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DRAG RACING

Paralyzed drag racer Gwynn returns to drive for a cause

LEGENDS GOING

AT IT: Darrell Gwynn, left, and Don Garlits line up for Friday's race in their best-of-3 series at the Gatornationals in Gainesville.



RICHARD WONG/SPECIAL FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

■ Miami native Darrell Gwynn, to raise money for his foundation, is racing against fellow NHRA legend Don Garlits at the Gatornationals.

BY MATT WATTS

Special to The Miami Herald

GAINESVILLE — Drag-racing legend Darrell Gwynn made a living wedging his torso into the cramped cockpit of race cars.

It's all he ever knew until he was paralyzed in a horrific accident in England in 1990.

Born in Miami, he started following in his father's footsteps at age 7. Jerry Gwynn was one of the pioneers of the sport, and Darrell caught the racing bug at an early age.

He earned his first professional license at 17 and amassed 28 national-event titles by the age of 28.

The driver known infamously as "The Kid" was quickly becoming an icon.

"In the racing community, he was thought of as one of the really up-and-coming superstars," said Don Garlits, a record eight-time winner of the National Hot Rod Association's U.S. Nationals.

Garlits and Gwynn will again race against each other this weekend in Gainesville to raise money and

• TURN TO DRAG RACING, 7D

FROM THE SPORTS FRONT

Gwynn: 'I'm still winning, just in a different way'

• DRAG RACING, FROM ID

awareness for the Darrell Gwynn Foundation and the Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing.

Garlits and Gwynn went toe-to-toe multiple times in the mid-'80s. Two of the sport's best, they squared off in the finals at back-to-back U.S. Nationals in 1985 and 1986, and also at the '85 Summernationals and '86 Winternationals.

Garlits continued to race competitively into his 70s, but Gwynn, who will be 50 this September, hasn't donned a flame-resistant driver's suit in quite some time.

Things are different for Gwynn now.

That fierce, competitive look remains in his eyes, and when he flashes it, Gwynn's effervescent smile is second to none.

But it's not the youthful features of a former pro that



DARRELL GWYNN, FORMER CHAMPION DRIVER

people first recognize now. Instead, that initial glance can't help but be directed at the wheelchair Gwynn has occupied since the accident.

Gwynn's Top Fuel dragster suffered massive tire shake off the line and veered left into the retaining wall at more than 200 mph.

"He's lucky to have survived," Garlits said. "He probably should have been

killed in that wreck." Gwynn lost the majority of his left arm and was paralyzed by the accident.

"But you see, he wasn't killed because there was something else he had to do," Garlits said. "His job wasn't finished here, and you ain't going to get off this planet until your job is finished."

And so, at the 42nd Gator-

nationals in Gainesville — the site of Gwynn's last professional win 21 years ago — his job again involves cranking himself behind the wheel of a racecar.

BEST-OF-3 SERIES

Along with Garlits, the two NHRA legends are participating in Garlits vs. Gwynn: Match Races for a Cause — a best-of-3 series pitting the historic rivals against each other in custom-built electric dragsters.

But instead of a paycheck or personal glory, Gwynn and Garlits are racing for something more.

Gwynn founded his organization in 2002 to promote awareness and prevention, provide support, and ultimately, to find a cure for paralysis.

"People started coming out and sharing their stories [after my wreck]," Gwynn said. "They were desperate."

That sparked the creation

of the foundation, which has donated more than \$1 million worth of custom wheelchairs to those in need through its Wheelchair Donation Program.

On Sunday, Genesis Cagle, a 9-year-old diagnosed with spina bifida, will be the latest recipient.

A fan of the Twilight series, she will receive a specialized \$15,000 chair decked out to match her favorite movies.

But Genesis won't be the only one piloting a unique creation this weekend.

Both Gwynn and Garlits' custom electric dragsters have been painted and designed to resemble their real machines from the mid-'80s racing days.

JOYSTICK CONTROL

Gwynn's car, built by Brad Hadman and designed by Mike Gerry, was customized to accommodate Gwynn and features joystick control

for acceleration and steering.

"The only thing standard on that thing... is the wheels and tires," Gwynn said.

But he Gwynn, who snuck in some test runs Thursday because he said the car can get "squirrelly," may need some more time in the car to shake off the rust. Garlits won Friday's opening race by a four-second margin — 30.30 at 35.99 mph to 34.52 at 30.28 mph.

But Gwynn doesn't mind. After all, life isn't about racing anymore.

"Winning races puts a big smile on my face, and I haven't had that in 21 years," Gwynn said. "But when you give a kid a brand new power-chair it replaces the feeling of winning a race. So I'm still winning, just in a different way."

For information, visit darrellgwynnfoundation.org.