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All For One: The Darrell Gwynn Foundation

by Keith Waltz

All-Star Softball Match Set Tone For Gwynn's Foundation



A crowd of 11,000 packed Reading (Pa.) Municipal Stadium for the NASCAR vs. NHRA stars game to benefit Darrell Gwynn. (Corinne Economaki Photo)

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Twenty years ago the auto-racing community came together to help one of its own — and the result was an emotional night that those in attendance will never forget.

More than 11,000 people jammed Reading (Pa.) Municipal Stadium Sept. 13, 1990, for the Darrell Gwynn Benefit Softball Challenge. The game, which saw the stars of NASCAR take the field against NHRA's Top Fuel and Funny Car drivers, was organized to raise money for injured NHRA driver Darrell Gwynn.

"It was such a magical, magical night in so many respects," Gwynn said recently while reflecting on that special event. "The outpouring of support, the passion everybody had to make this thing happen, the line of people waiting to get into the stadium when I pulled in, there isn't just one thing that stands out.

"It was very, very overwhelming. It was something you could never imagine could happen," Gwynn continued. "I still have people come up to me, I don't even know them, but they will come up and say, 'Darrell, I was at the ball game.' It's like they don't have to say anymore. Everybody felt the same way about that game. Yeah, it was for me, but I think it was something that everybody who was there will never forget. It was the ultimate show of support and I never dreamed I would need that kind of support."

A native of Miami, Gwynn was a second-generation drag racer known throughout the paddock as "The Kid." He honed his skills in Top Alcohol dragsters where he won the 1983 NHRA World Championship before advancing to the sport's premier division — Top Fuel — in 1985.

Gwynn was on top of his game during the early months of the 1990 NHRA Top Fuel season. He won the fourth race of the year at his home track in Gainesville, Fla., and was second in points when he headed to England's Santa Pod Raceway for an exhibition event on Easter Sunday.

That's when disaster struck.

During his first pass, Gwynn's dragster suddenly broke and veered left into the retaining wall at approximately 240 miles per hour. The then 28-year-old racer suffered life-threatening injuries that took his left arm and left him paralyzed from the chest down.

Members of the racing community immediately rallied to the aid of their fallen competitor.

"The support I received was unbelievable," Gwynn recalled about the days and months following his accident. "I was never alone, not once, in my hospital room. I never had a chance to cry. There was always somebody in my room, but it was uplifting. It was talking about racing and it was doing this and doing that. It was just constant support and it could have been considerably different if those people weren't there."



Darrell Gwynn in March at the Tire Kingdom NHRA Gatornationals at Gainesville (Fla.) Raceway. (Rhonda McCole Photo)

Gwynn continued to own and operate a Top Fuel team through the 2003 season, but it was in 2002 that he and his wife, Lisa, launched a project that became their life's work — the Darrell Gwynn Foundation.

“Our insurance system is so messed up that there are many, many people who have fallen through the cracks who need help,” said Gwynn. “Fortunately, we have been able to help many of them by giving away powered wheelchairs.

“We are very well known for our wheelchair donation program and that all got started through me going to the NHRA races where people would show up in shoddy equipment and tell me these horror stories,” Gwynn added. “We are not focused on research; we are the foundation that's focused on helping people in the meantime. We also have an educational program where we go to schools and teach the age group which is so vulnerable how to prevent paralysis.

“We've built an all-star team here at the foundation, starting with me and my wife. We've got Curtis Gray (former president of Homestead-Miami Speedway) onboard now, but Lisa and I kind of got it to this point. We grew very fast and a lot of great things have happened to us through the support of people like NHRA, NASCAR, Barrett-Jackson and our donors. We've been able to make a difference out there.

“When we give these wheelchairs away, we have really changed some people's lives,” Gwynn continued. “These are not \$3,000 scooters; we've given away a \$30,000 chair to someone who never in their life would have been able to afford that. That's life changing and it feels like you've won a race when you do something like that.

“Winning races was the ultimate thing for me, but we've been able to capture that same feeling by giving these chairs away to these needy recipients. But just as hard as we work at giving chairs away, we work just as hard trying to prevent injuries.”

Twenty years ago, the residents of Reading, Pa., and the surrounding area turned out to help Gwynn, and this weekend during the Toyo Tires NHRA Nationals at Maple Grove Raceway he plans to repay the favor.

“We are going back there with a whole different mission in mind and that's to help a Reading resident by giving away a wheelchair, and kind of relive some of the memories from that ball game,” Gwynn explained. “I never dreamed I would be running a foundation that would be in a position to give back to people.”

In addition to presenting a powered wheelchair to a local recipient, Gwynn and his father, Jerry, will be inducted into the track's Walk of Fame. The Darrell Gwynn Foundation will also host a track walk Sunday morning, which Gwynn will lead in the electronic dragster that has been in the NHRA museum since the emotional moment when he drove it down the quarter-mile during the 2001 U.S. Nationals.

"I said I would never drive the car again, but Reading is a great place to do it," Gwynn said. "The ball game was so special and the people of Reading have been so supportive that if there was ever a time we we

re going to bring it back out, Reading is the place.

"Twenty years ago, I didn't know what was going to happen to me," Gwynn added. "Now it's a cool position to be in, to be able to go back to Reading and be able to give back."

NHRA Drivers Come From Behind In Ninth For Win

The NHRA team celebrates its win in the 1990 Darrell Gwynn Benefit Softball Challenge. (Corinne Economaki Photo)

The emotions and numerous activities surrounding the Darrell Gwynn Benefit Softball Game at Reading (Pa.) Municipal Stadium on Sept. 13, 1990, were such that many details of the game itself have been lost among the memories.

But it was a spectacular offensive battle that saw the NHRA drivers rally for five runs in the bottom of the ninth inning to beat the NASCAR stars by a final score of 21-20.

After opening a four-run lead in the first inning, the NHRA drivers were forced to play catch-up the rest of the game. They trailed until Top Fuel racer Kenny Koretsky hit a two-run double with two outs in the bottom of the ninth to win the game.

NASCAR's Brett Bodine was named the most valuable player, making several fine defensive plays as well as going three for six with two RBIs and a run scored.

The event, which raised more than \$150,000 for Darrell Gwynn's recovery fund, was the brainchild of NHRA racer Kenny Bernstein. It was organized by Bernstein, employees of his marketing company and the staff of the Reading Eagle newspaper, led by sportswriter John Ernesto.



The NHRA team celebrates its win in the 1990 Darrell Gwynn Benefit Softball Challenge. (Corinne Economaki Photo)