

# Wheels for the Weekend Track Racer

By JOSEPH SIANO

**S**TANDING in the paddock at the Lime Rock Park road racing circuit in northwestern Connecticut, Mark Starr, a car salesman, talked last month about the sure-fire deal closer he uses on wavering customers. He has them don a crash helmet and strap themselves into the passenger seat, so he can take them on a bumpy, noisy, scary test ride.

This may not sound like the recipe for inspiring customer confidence. But Mr. Starr swears that it yields a sale almost every time. That's because the car he sells in his dealerships in Port Chester, N.Y., and Greenwich, Conn., is the Lotus, and the place he takes passengers for a spin is a racetrack. And if ever a street car was created to rack up most of its miles at places like Lime Rock, it is the Lotus.

"Today alone, I sold three cars," said Mr. Starr, who had taken some of his mechanics along and set up a small catered buffet at the track, all for his customers — past and potential.

An Elise (one of only two models Lotus sells) weighs just 1,984 pounds and has a 190-horsepower engine, which is positioned behind the two-seat interior compartment for ideal weight distribution. In skid-pad testing by Road & Track magazine, the Elise demonstrated that it can get around turns more nimbly than any other car except those costing much more than its \$40,000-plus price tag.

The Elise, which can carry two lithe adults who like to travel light, traces its corporate and design origins to the Lotus Formula 1 team, now defunct, created by Colin Chapman. Other than Ferrari, no other street car in the world has so much racecar DNA.

So it was no surprise to see Mr. Starr and other Lotus drivers taking part in a private session at the track organized by the Sports Car Driving Association, one of numerous car clubs that allow owners of red-hot brands like Lotus, Corvette, Porsche and Ferrari to do what they cannot do legally and safely on public roads — open up their cars to see what they'll do.

These sessions are less like races (at the Lime Rock event, drivers waited for a signal from the driver in front of them before passing, not the etiquette observed in a real race) and more like pleasure drives on fast forward. They have given rise to a new category of vehicle: the track car.

A track car occupies the space somewhere between the full-time passenger car, with its mundane life of trips to the commuter lot and grocery store, and the full-blown racecar, which isn't legal for street use. In fact, there are some owners who do nothing with their sports cars besides zipping around tracks like Lime Rock and the Watkins Glen, N.Y., racing circuit, as well as driving them to and from the track.

Joe Casella is a co-owner of the Performance Drivers Association, a 35-year-old group that, like the Sports Car Driving Association,

organizes several track days for its members each year. Before either group will allow drivers onto the track, they must go through a training program on high-speed driving. Their cars are then given a safety inspection, including a check for CD's or Mardi Gras beads hanging from the rear-view mirror or other loose items in the interior that could cause a distraction at high speed. On the track, drivers are closely monitored for signs that they are going faster than their skills allow. The idea is to allow owners of high-performance cars to explore their limits, with minimum risk.

Mr. Casella said that his organization had an average of 1,200 to 1,500 active members each year, and that "20 to 25 percent of our people have a dedicated track car."

One of the more popular track cars, he said, is the new Corvette. "The Corvette that is manufactured today is basically a racecar," Mr. Casella said. One reason the Corvette is so popular is that its computerized driver aids can help prevent spins and tire lockups under heavy braking. "It takes a lot of the guesswork out of driving the car fast," Mr. Casella said.

But at the September Sports Car Driving Association track day at Lime Rock, the Lotuses held a clear plurality among the several dozen cars on hand.

One owner, John [redacted], 55, has had a Lotus Elise for almost two years. In that time, said Mr. [redacted], a Greenwich resident who does leveraged buyouts, he has put 4,000 miles on it, mostly on the racetrack.

"It makes such a great track car," he said.



John [redacted] at the Lime Rock track.

"And I've done a lot of things to modify it that make it better for the track but worse for the street."

These include stiffer springs and shock absorbers for better handling and a high-performance exhaust system. He has even made it lighter by replacing the regular side-view mirrors with carbon-fiber versions. "It weighs 2,150 pounds with me in it," Mr. [redacted] said.

He would prescribe events like the one at Lime Rock for any sports car owner with an itch to get his money's worth in thrills. "On the street, you risk getting a ticket, hurting yourself, wrecking your car or hurting someone else," he said.

It was suggested to him that his Lotus is,



Photographs by Joseph Siano/The New York Times

Mark Starr with his Lotus Exige.

in fact, a luxury car, since any vehicle that costs well over \$40,000 and is used mainly to lap a racetrack is surely an indulgence. He seemed a bit hurt by this, replying: "It's a hobby. Everybody's got to have a hobby."

Derek Marley, a 35-year-old commercial real estate developer from Boston and one of the newest track car owners at Lime Rock that day, said he had bought his Lotus Exige (basically an Elise with different bodywork and interior) eight days earlier and had just finished the 1,000-mile break-in recommended by the manufacturer. "I might drive it a little bit on the road," he said, "but it's not a daily driver." For that duty, he said, he has more than a dozen other cars to choose from.

"It's like buying a motorcycle," Mr. Marley said. "You don't buy it to do errands."

Mr. Starr, who sold the Exige to Mr. Marley, estimates that about 10 percent to 15 percent of his customers use their Lotuses exclusively as track cars. "And I'd say 70 percent of them eventually wind up being track-day cars," he added.

With that, Mr. Starr took this reporter for a ride around the track. After you don a crash helmet and assume the Lotus position to twist into the passenger seat, a five-belt safety harness removes whatever slim chance you might have to squirt free during the ride that follows.

Because your extremities aren't belted down, however, the helmet quickly cushions your head as it bangs back and forth off the roll cage and door while the Lotus itself madly claws the racetrack's curves. With the suspension adjustments Mr. Starr has made, the car doesn't so much absorb bumps as pass along a detailed report on each one.

If the ride doesn't frighten you, the only other thing it will do is help Mr. Starr sell a car.

The Lotus factory seems to have caught on to this. It has created something meant to be a track car exclusively: the Sport Exige Cup, a \$78,990 version of the Exige that has 243 horsepower and none of those frills like headlights, air bags or air-conditioning. And Maserati is building a limited number MC12 Corsa cars, with 755 horsepower. The factory will stipulate that these cars can be used only for "private test sessions" (like track days). Cost: more than \$1.25 million.



Newlin Keen

**SUNDAY DRIVERS** A Lotus Elise paces a Lotus Exige and a second Elise at Watkins Glen.