

Appeared in Dirt Late Model Magazine:

### Adams County Speedway-Small Town Track, Big Time Success

NASCAR. Few words have more meaning to a race fan than NASCAR. Think NASCAR and you think of Daytona, Dale Earnhardt(or Jr.), three wide racing at Talladega, and the Bristol night race. You think of young guns, speed, sponsors, five car teams, and race shops that are now called campuses. NEXTEL Cup- each race is an event, when for us, the race was more than enough.

You didn't think of the NASCAR Weekly Racing Series, sponsored by Dodge did you? Well, you never see the local track on Fox, and while you might meet Darrell Waltrip in L.A. or New York, don't count on seeing him in Greenwood or Farley or Corning. Still, despite being downsized, the Weekly Racing Series is the one division of NASCAR that remains true to the racing giant's origins. The NASCAR Weekly Racing Series is a place where the "little guy" doesn't have to have mega-million dollars sponsors to be able to race, where a family of four doesn't have to take out a loan for tickets, where the action is only a few feet away, and you really can "feel the thunder." There are no concrete speed palaces in the Weekly Racing Series, just wooden bleachers, and dirt or asphalt tracks. Pick-ups pull open trailers. And while the f-a-n-c-y motor homes pull enclosed trailers housing not just a late model race car, but more parts and tools than any 50's service station ever saw, at least they aren't moving billboards for Rubber Maid. AND, there is no need for special credentials, you just walk into the pits after the races, and talk to any driver-and they love it.

Going out on a limb, grass roots weekly racing is one of the good things about America. Stock car racing is every bit as much us as baseball or hot dogs, more us than Chevy or apple pie. For a few hours, little league games and soccer practices take a back seat, the frustrations of our jobs can be forgotten-racing is doctor and medicine alike, healing our aches, soothing our pains. It's the same for driver or fan, because these drivers don't live at Lake Norman, North Carolina, they live across the street, or down the block. They drive a truck to earn a living. Or maybe they build houses, sell cars, or fix them, farm or even ranch. Just like you and me. Grass roots racing is All-American. And NO race track in America delivers grass roots weekly racing like Adams County Speedway in Corning, Iowa.

Adams County, Iowa is the LEAST populated county in the state. It lies about 75 miles southeast of Omaha, but not that far from Red Oak, Clarinda, Massena, or Creston. Corning, population 1700 something, is county seat of Adams County- and just like most rural American towns, there are a few less souls every census. But hey, how many communities can boast of having a NASCAR race track? Adding the big three series with weekly racing sanctioned tracks, there are 100 NASCAR sanctioned tracks. AND, how many of those tracks can boast of

doubling the population of the community 15-20 times a year? Too many race tracks in much larger markets have been turned into shopping malls, but ACS continues to thrive under the NASCAR banner-and if these are uncertain economic times in the city, well, they are no better in the heartland.

ACS has a long history. It is no new build it and they will come speed palace. In the late 1800's and early 1900's the track featured horsepower of the equine variety. The shady area inside the track served as the town's football and baseball fields. In the mid to late 1950's, coupes entertained racing fans. In the 70's multiple class racing began, and in 1983 Gail Hampel and his family came on as promoters, working with the 22 member Adams County Fair & Racing Association to give southwest Iowa racing fans a big time show in a small town setting. The NASCAR sanction followed the Hampels by a year. For several years the racing program has consisted of hobby stocks, a Pro-Street class (Camaros and the like), Modifieds, and Super Late Models as the feature class. The track hosted Jim Wilson's first NASCAR All-Star race in the 80's, and almost twenty years later continues to work with the legendary promoter-over 50 monsters of Midwest speed participated in the WDRL Polydome Super Series race at ACS over the Memorial Day weekend.

### Truly Non-Profit

The track is owned by the Adams County Fair & Race Association, a 501c(3) non-profit corporation. The 22 member fair board works with the Hampel family who are the NASCAR promoters. The Hampels take gate receipts and pay the purse. The ACF&RA gets concession receipts and maintains and builds the facility. The Hampels sell the tickets, the fans purchase ACF&RA food and drinks, watch the Hampel's races, while sitting on ACF&RA bleachers and using ACF&RA restrooms. It would be easy for an attitude of WE vs. THEM. That is not the case.

