them and for him, there are two that come immediately to mind.

"Spa. For the same reasons as Bathurst. It's a very long lap, undulating, very challenging, and the weather over there is always a factor. It can be raining on one part of the circuit and dry on another."

"One thing that was good was coming from the high speed section of the circuit into the Bus-stop. They have changed it these days, but it used to be very challenging,

Courtney on Spa: "One thing that was good was coming from the high speed section of the circuit into the Bus-stop. They have changed it these days, but it used to be very challenging, from top speed down to second gear and into a really tight, tricky chicane."



Andrew Hall

from top speed down to second gear and into a really tight, tricky chicane. It's an amazing circuit.

"Another track that I really enjoyed that they've ruined was Brands Hatch Grand Prix, when they took out Dingle Dell. I did Formula Ford and Formula 3 there, and you'd come over the crest and the car would launch."

"You'd get all four wheels off the ground. I've got a great picture of me in the Formula Ford car with about 30cm of air underneath the car!"

Alex Davison has played on as many international arenas as Courtney, and counts Spa, Elkhart Lake and Phillip Island among the greats but when asked to name his favourite (aside from Bathurst), the answer is Le Mans.

"Bathurst is always purely from the



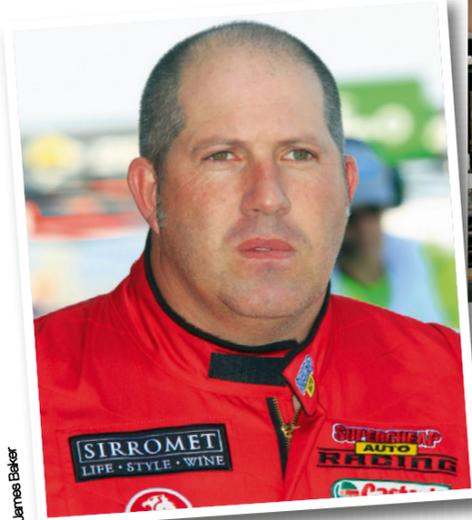
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Larry Perkins on the Nurburgring: "It's staggeringly good, 193 corners, or something like that. It has everything and there wouldn't be a driver in the world that doesn't have that at the top of his list."



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DRIVERS' FAVOURITE CIRCUITS



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driving point of view but with Le Mans, it's the atmosphere. It is so great to be there and be part of that event. It's something you dream about.

"But the track is fantastic too, and like Bathurst, it has lots of different elements. It's particularly interesting at night in the rain, because it's bumpy and the water puddles badly on the straight, so when you're doing 300 kays and aquaplaning, it's a pretty amazing feeling.

"So, some of the hairiest moments I've ever had racing were in the rain at Le Mans at night, hitting the plus button on the traction control trying to get more traction and the TC light is flashing at 280 kays, so you know it's pretty slippery ...and then the Peugeots and the Audis go past at 360 kays and nearly blow you off the road!" he laughs.

For Skaife, it's also Le Mans, which he raced at in 1997 in a Lister Storm. He admits part of the attraction is, like Bathurst, because of the tradition associated with it, but also because of the style of track.

"If there's a style of circuit I like, it's fast and flowing, so Phillip Island and Eastern Creek are similar. They're fast, they're testing and there's not much room to go off and there are sections at Le Mans, like Indianapolis, that are really quick.

"You enter an incredibly fast sixth gear section, then a really fast sweeping right, into a tight third gear left. And the skill of getting it through there and slowing it up and balancing it and having it sort of on the slide and being able to be accurate – all the things that test driver skill – is in that little piece of road."

Steven Richards has driven on many of the British circuits during his time away as a Nissan Super Touring test driver in the late '90s, and names Thruxton as one of his favourites.

"While it is quite short, it does have quite a few fast corners and it is quite bumpy. It's an old airfield circuit so it's been designed on a big open plain but it has a lot of character.



Morris on Macau: "It's unbelievable. It's a hard track to learn, but once you get the back section, the first corner, then the second corner right, then all the rest flows in each other. If you get those two wrong, you never string the lap together."

"The best circuit I've ever had a chance to drive around – and sadly, it was only in a rental car – is the old Nurburgring. It wasn't created from a clean sheet of paper. It had to be wound around villages and forests and all the terrain that was already there.

