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Dragster Kings Resume a Rivalry, Slowly

By DAVE CALDWELL



Nearly 21 years after he was paralyzed when his top fuel dragster crashed on an exhibition run in England, Darrell Gwynn strapped himself into a red racecar at a track in Gainesville, Fla., and once again took on his flamboyant nemesis, the legendary Big Daddy, Don Garlits.



Gwynn lost decisively in that race in March, his first since 1990. He also lost a second run that day to the 79-year-old Garlits. But Gwynn won the third, by nine hundredths of a second.

“It’s still a race, and it is against Big Daddy,” Gwynn said, adding that he wanted to beat Garlits as much as Garlits wanted to beat him.

Gwynn, 50, known as the Kid, and Garlits are concluding their match races for charity by going head to head three times

Saturday and Sunday in Pomona, Calif., after which their dragsters will be auctioned for charity.

Though the cars they will drive look like the real thing, there is a significant difference: they do not run on nitromethane fuel and racing alcohol but, rather, electricity. They reach speeds of no more than about 35 miles an hour, not the 270 that Gwynn and Garlits attained a quarter-century ago during the heyday of their ferocious rivalry. A run down a National Hot Rod Association track now takes about 30 seconds, not 5.

“Obviously, we’re not going as fast as we used to go, but the cars don’t make any noise, so you can hear the fans as you’re going down the race track,” Gwynn said recently in telephone interview from his office in Davie, Fla.

Heading into the Pomona event, Garlits led Gwynn in the match races, 5-4. Gwynn, who is paralyzed from the chest, can drive because the dragsters are controlled by joysticks. Still, he and Garlits say, steering these glorified golf carts is not as easy as it looks.

“I’ve had able-bodied people get in the car and not be able to drive it,” Gwynn said. “It wasn’t easy building it, and it ain’t easy driving it. But I’d like to think we did this right.”

Gwynn won two of three from Garlits the last time they raced, in September at Indianapolis. Meet officials presented Gwynn with a Wally, the small trophy in the likeness of the N.H.R.A. founder Wally Parks that all top fuel winners receive.

“If I’d have known a Wally would be on the line, I would have tried harder,” Garlits said in a telephone interview.

Gwynn started the Darrell Gwynn Foundation in 2002 to support people living with paralysis and to help prevent spinal-cord injuries, not just those sustained in motor-sports accidents. [The foundation](#) has provided dozens of power wheelchairs, at more than \$15,000 each, to those who cannot afford them.

Often these wheelchairs are presented at racing events, where the recipients and their families are treated like V.I.P.s, even if they do not know much, if anything, about racing. Gwynn recounted the Nascar driver Dale Earnhardt Jr.’s sidling up to a wheelchair recipient at a recent event.

“Little E said to him, ‘Hey, buddy, what’s your name?’ And the boy told him what his name was and said, ‘Hey, buddy, what’s your name?’ ”Gwynn said.

The foundation also hosts two annual fund-raising fishing tournaments with Nascar drivers, but Ryan Rogers, a spokesman, said almost all of the foundation’s funding came from individual donors. Eighty-one cents of each dollar raised goes to the wheelchair donation program, education and prevention program and patient assistance fund, Rogers said.

The match races were an idea of Gwynn's father, Jerry, to increase awareness of the foundation. Garlits, who owns a drag racing museum in Ocala, Fla., signed on to race Gwynn. (Part of the proceeds from the match races benefit the museum.)

"They're only going about 35 miles an hour, but that rascal is still as competitive today as he was in a top fuel dragster," Tom Wright, a fund-raiser and donor to Gwynn's foundation, said of Garlits.

Garlits said of Gwynn: "He's having so much fun driving that thing and racing against Big Daddy again. I like it. It's been kind of a fun deal."

After the last race between Gwynn and Garlits, the two dragsters will be presented by the N.H.R.A., a sponsor of Gwynn's foundation, to the Barrett-Jackson Auction Co., another sponsor, which will auction the cars in February in Scottsdale, Ariz.

The race could be the last for Gwynn for a while. A three-race series was scrubbed in September in Charlotte, N.C., when he became ill with a urinary infection. Gwynn said it had been difficult traveling to the races, which included one in Englishtown, N.J., in June.

Three minutes after Garlits and Gwynn finish their final race, Alvin Jackson-Belles, a 16-year-old originally from Liberia who was paralyzed five years ago, is to receive a \$17,000 power wheelchair from Gwynn's foundation. There will be a winner, guaranteed.

Gwynn said of the foundation, "It's turned out to be a really cool thing."

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