

THE NEWS TRIBUNE

[Can Circuit of the Northwest race track succeed in busy Puget Sound sports market?](#)

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Venue like Tacoma's Cheney Stadium, seen here Sept. 25, 2019, have a lot of competition. Can a new race track in Bremerton compete? JOSHUA BESSEX JOSHUA.BESSEX@GATELINE.COM

We often kick around the topic of sports venues in this space, considering such questions as the economics of and competition between the Tacoma Dome, whatever KeyArena will be called when it's redone, the football and baseball stadiums in Seattle, Chris Hansen's moribund (at the moment) Sodo arena proposal, Cheney Stadium, the new soccer complex nearby, the golf course, even the horse track in Auburn.

That's a lot of facilities to be chasing after events, attendees and public and private investment. Now the region is getting another.

A groundbreaking ceremony was scheduled for last week for [Circuit of the Northwest](#), an auto racing course on 232 acres of Port of Bremerton property. The prime developer is Brian Nilsen, co-owner of a motorsports equipment dealership in Bremerton.

Those who have been around for a while and track what's going on in the regional sports-venue sector will remember proposals more than a decade ago for a NASCAR track, first suggested for Marysville, then in Kitsap County.

This one, backers say, isn't like those others. Instead of an oval raceway, the Bremerton track will be a 2.7-mile road course (i.e., drivers aren't just turning left all day).

The facility will be designed, according to the website, for "concerts, festivals, fundraisers, 10K running races, bicycle racing, mountain bike riding, motorsports track rentals, karting, driving schools, teen driving education, STEM education, sanctioned racing (3-5 times per year), Navy EVOC training, K-9 training,

West Sound EVOC (emergency vehicle operator course) training, Kitsap Transit bus driver certification, motocross, RV parking, car storage (and) a motorsports country club.”

Circuit of the Northwest is selling memberships for car enthusiasts who want to take their vehicles out for a spin. They also can lease garage space at the park, and, if they get in early enough, can arrange for a build-to-suit garage. Also promised are a clubhouse loaded with amenities, an indoor shooting range and a recreational-vehicle park. The grand opening is scheduled for the third quarter of 2021.

It's an interesting gambit on several levels.

The Northwest doesn't have a participating race in the highest-profile auto-racing circuits, but it has produced a few drivers of national renown and has a small but active racing scene, whether at dusty dirt ovals or more established tracks like Evergreen Speedway at the fairgrounds in Monroe.

The challenge for owners and operators of major racing facilities — for most venues including stadiums like CenturyLink Field and Safeco Field (whoops, T-Mobile Park) — is finding revenue sources in between the big events. An empty, unused venue continues to generate costs even when it's not generating income.

The Northwest golfing community has been trying to elbow its way onto the tour schedule with something more regular than the occasional U.S. Open at Chambers Bay, but at least golf courses can generate revenue when not hosting a tournament by hosting non-pro hackers.

That makes Circuit of the Northwest's approach, at least on paper, to appear more financially viable than building a giant track with huge spectator capacity that doesn't need it more than a few times a year. A flexible facility that can accommodate not only a variety of racing types and circuits but lots of other events is likely to have fewer empty dates on the calendar with no money coming in.

But Circuit of the Northwest won't be without competition even within its own sector of auto racing.

The most immediate source of competition would appear to be Pacific Raceways in Kent, which has embarked on its own development project to expand and diversify its portfolio of activities. The facility already includes a straight track for drag racing and a 2.25-mile road course. According to the operator, law-enforcement agencies use it to “practice pursuit driving during the winter months.”

Under a new development plan dubbed Pacific Motorsports Park, the tracks are adding 200,000 square feet of garage space for racers, car enthusiasts and businesses. Pacific Innovation Center will house automotive-related companies and start-ups.

Beyond that the competition lies in racing on TV, sports on TV, sports in person at other events in the region, social media and streaming TV, and all the other entertainment outlets available to claim a share of the consumer's leisure time and spending.

Getting enough of a share to be economically viable is an issue for everyone in the entertainment/sports business. Getting consumers out of the comfort of their homes and away from their big-screen, high-definition TVs is a particular challenge for in-person sports and entertainment venues. Between high ticket prices and traffic snarls, the staying-home-or-going-out choice isn't a tough call to make for many.

So that's the risk for sports venues like Circuit of the Northwest — can you build a sustainable business on whatever audience of auto-racing enthusiasts the region has plus other events sufficient to draw paying customers?

That's also the potential opportunity for that track, and the one in Kent, as well as the T-Dome, Cheney Stadium and the soccer stadium, and a competitive advantage over Seattle sports venues — build affordable venues that draw on a sizable base of fans who would like to attend an event but don't want to fight their way into Seattle to do so.

Will it work? There's one way to find out. Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines. Well, actually, first start your bulldozers.