"And the fact that it's 27km long. There's no other circuit like that. Even the shorter circuit they use for the 24-hour race. That's definitely something I would like to put on my resumé."

For Paul Morris, nothing beats the Macau street circuit. He loves the contrasts of the track, not just the circuit itself, but its position, winding up past the centuries-old buildings in the old Portuguese part of town, then back down to the modern part of the city.

"I don't need to think about it," he says of Macau, "if someone asks me. It's unbelievable. It's a hard track to learn, but once you get the back section, the first

corner, then the second corner right, then all the rest flows in each other. If you get those two wrong, you never string the lap together."

Jason Bright's pick is Mosport in Canada from his time racing Formula Ford 2000 in North America in 1996.

"It's another track with lots of elevation changes as well and when I was racing there, there were four or five corners that were over 120mph, so it was very exhilarating. There's not a lot of run-off, so if you made a mistake you were going to pay and that's another thing that makes it exciting!"

Lowndes shares Courtney's love for Spa, describing it as a beautiful track. He says he had watched television coverage of the 24-hour and the F1 races over many years so racing there in F3000 in 1997 was a dream come true.

"Down through Eau Rouge is amazing.



It's not a street circuit that's on many drivers' favourite lists, the 2.3km layout being as simple as Symmons Plains but without the character of the Tassie track, but nothing in world motor racing catch match the historical setting of the Norisring. It's in the heart of Nuremberg, Germany, held on the former site of the Nazi Party rally grounds where Adolf Hitler would address the party convention each year. The decaying ruins of the old Nazi stadium form part of the pit straight grandstands, which are seen here packed with thousands of fans watching last year's DTM round. Sportpics

THE ULTIMATE CIRCUIT: So what type of track would our heroes create were they given the chance?



Mention the possibility of designing a circuit from scratch and it's hardly surprising the guys would jump at the chance. Many agree with Alex Davison in saying they are not consulted early enough in the process when a new track is created. It's also hardly surprising they mention many of the same elements as being non-negotiable, if the track is to be challenging and rewarding.

"I would scour the world looking for a relatively undulating piece of landscape that has a road on it, and where one road joins the next and you have a natural circuit," says Larry Perkins.

"An artificial track can never capture what I'm talking about. I'm fortunate that I've driven on places like Rouen and Pau in France and others like them, and if I was designing a track, I would try to build a replica of some of those absolutely staggeringly excellent road tracks, because you've got to have a track that's challenging.

"And what's challenging is high speed fast corners, unpredictability, none of this textbook precise radius and 2.6 degrees of gradient and all this sort of crap. A road course is a road course. It's all over the shop. It's got bumps, it's got everything that today's textbook won't allow.

"There's nothing wrong with safety, that's not the issue. You can have those challenging tracks but mostly they've gone away because they aren't deemed safe. However, if you create a new track, you'd incorporate all the known areas of safety.

"The piece of bitumen has never caused a problem," Perkins says. "It's what you hit when you leave the bitumen."

Skaife agrees with Perkins, that any track that is good to drive on has character, which means rise and fall.

"It also has to be wide enough to have raceability,

in terms of providing corners you can run two abreast on and other areas where you can be three and four abreast on, leading into a braking area. Areas with long enough braking areas that you can make a passing manoeuvre.

"And probably, clearly, the over-riding thing is that it is safe enough, but sometimes in the safety of modern race tracks, we've created sterile, more clinical race tracks that don't have character," Skaife says.

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"The great example of that is the old Nurburgring. I've never raced there but I've driven around there and it is just one of the most spectacular tracks, probably the best in the world.

"Then you go to the new Nurburgring, the F1 circuit, and it's probably one of the most ordinary circuits to

drive around. It really shows the difference between character and unforgivingness, if I can say that, versus modern, safe, bland race tracks.

"I'm happy to trade off a little of the safety. I mean, 10 or 15 years ago we had a mandate to look at the places that were dangerous from a straight-up, off-the-road, perspective. The ones that were obviously dangerous. And we did a lot of work on that.

