

GIANT'S DESPAIR HILLCLIMB RACE

WHEN?
1906-present

WHERE? Laurel Run
borough



VOCABULARY
hillclimb



If you like to watch cars race up a mountain with sharp twists and turns, then the Giant's Despair Hill Climb is for you. Started in 1906, the hill climb is one of the oldest running auto races in the United States. Famous drivers such as Carroll Shelby and Roger Penske have been among those who have attempted to navigate the six turns as the road rise 650 feet to the top of the mountain. Louis Chevrolet, who later became one of the prolific car designers of the century, also raced the mountain.

The hill climb takes place each summer drawing hundreds of spectators to watch the drivers navigate their cars along the route. Since there are mountains on either side of the valley, the race could

have taken place on a number of locations. The most obvious route, however, was over Wilkes-Barre Mountain which rises nearly 690 feet in a little over one mile and has six turns. It followed the same route as the Wilkes-Barre to Easton turnpike from the 1840s.

After the first race, the *Wilkes-Barre Record* newspaper reported that "honors went to an English Daimler 45 horsepower car run by H.N. Harding" (Luzerne County 2020). The second race was won by a Matheson car which broke the two-minute mark. Matheson cars were manufactured in Forty Fort, Pa. Subsequent races in 1907, 1908, and 1909 drew over 40,000 to 50,000 spectators (see Luzerne County 2020). However, after the 1916 race, the hill would be quiet until 1951 due to two world wars and the intervening Great



Depression. Once the race restarted in 1951, the road was repaved and shortened to an even mile with an elevation of 650 feet. The two-minute mark broken so long ago now gave way to speculation about the 1-minute mark—when would that be broken? In 1956 Mercedes sent their SLR sports car that won the 1955 world title to run the 50th anniversary of the hill climb (Luzerne County 2020 part 2). They weren't the only big car manufacturer. Ferrari, too, sent a car. This one had competed in the Indy 500 though Carroll Shelby would be the driver here (Luzerne County part 2.) Shelby

broke the minute mark and won the day. Oscar Koveleski set a course record in 1969 at 47.636

seconds which stood for almost 30 years. He won the race six times in 13 years (Luzerne County 2020 part 2).

The 1950s saw some additions to the Hillclimb section of the race. Forty Fort airport became the location for a drag race while streets near Harvey's Lake hosted a road race. An antique car show, and parade were added later to complete the Giant's Despair Race Week" (Luzerne County part 2).

The road race was stopped in 1981 due to poor road conditions, lack of crowd control, and spiraling insurance costs (Luzerne County blog part 2). It was restarted in 1983 and has continued since then. Part 3 of the series on the race (1986 to present) from Luzerne County Historical Society has yet to be posted.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Hillclimb Video](#)

[Giant's Despair](#) Luzerne County Historical Society
Part 1

[Giant's Despair](#) Luzerne County Historical Society
Part 2