

7-02-23: Chicago Street Course

When NASCAR announced they were racing at a true street circuit for the first time since I think the Daytona Beach course, I knew that I had to check it out, it was going to be something so different than anything else I've ever experienced. A bit of added complication was that the Monster Jam World Finals were in Nashville the day before, which is another event I attend yearly, so I figured I'd just have to go to both.

I drove down to Nashville on Thursday and went to Monster Jam Friday then picked up my brother from the airport before the second day of the event. It was a fun show despite some mid-afternoon thunderstorms and we got on the road around 10:30pm. I drove three hours or so, got a roadside motel and set my alarm for 3 hours, then got right back out on the road. We parked at a park and ride lot and took the CTA train into the city, marking the second time (with the Clash at the Coliseum) that I've taken public transit to a NASCAR race.

We arrived in the middle of downtown and put our ponchos on since it was pouring rain. The entrance to the festivities was at the northwest corner of the park and they had a big area with turnstiles that opened with the RFID wristbands, which was a pretty efficient system. We saw the haulers parked off on a side street and the makeshift garage area with pit carts and tents. There were other festivities set up but almost everything was closed due to the heavy rain, which was unfortunate since it looked like they had some pretty neat stuff going. They did have a large tent for general merchandise so I bought my pin, and the team merch was all together in a separate tent. It was a nice way to see everything in a much smaller area, but with any crowd of people it would have been a nightmare to navigate.

We wandered by the iconic fountain and to the crossover gate into the GA infield section. We had to step through some deep mud and big puddles but we made a lap around the interior. I wasn't sure how much we were even going to be able to see but looking at how the k-rails were set up they offered a pretty decent view next to them. They had a huge concert stage set up in the middle of the grassy field in the center but they soon canceled all the shows since the ground was completely flooded.

As soon as we got to the section by turn 6 I knew this was the place we had to be. It offered a good view of turn 6, a hard righthander after a long straight, and some view of the frontstretch and turn 1 as well. There were some people camped out there with lawn chairs but we were able to pretty much stand right behind them.

Then we stood, and stood and stood, for about 6 straight hours. I realized we couldn't leave our spots for fear of losing them and it was raining so hard I couldn't use my phone or read a book so I was stuck just standing, doing nothing, for almost 6 hours. It's the longest I've waited for a race with nothing else happening (only slightly longer than Lanco but at least there I had a book and a lawnchair). I will admit it was very boring.

The rain did eventually stop sometime around 5pm. They had intended to start the Cup race at 4, and had intended to run the remainder of the Xfinity race before that, but with the nonstop rain they eventually declared that the Xfinity race would be declared official short of the halfway point due to "unprecedented circumstances." I eventually gathered that even though they technically could have kept the track up and ran it on Monday, they didn't want to strain their relationship with the city, and by the time the track was in shape to race there was definitely no way to get both shows in. I eventually figured out that the track itself was flooded with lots of standing water, hence not being able to race in the rain. The city of Chicago got 7 inches of rain on Sunday alone, way more than anyone could have prepared for. I believe they were

drilling holes into the k-rails to allow it to drain quicker and they had a sewer pump truck rolling around that I assume was unclogging drains.

They finally started the race around 5:30pm, 6 hours after I arrived and an hour and a half after the scheduled time. The thing I didn't realize beforehand was that all restarts were going to be single file. I understand the logic with the tight confines but it was unexpected, though I didn't mind it.

I listened to the MRN broadcast for the first time. I usually listen to driver radios but I decided that since I can't see the whole track it would be the best way to keep up with all the action. They had multiple people set up around the circuit and one was right in front of me so I could see him talking while I heard him on my headphones. It was great listening to that broadcast and it's going to be my go to going forward. Since I used my Raceceiver and tuned into the MRN frequency there instead of the actual FM broadcast, I didn't have to hear ads and got to listen to them chatting with each other on commercial breaks, including multiple times randomly bursting into song.

It was really cool seeing the car so close by, I've never been that close to Cup cars during a race before. It was obvious they had mufflers on since they were a lot quieter than I expected, but still loud enough to definitely need ear protection.

Things got wild in turn 6 pretty quickly, with multiple incidents. Several cars went into the tires in the first few laps, but they allowed them time to extract themselves if they were able before throwing the caution. Kyle Busch at one point just went flying into the barriers, must have gotten turned or something outside my field of view and I just saw him going way too fast into my sightline.



Noah Gragson had a bad time during the race. Twice he nosed straight into the tire barrier, both times getting stuck underneath it and smoking the tires in reverse while trying to get out without being able to, bringing out a caution. Late in the race he got into the barrier a third time, this time backing it in and continuing. I found out later that he spun a fourth time on the cooldown lap.



I could see turn 6 quite well, plus a bit of the straight following it, and a bit of turn 1. There weren't a ton of people for a while, but once the rain stopped people flooded in very quickly. There was a screen on the straight after turn one that I could see if I moved my head around the people but not the whole thing. I could move my head around and get glimpses of the front stretch and turn one throughout. I could very easily tell when someone slammed the tires late in the race and sent a big plume of water up in the air. That water rolled down into turn 6 actually and made it a bit tricky for the laps following.