"But there are still a lot of corners on tracks around Australia that are still dangerous. And some of those, because of the cost, or the lay-out or whatever, maybe even how much land the track owns – like the run-off at the end of the back straight at Sandown, where you can't have any more because you're on the Princes Highway – so there are places you can't do much about.

Greg Murphy has lots of elements he would like to incorporate in a track but, as he says, it depends what sort of lap length you want.

"If it takes two minutes and a bit to get around Bathurst, which is a very long circuit, you would use some elements of that, and there would be other elements from other tracks around Australia and New Zealand that you would add. If you want to make it a three-minute lap, there are other things you'd use.

"You certainly wouldn't alter Bathurst, but if you were designing a new track, you would use parts of Bathurst. You would use sections of Phillip Island because it's got some fantastic corners. Eastern Creek, Sandown. That's a great circuit but very different to Bathurst. Oran Park – the bridge. Pukekohe, coming up over the hill is great.

"It would be great to design a new track and take the best parts, use all the corners that have made you hold your breath in the past. But you've also got to design a circuit that is a great race track and great for passing, which I think is something

that has been forgotten on some of the newer tracks. "They've forgotten about the racing. They've drawn up tracks that have got good shapes to them, and are safe, but they don't do anything for the actual racing."

Paul Morris says the trouble with newer purpose-built tracks is that they lack passion, for drivers and for spectators.

"They don't have any places where the fans rush to the corners, saying 'let's watch the cars go through here'. As a kid I remember being at Lakeside and being absolutely fascinated by the cars coming under the bridge and then going up through Hungry Corner, because you could actually see the cars working and get close to it.

"The only track we have left like that is probably Bathurst. Oran Park was too. Everything else is so sterile. Amaroo Park was another great track. It had a little bit of everything.

"If I was designing something I'd want some of Lakeside and some of Amaroo Park – put those together, and you'd have the best racetrack! You can't start with a flat piece of land because it's so boring."

Steven Richards agrees with his peers in terms of what makes a good track. The difficulty, he says, is not just in finding the right piece of land.

"Gone are the days when motorsport was a purists' sport where only the competitors were thought about.

Nowadays, we have to think of the sport as a commercial entity and how it can survive in the real world and make a profit, so nowadays we tend to go for big open spaces that are easily accessible for spectators, so that also tends to limit some of the design criteria too – the sport has to make ends meet.

"It has to be easily accessible, so the parcel of land is close to transport, and as open as possible so they can fit lots of grandstands in. They're the realities. As a driver, there's no reason other than expense why you couldn't find the right land and design the track you want.

"The other aspect is that a race track of today doesn't just survive with races. It has to host defensive driver training and things like that. Most of the circuits around Australia are booked out daily for a wide variety of things. They're like any other business, they have to diversify to make ends meet, to turn a profit."

Jason Bright agrees with Paul Morris on the fact that



many of today's circuits are designed without passion.

"A lot of the tracks I raced in America, and tested at, have more character than the tracks here, but at the same time, the safety standards aren't anywhere near what we have here, so I think there's a catch-22.

"You can make a really good circuit and have it going through the bush or whatever, but they're also quite dangerous. It's not always possible to have the challenges and the safety in the one track.

"Temporary road courses can take a lot of work to get up to the safety standards we need whereas a lot of the permanent circuits end up quite sterile because they're built with safety in mind.

"If we're going to a new street circuit, it should be designed and built with racing in mind. Canberra was very poor for racing and Indy is not the best for V8 Supercars, but Adelaide is."

Bright is another who says more consultation with the drivers is needed when it comes to designing new tracks.

"We probably should push for more say, and the guys doing it should ask us. The biggest damage we can do to the sport is to go to some of these tracks and put on bad racing."

James Courtney is another who would go looking for a mountain or a valley and build the track around it, saying undulation is good for drivers and spectators. He agrees that safety concerns, while

important, are sucking character from the track.

"Look at the faces of the drivers after a street race. They're up and down and all over kerbs and everyone has a great time. The fans love it because it's more exciting because the cars are moving around; the drivers love it because it's more of a challenge and you're running up against walls and the car is leaping off the ground.

"I guess they think you have to have a flat track to make it safe, but if you look at the accidents we've had over the last few years, they've been really freakish accidents, where everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. It wasn't just the track.