According to Greg Hampel, "we have discovered over the years that with 22 fair board members and our own opinions, there are few unanimous decisions made at the track. But that is not all bad. Differing points of view allow us to see things from many perspectives, and we all understand that whatever we decide to do must be in the best interest of the speedway." Hampel added, "the more fans we attract, the more concessions the fair board sells, and the quicker the facility gets improvements."

Two separate entities, one a non-profit organization, the other a for profit venture; well over 20 people involved in the decision making process-tracks with a far simpler organizational structure and less than half the people involved in making decisions seem to be unable to make timely or good decisions that benefit

owners, drivers, and fans alike. But ACS seems to get better and better each year. Between \$600,000-\$700,000 has been spent at ACS in the past seven years, greatly improving an already good facility. New decks and bleachers have been added. A new women's restroom was built. New food stands have been built in both the grandstand and pit areas. A new catch fence has been added, and lighting by the famed Musco Lighting Co. has been added to the track. The track is wired for closed circuit TV. Future projects may include indoor suites, a beer garden, and a hall of fame.

And, the ACF&RA gives back to the community as well. According to ACF&RA board member Mike Larson, "over \$40,000 in grants and scholarships have been given to area organizations and youth since 1999," funded by the track's 50/50 raffle. Not bad for an organization that is truly non-profit.

### Track Prep In A River Bottom

A drainage ditch several hundred feet off turns one and two runs to a river about 1/8th of a mile east of the track. Even in the dry summer season moisture is within a few feet of the surface. Adding to moisture problems is the track is temperamental black gumbo. "If the gumbo is too dry it will crust over and not take moisture," states Greg Hampel. "Get it too wet and try to have a show and it will be spongy and get rough. Packing it when it is too wet is like trying to squeeze a bowl full of Jello into a smaller space. It just doesn't work."

Weekly track prep actually starts Saturday night after the races, with Gail Hampel watering the track, so there is moisture in the surface for the track's grader man Donnie Ashenfelter, who begins fine tuning the track on Sunday morning. Weather during the week determines track prep. If it has been really dry, Gail Hampel soaks the track Friday night. He is back at it early Saturday morning, keeping the track wet all day. Every track has its own particular nuances, and with ACS, turns 2 and 3 need more late moisture since they are in direct sunlight longer than turns 1 and 4.

The Hampels have built a spiker that they pull around the track during intermission of the weekly show. The spiker pokes at the surface and allows the track to take a little water also added during intermission. Reworking the track during intermission might add a little time to the evening's program, but real race fans never complain about a delay. They know it is well worth the wait because they will see better features.

### Preachers, Teachers, And Future Fans

The track surface is temperamental black gumbo. The entire facility is built on river bottom ground. But built on bedrock, etched in stone is a very simple concept that all involved with the track follow. Give fans value for their

entertainment dollar. ACF&RA board member Mike Larson called it "giving our neighbors what we expect." Another ACF&RA board member Burton Heaton stated, "We understand that taking your family out for an evening of entertainment isn't cheap. Our goal is to make a night at ACS one that the whole family can enjoy. When parents can bring the kids and get them through the front gate FREE (all kids 12 and under are admitted free), then feed them for a reasonable price, it makes the weekly trip to the races one the entire family can look forward to and enjoy."

Admission, Adults \$8.00, Children 12 and under free. Most tracks claim they are fan friendly. ACS walks the walk, right from the ticket booth. And it doesn't stop there. Concessions at the track are as reasonably priced as any sports venue in the country (a 20 oz. soda costs as much as \$2.50 at many Midwest race tracks. At ACS it costs \$1.50).

