

Travel Tales

The Baltimore Grand Snafu

by

Llewellyn and Susan Toulmin

The first ever Baltimore Grand Prix (BGP) was held September 2-4, 2011, over the Labor Day weekend. As a car enthusiast who had never attended a Grand Prix event in person, I had to go. Big mistake.

The problems started with the TV coverage. ESPN3 boldly announced that it would broadcast the race over the Internet, where my wife Susan and I could watch on our computers any bits we missed in person. But then the ESPN3 schedule failed to list the different races, and we were never able to really pull in the program.

The BGP website assured us that numerous volunteers would direct us to parking near the event, or to a satellite parking lot with a shuttle service. As we drove in to Baltimore we saw a few small signs directing us to parking. Then the signs disappeared. No volunteers were in evidence. Finally we saw a small sign saying "Turn in here for BGP." We dutifully turned in and found ourselves in a giant Walmart parking lot, with no shuttle or BGP staff.

Driving further into the city on our own, using our GPS, we found a street about a mile from downtown that had on-street metered parking. There was one empty parking spot. Naturally, the meter was broken. We decided to risk a ticket, and put a note on the meter saying that it would not take our quarters.

We then trudged in the heat toward the distant roar. Nearing the harbor, we were stunned at the transformation of the town. Most of the downtown just west of the Inner Harbor was surrounded by high fencing, screens, grandstands and concrete New Jersey barriers. A huge amount of work had gone into creating the track, which was shaped rather like a big pistol pointed at the Inner Harbor. We could hear cars screaming down the city streets during a warm-up period, but we could not see them due to the temporary walls that screened most of the track.

A race official told us to go to the Information Center near the harbor restaurants to buy our tickets to get into the race area. We dutifully went there and were told that at the last minute the BGP management had decided to cancel all ticket sales at that location. We would have to walk another 2/3 of a mile around the north end of the track to find the main sales trailer.

Trudging along, we noticed a small area right at the northeast corner of the track where we could actually see a few yards of street/track, without paying. Hmmmmm. Cars roared by and were so loud that we were glad we had brought our ear plugs. But the spot was beside a smelly Port-a-Potty, and we decided to keep going and buy tickets, so we could wander around the inside of the raceway and get some good wide views of the track and racing.

Arriving at the ticket trailers, we noticed that the lines were long and not moving. I went to the head of the line and asked what the problem was. “The power has been off for an hour,” said a frustrated patron, “and they have no manual backup. So they refuse to sell any tickets.” I noticed that the posted price was \$33, not the \$30 listed on the website, for the cheapest, walk-around tickets – no sitting allowed.

Just then the power came back on. The eager crowd surged forward to the ticket windows. We looked over at the pedestrian bridge leading into the raceway, and saw another long line there. Apparently officials were checking all tickets very carefully, and it was taking a half hour or more to get in, even after an hour in the purchase line. Susan and I looked at each other and simultaneously said, “Let’s go to the Port-a-Potty!”

Arriving back at our Port-a-Potty vantage point, we tried to figure out where we were. Studying the raceway map, we realized that we were at turn number one, right after the start, at Pratt and Calvert Street, at the northeast corner of the raceway. The turn in front of us was very narrow, and it seemed impossible that a group of cars could get through safely without a pile-up. There was an emergency escape ramp off to our right.



Spectators beside the PortaPotty at the Baltimore Grand Prix

We were downwind of the Port-a-Potty, which was smelly and leaking something unmentionable. The fellow in front of us kept sneezing and blowing his nose one nostril at a time onto the ground. A drunk weaved between us, almost colliding with Susan. Atmospheric.

We waited for an hour past the announced time for the start of the race. Nothing much happened. The numerous massive TV monitors gave lots of useless information on expensive products to buy, but nothing on the delay.

Susan and I passed the time by watching the legs of the attractive young woman standing in front of us. It was quite hot, and little beads of sweat formed on the backs of her thighs and dribbled down to her ankles. “Hey,” I said to Susan, “We’re race fans. Let’s bet on this race. You take the drop on the left leg and I’ll take the right. The loser has to buy the next meal.” In eager anticipation we watched, cheering in whispers as one then the other contender surged ahead. It took 84 seconds for Susan to be declared the winner of the Baltimore Grand Prix de Sweat.

Finally the National Anthem began. We dutifully placed our hands over our hearts. But we weren’t quite sure what to do when the PA system cut out half way through the song. We couldn’t hear the anthem or the rest of the race commentary which followed.

Apparently the BGP finally started, although we didn’t hear any announcement. Suddenly a yellow race car rammed into the concrete barrier on the street/track in front of us. It backed up into the blind curve behind, risking a major collision, but then started forward and managed to survive.

Several cars overshot the turn and skidded into the escape lane. We were finally able to see a few cars up close. They were from the American Le Mans Series (ALMS), and some looked like souped-up street Porsches, while others looked like space ships on wheels. Apparently all the cars used alternate fuels.



An ALMS race car whizzes by at the Baltimore Grand Prix

The PA system finally came back on and we heard an announcer say that the Baltimore track and its race administration were fantastically well managed. Susan and I looked at each other. Later we heard an expert commentator say that Pratt Street at the start was the “roughest stretch of road in the world of Grand Prix motor racing,” and would hopefully be re-paved in time for the next race in 2012. He didn’t sound too pleased with the track preparation. The contract for the

BGP lasts through 2015, so perhaps the teething problems we experienced will be worked out by then.

After a few laps we gave up. Our only view was of 40 feet of track, across which noisy blurs sped by intermittently. We later learned that the ALMS race we watched was won by Humaid Al Massood of Abu Dhabi and Steven Kane of Ireland, driving a Mazda, doing the 71 laps in two hours and one minute at an average speed of 72 miles per hour. We had no idea of any of that at the time. It was hot beside the Port-a-Potty and getting more crowded. So we headed for reliable old Phillips Seafood at the Inner Harbor for some relief from the heat.

Unfortunately, instead of the excellent seafood we remembered, we found the crab soup to be mediocre and the crab cakes weak. It was a far, far cry from the best crab cakes we have ever had (at the Robert Morris Inn in Oxford, Maryland), and quite a let-down from our expectations.

Totally defeated, we trudged back to the car. Incredibly, there was no parking ticket on our windshield. It was the highlight of our day.

Lew and Susan Toulmin of Silver Spring have rallied their classic 1968 "Bullitt" Mustang across thousands of miles, and driven it across the US three times. They are not planning to drive it down Pratt Street in Baltimore in the foreseeable future.

* * *