

Ocala's 'Big Daddy' Don Garlits now grandfather of NHRA

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Down through the years, "Big Daddy" Don Garlits has come to be known as the father of drag racing.

Now, at age 79, he's more like the grandfather. A very proud one at that.

"I'm just happy to be here," Garlits said. "We live dangerous lives. In the early days, a lot of people thought professional drag racing would never amount to anything. They thought we were just a bunch of hoodlums in black leather jackets. But look at it now. It's amazing how far it has come.

"We did have a lot of fun back (in the early days) racing with junkyard parts. A lot more people could race, but it was a lot more dangerous. Very dangerous. There are some of us who passed on. These people all helped make it what it is today. We profited from their mistakes.



"I was fortunate to live through it and help make some changes in the sport. It's modern drag racing now. It's different from when I was there."

The black leather jackets days of NHRA are long gone. Professional drag racing is now a big-time business with big-time drivers and corporate sponsors and a big-time national (and international) fan following. And it is safer than anyone could have ever envisioned back when Garlits started out in the 1950s.

Drag racing has come a long way in 60 years.

"For the last 60 years, it's been pretty good," said Don "The Snake" Prudhomme, another legendary driver. "A lot of people in the early days didn't think it would fly. There was no money in the sport. We were using junkyard parts. To see where it is now is amazing.

"You see drivers making real good money and making a living at something that was a hobby when Garlits and I started out. The sport is great now, terrific. It's a completely different world now."

This weekend at Gainesville Raceway, the Tire Kingdom Gatornationals will be a walk — well, better make that a sprint — down memory lane for Garlits and drag racing fans.

Gatornationals is the host event for NHRA's Official 60th Anniversary Kickoff Party, and Garlits, a Florida native, is going to be very much involved in the festivities.

All three days (Friday through Sunday), Garlits will face off against Darrell Gwynn in 1960s-style exhibition match races that will renew their rivalry from the mid-1980s. The dragsters will bear period-authentic paint schemes.

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Garlits and former driver Darrell Gwynn will be available throughout the weekend for meet-and-greets and autograph sessions, and several vintage cars from the Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing will be on display, along with a recreation of Garlits' first drag racing car.

Garlits, who in 2001 was voted the No.1 drag racer of the last 50 years by NHRA fans, won 35 Top Fuel races in his career, three coming at Gatornationals (1972, 1978, 1986).

Given Garlits' history, and the history of Gainesville Raceway, Gatornationals seems like the appropriate event to launch an anniversary celebration.

Gatornationals, which is celebrating its 42nd year this weekend, is where Top Fuel drivers first broke the 260 and 270 miles per hour barriers. And, of course, it is where Kenny Bernstein was the first to eclipse 300 with his historic 301.70-mph run during Friday qualifying in 1992.

This is also a place where John Force, the winningest driver in NHRA history, has won seven times. Force won his 15th Funny Car season championship in 2010 after going winless in 2009.

As for Garlits, well, "Big Daddy" is synonymous with professional drag racing.

The NHRA recently came up with its 60 top moments in the history of the sport to commemorate the 60-year anniversary, and five of those moments belong to Garlits.

As successful as he was on the track, his biggest accomplishment may have come off it. After nearly losing a foot in a 1970 accident when his transmission blew up in his lap, Garlits came up with a successful design change that changed drag racing. He moved the powerful Top Fuel engine to the rear end of his dragster.

It was a revolutionary idea, and one that likely has saved many lives over the years.

"I think that's the most important thing I ever did in drag racing. I think it equated to lives," Garlits said. "I don't know exactly who would still be with us today if we didn't change. We were killing them right and left. I might have lost my own life."

When Force was asked what he thought is the biggest moment in the 60-year history of the NHRA, he mentioned several events, including Garlits moving the engine to the rear of his Top Fuel dragster.

"Garlits, as an innovator, the rear-engine dragster, that was engineering, technology, the evolution of the car," Force said. "Putting the motor behind the driver, that was really a cool deal."

It's part of the 60-year celebration of professional drag racing. And the father (or grandfather) of the sport is still here to share the story.

"I never thought I'd be writing that date, 2011, on anything," Garlits said. "And here I am signing autographs with 2011 underneath it. I'm tickled to death to be here."

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