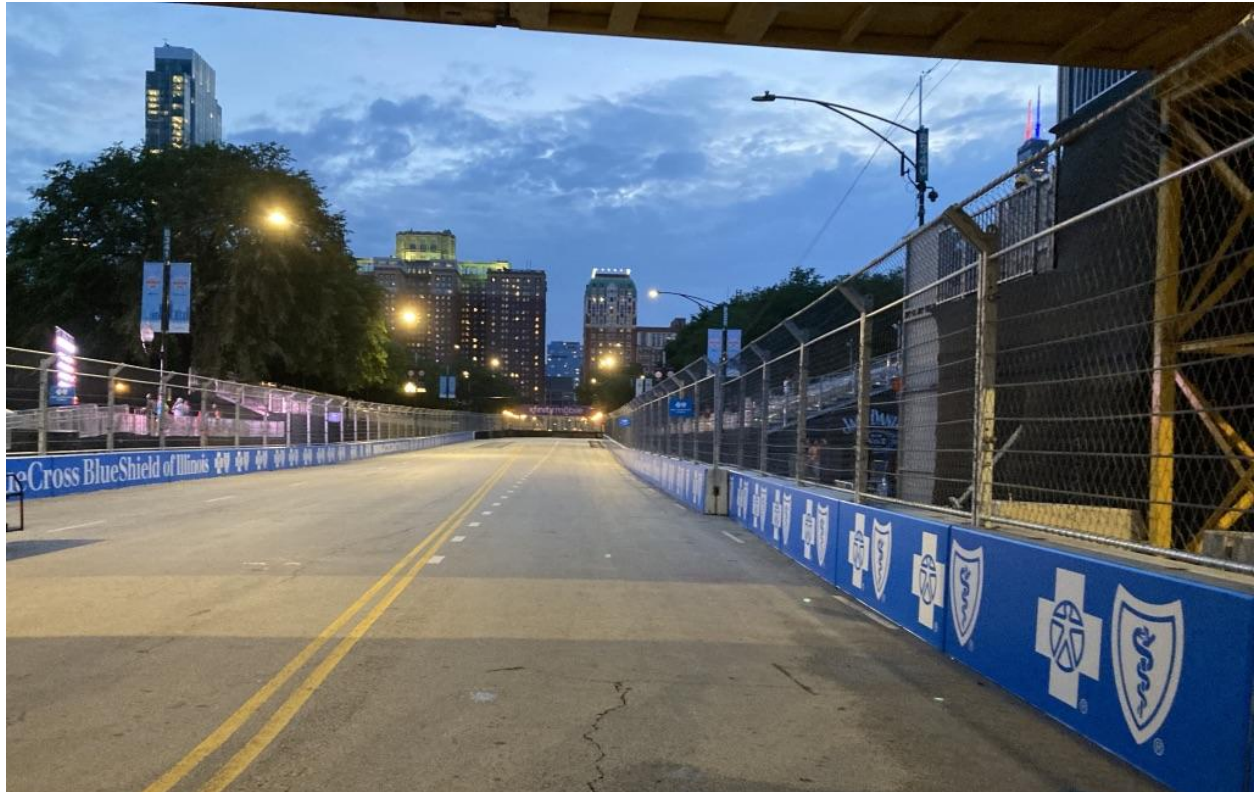


There was passing but it seemed difficult. The strategy got turned upside down when they announced that the race was going to be cut to 75 laps instead of the scheduled 100 due to darkness, but it made perfect sense and was expected as there was no way they were going to finish the 100 in time.

With 25 laps to go Shane Van Gisbergen was in 18th place after losing spots on pit strategy, He'd qualified third and had speed but wasn't able to compete for the lead at the initial start of the race. But he began to steadily make his way through the field, noticeably passing cars in ways that other people couldn't. It was fun watching him drive forward. With about 10 laps to go it became clear that he could actually win. I was rooting for him, and he got to the lead with a few laps to go. There was a late race caution where someone went into the tires in turn 1, but SVG was able to hold off the competition on the restart and take the win! It was his first ever NASCAR race and he won, which is ridiculous. It's the first time since the 70s that a driver won in their first start. I was cheering for him and so was almost everyone else in my section. It was a really cool moment to see, one of those that you realize how rare and impressive it is. I stayed for the victory lap and everyone was cheering him when he came around for the final laps and on the cooldown.



There was a big bottleneck to cross back over the bridge exiting the track, which was alleviated when they eventually opened the gates and allowed us to cross directly across the track. I know it's just city streets surrounded by k-rail but it feels so different when you're standing there on it, and it was neat in the twilight.



Getting out of the track afterward was not a problem at all, and we walked easily back to the train. The festivities were all take down unfortunately, but we did walk past the booth where they were doing the post-race TV analysis and Dale Jarrett was up there, and the crowd of people walking by started cheering for him until he turned around and waved.



We had an easy train ride back to the car and drove to the Airbnb. I felt totally fine after only 3 hours of sleep last night and 6 hours of driving plus 6 hours of standing, though I was way more sore from the standing without moving than I've ever been for walking long distances. Overall the race was a lot of fun. Going into it I wasn't sure how much I was going to be able to see or if the race was going to be interesting outside of the spectacle of it being the first street race, but it was legitimately entertaining. I would have no problem going again, though I imagine that it will be absolutely jam packed if it's on a nice day. I can't imagine how crowded it would have been without all the rain. That's a good thing for NASCAR though, I think it brought a lot of new fans. It was so cool seeing Shane Van Gisbergen win in his first race too. Definitely worth the trip and my brother is already talking about going back next year.