"For sure, moving walls away does help, but then it's not as exciting, so it is probably a trade-off. And I don't think there's a way to build a Bathurst with plenty of run-off all the way round it. It's not as challenging.

"Bathurst wouldn't be the same if you came over the top of the hill and there was a couple of hundred metres of run-off each side. It would be nowhere near as exciting for us or the fans.

"It's also about ego too, doing what we do! Having the quickest split of the weekend across the top of the hill at Bathurst. If you can't win the race, that's what you want – sometimes it's even more important! Yeah, yeah, you won the race, but I've got the manhood across the top of the mountain!"



DRIVERS' FAVOURITE CIRCUITS



Skaife on Le Mans: "You enter an incredibly fast sixth gear section, then a really fast sweeping right, into a tight third gear left. And the skill of getting it through there and slowing it up and balancing it and having it sort of on the slide and being able to be accurate – all the things that test driver skill – is in that little piece of road."



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It was wet right through practice and qualifying when I was there, and then it came to race time and it was a dry race.

"We asked, as rookies, if we could have 10 or 15 minutes run around to see if we could get through Eau Rouge flat, which the FIA denied, so we had to go in a bit green, but as the race went on we managed to do it."

You're coming from behind at a place like Spa starting a race with no experience in the dry, but that's just the kind of test – and place – that sorts out the better drivers from the rest of pack.

"The difference between hard race tracks and easy ones is that the easy ones will bring the field together," Skaife says. "I'm not saying that in an arrogant way – but if you go to an easy track, you have the whole field within a second, whereas if you go to a hard

track, you have 10 cars within a second.

"Those tracks reward your ability and your commitment. When you do a lap of Bathurst and you know there is not a millimetre of road left anywhere, there's nothing more rewarding. If you qualify on pole at Winton, you might have done a ripper lap, but it hasn't been as challenging."

Alex Davison agrees with Skaife about Bathurst, and Winton. He says drivers never complain about undulation and always want something that is fast and challenging.

"To do a quick lap around Bathurst, you're never comfortable, whereas some other tracks you never really scare yourself. You might worry occasionally that you're going to run off the road, but you're not scared."

"All the big tracks have that, and it is important. Undulating, fast, and a good flow is

important too. A lot of the new Formula One tracks have corners that don't flow. They just feel awkward when you're driving around them.

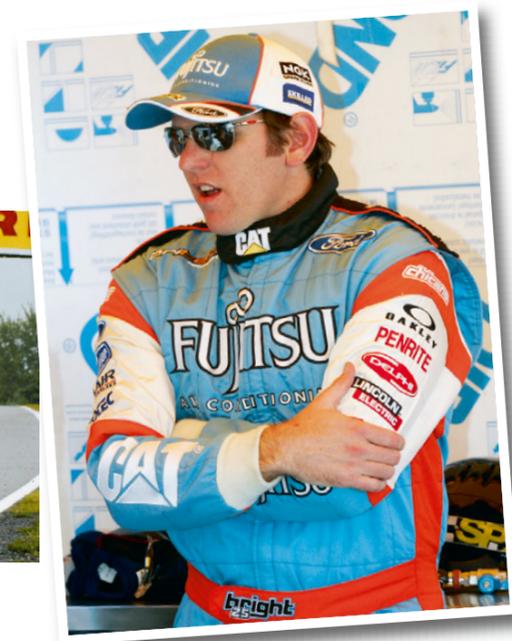
"It's not easy to explain, but some corners have a good feel and flow well, and some don't, and you've got to have a good flow. Like the new stadium section at Nurburgring is just terrible, whereas the rest of the circuit is great. But this new section, the corners are off-camber and you can't see the apex.

"It's tricky and difficult to get right, but even when you do, it just doesn't do anything for you. That's one example. All the modern race tracks have similar sorts of issues. Sepang has some great corners, but in some corners, you just wonder what the designer was thinking.

"We don't get enough say. Engineers and designers think on a theoretical level – this should be right because of this and this – but like so many other things, a race track is very different in practice compared to what it is in theory."

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Bright on Mosport: "It's another track with lots of elevation changes and when I was racing there, there were four or five corners that were over 120mph, so it was very exhilarating. There's not a lot of run-off, so if you made a mistake you were going to pay..."



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