

ASBURY PARK PRESS

Don Garlits enjoys return to Old Bridge Township Raceway Park

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Written by

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John Force has been in the drag racing business for more than 30 years, but never did he witness a race like this.

Twenty five years ago during the NHRA Summer Nationals at Old Bridge Township Raceway Park, Force recalls standing trackside for Don Garlits' infamous blowover.

A day after making the fastest quarter-mile pass in NHRA history, Garlits was driving his Top Fuel dragster when it launched vertically into a wheelstand, pirouetted on its rear tires, flipped around and landed on all four wheels the wrong way.

Garlits, who was driving alongside rival Darrell Gwynn, said immediately afterward: "The wind just got underneath it when the front end came up. I took my foot off the throttle, but there was nothing I could do. It just went over backwards, faster than you could say Jack Diddly."

The car was totaled, but when the Englishtown track announcer asked him whether he would be repairing the dragster in time for its next race, Garlits recalled quipping, "I'm not that crazy."

The drag racing pioneer, Force said, was crazy like a fox.

"He says he made a mistake, but let me tell you something," the 15-time nitro-fueled Funny Car champion said, "I saw the front end come up and then the car went airborne like the space shuttle, went over backwards and Garlits set it down on its rear tires and drove it back to the starting line. He then stepped out and the fans went crazy. My hair stood up on the back of my neck."

"Nobody could do that but God or Don Garlits. It was the most unbelievable moment that I ever saw in racing, and I prayed, 'Someday, Lord, let me pull off a stunt like that.' "

This weekend here at the NHRA SuperNationals, Garlits and Gwynn are renewing their on-track rivalry and raising money for the Darrell Gwynn Foundation and the Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing. The NHRA legends are racing battery-powered replica dragsters down the Raceway Park strip.

Garlits won Friday's match race before Gwynn prevailed Saturday afternoon by 0.3 seconds. The rivals will square off again today, not long after Garlits gives the morning driver's call to start their engines and Gwynn donates state-of-the-art wheelchairs to two Bronx residents who were paralyzed from gunshot wounds.

"It started off where it was just these exhibition runs to help the foundation," Garlits said. "Now it's turned into a deal where he actually wants to win a race."

Garlits, 79, is enjoying his time at Englishtown this week, the track he says that "made it possible for a lot of us professionals to make a living drag racing back in the early days."

The Tampa native, who still drives his black, 2009 Dodge Swamp Rat XXXV in the NHRA sportsman division, made his living racing Top Fuel dragsters 300 miles-per-hour but these days is more comfortable driving a brisk 130.

"Raceway Park had those Wednesday night shows," Garlits recalled, "and that made it possible for a lot of guys to get by because there weren't big sponsorships and you made your money match-racing."

Garlits has spent the weekend strolling around the grounds, shaking hands and signing autographs. Invariably, when he chats with race fans here, the conversation turns to his infamous blowover.

"If I had been a better driver that day, I could've saved that car," Garlit said this week. "It was coming up and the car was the fastest car in the world at the time. I didn't want anything to happen to it and I thought I'd just back off of the brake real easy and ease it down so I won't damage it. And that was a big mistake. I should've grabbed the brake and slammed it down and saved it because enough wind had gotten under the car when we got it up to 150 miles-per-hour and it just blew it over.

"It was a bad day for me, it banged my leg up and I was really sick about it. But it just goes to show you that in a split-second there, that tiny little moment that I decided not to pull the brake, cost me the car and could've cost me my life."

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