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Honoring Gwynn, recalling 'The Game'

NHRA vs. NASCAR battle 'very special time' in Darrell Gwynn's life

By Brian Rippey
Reading Eagle

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Emotions still run high 20 years after "The Game."

Drivers Kenny Bernstein and Kenny Koretsky had to pause to hold back their tears Thursday night when they talked about paralyzed NHRA driver Darrell Gwynn and the "magical" softball game in Reading between NHRA and NASCAR drivers.

Gwynn was honored Thursday night at the All-Star Salute to Darrell Gwynn in the Crowne Plaza Reading Hotel on the eve of the 26th annual NHRA Toyo Tires Nationals at Maple Grove Raceway.

Current and former drivers signed autographs for fans and donated items for auctions that raised \$30,000 for the Darrell Gwynn Foundation, an organization founded to help people in wheelchairs and raise awareness about spinal cord injuries.

Bernstein, a longtime NHRA driver who also had ties to NASCAR, helped John Ernesto of the Reading Eagle organize the game in 1990, just months after Gwynn was paralyzed as the result of a crash during an exhibition in England.

Bernstein recalled a conversation he had with late NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt to organize the game to help pay for Gwynn's medical expenses.

"We'll do what we can to help that boy," a tearful Bernstein remembered Earnhardt telling him.

Koretsky, who had the game-winning hit in the bottom of the ninth before 15,000 fans at FirstEnergy Stadium, also paused to compose himself when reflecting on the game and his days racing in the NHRA.

Koretsky, Dallas Gardner, Steve Gibbs, Darwin Doll, Jack Redd, Darrell's father Jerry Gwynn and Darrell Gwynn were inducted into the 2010 Maple Grove Walk of Fame.

But the night definitely belonged to Darrell Gwynn, who said the softball game was a turning point in his life he still remembers fondly.

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Susan L. Angstadt
Darrell Gwynn is greeted by Sandy Gardner, wife of Dallas Gardner, board chairman of the NHRA, during AllStar Salute to Darrell Gwynn Thursday night at the Crowne Plaza Reading Hotel.

"The ballgame was a very special time in my life," Gwynn said. "I really needed something like that at that time. When I have a bad day now, I think of that ballgame and I get through that day. It just helps you get through those bad days."

Gwynn's mission is to help as many paraplegics as possible survive the bad days and live productive lives.

As a team owner after his accident, Gwynn said he saw many fans come to races with shoddy equipment because they couldn't afford the wheelchairs that cost up to \$30,000. After selling his race team, Gwynn said he found his niche in life.

"Giving a wheelchair away to somebody at the beginning of their life, it's like winning a race," Gwynn said. "It's a life-changing thing. I feel like I've won more races giving those chairs away because it's such a good feeling when you see that youngster being able to live their life."

The Darrell Gwynn Foundation will present a wheelchair to someone Sunday at Maple Grove Raceway. Gwynn said the gift will help that person return to work as a chef.

It will be one of several activities beginning Sunday at 8 a.m. prior to the NHRA final eliminations.

Fans can make a \$20 donation to the foundation to walk the track for those who can't.

Gwynn will go down the quarter-mile track in a special electric drag racer he has driven just once previously, nine years ago at Indianapolis.

Contact Brian Rippey: 610-371-5070 or brippy@readingeagle.com.

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