And, no area organization is immune to track promotional efforts. Sponsor R & S Auto provides ACS with golf carts for staff to move about the big half mile track. The carts have been painted in Nextel Cup trim, and in May the facility hosted a Easter Pastor night, with area preachers racing golf carts around the track during intermission. The track made a contribution to each church that participated, extra to the church with the heaviest foot man of cloth. Each church had been given free passes for the event, differing colors so which church brought the most supporters could be determined. That church received an additional donation. Call it blue sky or gravy, but otherwise empty seats were filled. Concessions that might have carried over to the following week were sold. And maybe, just maybe some new race fans were created. A similar race called Teacher Feature was held in early June, with nine area schools participating. Two excellent, low-cost promotions that showed auto racing can be inexpensive entertainment for anyone.

And the youngsters have not been forgotten after passing through the front gate free. Iowa State Savings Bank of Creston sponsors the ACS Jr. Speedsters. Each youth involved gets a membership kit, that includes coupons that can be used at the track's concession and souvenir stands-a free hot dog is one that dad doesn't have to budget for. Drawings are held each week, and a group of the Jr. Speedsters ride in the pace vehicle prior to all feature races, and then get to meet and have photo's taken with feature winners. Future fans-nope, these kids are big fans already.

Adams County is the least populated county in Iowa. The rural economy is struggling. ACS has a track hierarchy like no other. But week after week, ACS remains one of NASCAR's biggest success stories. During a 2004 visit, NASCAR Director of Regional Development Don Hawk stated "just put this place in a copy machine and give the rest of the weekly racing world a copy of how to do things." Why do other tracks struggle, while this small town track thrives? ACR&RA

President Clifford Baldwin answered, "I can only answer by what works for us. We are forward thinking and progressive, yet maintain the grass root values of racing. We provide a family atmosphere, good prices, we listen to our fans, and we upgrade the facility in some manner every year. We never rest on our laurels."

There is a beer commercial showing a hobby stock racing at a Saturday night track. Lynyrd Skynyrd is singing "Simple Man." Of course the company attempts to piggyback its beer with the values of the common man. But forget the beer, listen to the lyrics, and watch the racing. The commercial is really saying that the values of the common man can be seen every week at a grassroots race track. The only thing really wrong about the commercial is that it was not filmed at Adams County Speedway. It should have been. Adams County is small town values. ACS-is a small town track with a B-I-G success.

Sidebar-Man, This Place Is Wired

Internet-of course, doesn't every track have a website? ACS has a nice site, [www.acspeedway.com](http://www.acspeedway.com)

Regional radio station KMA 960 of Shenandoah features "This Week In Racing," every Saturday from 5:00-6:30 p.m. The live show originates from a radio booth built beneath the ACS grandstands, with announcers Rick and Steve Cabbage and Bob Harris discussing national and local racing news, and interviewing local drivers in a fun-filled, information packed 90 minutes.

As if radio weren't enough, throw in closed circuit TV. If you are hungry, or feel the urge for a beer, you don't have to miss any action or wait until intermission at ACS. Four or five cameras feed video to a mixer and this video is shown on TV monitors at the concession stand. Oh, if you have a different urge after drinking that beer, well, and I swear this is true, there are TV monitors in the restrooms too.

Internet, radio, closed circuit TV. This is a small town track? Well, the TV does not stop at the track. Midwest Speed Zone is a one hour show produced by Short Track Network that features ACS. The weekly show had been aired on three different days on Mediacom cable TV access channels in western Iowa, but the program has been so well received that Mediacom has decided it will air throughout Iowa.

Now, how many tracks have internet-many if not most tracks. Throw in an hour and a half radio show, and it would be on the down side of many. Add closed circuit TV, and you are talking a handful of tracks. But a state-wide cable TV show. I suspect that an answer more than one track in the entire country is

incorrect. Just one more way ACS is the small town race track with the BIG success.

#### Sidebar-How Do You Handle A Hungry Fan

Well, ACS keeps concession stand prices comparable with off-track establishments, and tries to make up in volume what they lose in profit margin. And what a volume they handle:

425 lbs. of quarter pound hamburgers

80 lbs. of loose ground beef for chili and walking tacos

10 cases of hot dogs and brats

20 cases of chicken strips

8 cases of tenderloins

10 cases of French fries

over 50 lbs. of popcorn

25 large Pizza Hut pizzas

2500 bottles of pop and water

35 cases of cans and 8 kegs of beer.

Make up in volume? I guess.