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Darrell Gwynn: a racing hero
Posted by **Jeff Wolf**
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If you haven't read my Oct. 15 column on Darrell Gwynn in the Las Vegas Review-Journal and posted here at lvrj.com, please do so before reading on.

Last weekend's NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing Series event at Maple Grove Raceway near Reading, Pa., was a record-setter on the track when Matt Hagan took the Funny Car points lead from John Force. Hagan lost in the final round after Force lost in the first round but Hagan gained 20 bonus points by setting a national elapsed time record of 4.022 seconds.

Hagan will lead Force by four points when the Oct. 28-31 Las Vegas Nationals is held at Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

As impressive as Hagan was, the Toyo Tires Nationals will be most remembered for a salute to Darrell.

I want to share parts of a telephone conversation I had with Darrell on Thursday about the special weekend that included a pass in an electric-powered dragster built in 1991 by Mike Gerry of Las Vegas as a surprise to celebrate Darrell's 40th birthday.

"It was an unbelievable feeling," Darrell said. "It has to go back to the person who made the car. I made a pass down the track at the U.S. Nationals (in 1991) and when I got out Steve Gibbs asked what I planned to do with it. I said, 'I don't know. I just got it an hour ago and I didn't know I was getting it.'

"It was a total surprise."

Gibbs, a long-time NHRA executive before retiring to run the NHRA Museum in Pomona, Calif., put the dragster on display at the museum. When Gibbs was chatting with old friend Lex Dudas, the general manager at Maple Grove, about plans for last weekend's race Gibbs suggested shipping the electric car to Reading for Darrell to take one more lap.

Gerry refreshed the rail before heading to Reading last week to rejoin Darrell.

"Reading fans are some of the most passionate fans in the world," Darrell said.



Darrell Gynn



Darrell Gwynn drives an electric-powered dragster down the Maple Grove Raceway dragstrip Sunday before a standing, capacity crowd that honored the Top Fuel champion who was paralyzed in a 1990 racing accident. Courtesy of NHRA/National Dragster.

They have never forgotten that Darrell won Top Fuel titles in 1988 and 1989 at their national event, and the following year his career was ended by the 1990 crash in England.

Darrell also said he lived near Reading during summers through the 1980s.

“Reading seemed like a logical place to get in it again.”

Sunday’s exhibition run was to take place after the nitro cars completed their first-round of eliminations.

“We wheeled over to the staging lanes. I had the brakes on with my hand but there is an incline in the staging lanes there and the brakes went out. I guess a fuse blew because of the pressure trying to hold it for so long.

“All this drama in the staging lanes was just like old times: ‘Oh, my God, we have an oil leak. Hurry up, hurry up, we’re the next pair, ’ ” he recalled laughing about flashing back to last-second problems he had encountered in Top Fuelers on race days.

“It was surreal, man. Then I pulled it up the starting line and shook my dad’s hand like I did before every run.

“This car is completely quiet so I could hear every breath of air everyone in the crowd was taking, everything they were saying. They’re clapping and wooing. I must have heard ‘Darrell, we love you’ at least 5,000 times.

“That was an awesome feeling. Those moments are precious.”

It wasn’t until after trackside workers applauded him and NHRA Safety Safari workers lined the track as he turned to leave the end of the drag strip that his emotions took over.

“It was so awesome. That’s when I lost it.”

What also made the trek memorable was that his 12-year-old daughter, Katie, was there to experience the love of tens of thousands showed her dad. And to see him drag race for the first time.

“She had never seen me go down a racetrack. It meant as much or more to me than it did to her.”

Nearly matching that as a weekend highlight was when Darrell presented a custom wheelchair to Phil Polynone, a who was paralyzed in a motorcycle accident and unable to work as a chef. The \$17,000 chair is designed to elevate him so he is able to work in a kitchen.

The Darrell Gwynn Foundation, founded in 2002, has given more than 100 custom wheelchairs and most cost \$30,000.

“Parts of my job I cry like when I get a call about someone who has a friend or relative that suffered a spinal cord injury and they don’t know what to do or which way is up and which way is down.

“But the fun part is when we get to give chairs away. When we give someone a wheelchair it feels like we just won a race.”

The Foundation is expanding its focus on trying to prevent catastrophic injuries.

"I didn't sign up for this," he said of his paralysis. "This is a club I didn't want to join. But spinal cord injuries can happen to anyone. You don't have to be going 300 miles an hour to get a spinal cord injury. Your life can change in a minute.

"Right now, the only cure for paralysis is prevention. We're going to try to prevent some so we don't have to give so many wheelchairs away."

I've said many, many times that someone isn't a hero just because he or she drives a racecar.

But one racer who is a hero is Darrell.

Please visit DarrellGwynnFoundation.org and have your credit card out when you do.

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