

Drivers see changes at Watkins Glen

A year ago, Jeff Gordon left Watkins Glen International feeling a little sore after a frightening crash. He's smiling now. "I'm certainly happy to see the improvements that they've made," Gordon said Tuesday after completing approximately 50 laps on the first day of a two-day tire test on the track for Goodyear. "There are a lot more runoff areas that I think are really good improvements."

WGI is a road course equivalent of Talladega Superspeedway, always capable of causing a big crash. Two bone-jarring pileups in Cup races the past two years helped precipitate the largest improvement project at the storied track since 2005.

In the section known as the inner loop (Turns 5-8), the gravel trap was replaced with a paved runoff area and a SAFER (Steel and Foam Energy Reduction) barrier was installed along the interior concrete barrier wall.

The grass area in Turn 9, known as the carousel turn, also was removed and paved to form an extended runoff area, a rumble strip was added, the existing guard rail system was pushed back about 25 feet, and sand barrels have replaced the tire barriers that contributed to last year's crash.

In Turn 10, a portion of the gravel trap was replaced with another paved runoff area and the rumble strip was extended, and a SAFER barrier was installed in front of the exterior guide rail system in Turn 11. All grass areas between the new SAFER barrier and the track were paved to help provide better traction when a driver is attempting to bring a car to a stop.

Last August, Kasey Kahne caused the big wreck when he dived inside Sam Hornish Jr. coming out of Turn 9 and sent Hornish off onto the grass on the left side. Hornish's No. 77 Dodge then caromed off the tire barrier and came twirling like a helicopter blade back across the racing surface. Gordon tried to speed through and slammed the left rear of Hornish's car, spinning violently around into the guard rail lining the track. (MSA archive photos)



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