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The Beer Is Cold, The Hot Dogs Are Hot, Let's Go Racing.

Strangely enough, for the average fan, spending a night at the local weekly track is not much different than attending a rock concert. Strolling into a stadium the concert-goer thinks "My God, this is the Rolling Stones." Even though the event would not be the same without the behind the scenes efforts of hundreds of workers, you will never hear a concert-goer talking of how roadies, techs, and arena workers set up 20 semi trailers of Stones' equipment. No, the concert-goer is thinking only of "bring on Mick and Keith. Let's rock."

Walking to a grandstand seat, the race fan eyes an immaculately prepared track. Glancing at the infield pits, the fan smiles, spying over 140 race cars, including 30 sleek, powerful, nasty creations. The most famous denizen of Midwest dirt tracks, the Super Late Model, glistens under the late afternoon sun, the best drivers in the most competitive of race cars getting ready to overwhelm the senses in high speed battle. And the fan gives no thought to the behind the scenes effort of track workers who have invested hundreds of man hours to ensure a competitive, safe, exciting night of racing. No, the fan thinks "bring on Kyle Berck, bring on Joe Kosiski. Let's go racing."

Many fans presume preparing for a weekly racing show is merely a matter of getting your house in order for company. Perhaps. If your house sets on a 100 acre tract, and if you invited over 3,000 of your closest friends to the party. Prior to opening Nebraska Raceway Park gates at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoons, over 70 people have contributed to what will be another great night of NASCAR racing in eastern Nebraska. This is THEIR story, but also the story of thousands of track workers around America. Their efforts will always be overshadowed by our hero racers, but without them, none of us would be a part of the fastest growing sport in America.

It Is A Dirty Job, But Someone Has To Do It

Track prep for an NRP show begins long before race night. L-O-N-G before. Like during the long, cold, and snowy Nebraska winter.

"I keep the snow off the track in the winter," states NRP track prep man Doug Reikofski. "If we let the snow build up and melt, we will be fighting soft spots in the track all season."

Pre-season track prep includes cutting the track deep with a disc, then compacting the surface with a vibrating roller. "Many tracks are rough the

first month or so of a season,” said former NRP GM Craig Kelley. “We believe using the vibrating roller helps keep the roughness out of our track the first six to eight nights of the season.”

Weekly track prep begins early Monday morning. “Dougie is the best blade man I have ever seen,” avows Kelley. Kelley’s statement is strengthened by a glance at Reikofski’s resume. Stops at Colorado National Speedway and Las Vegas Speedway are shown, even an endorsement from WoO founder Ted Johnson.

Watering the track is a late night activity. “Anyone can spray a track,” stated Kelley. “Getting the surface even from one end to the other is the ticket.” The track is normally watered Friday and/or Saturday, and then all day Sunday, depending on the time of season and rainfall.

“We will drop 55,000 gallons of water on the track most weeks,” said Reikofski. “Doug and I talk early Sunday about watering that day,” added Kelley. “We want the water layered properly, and depending on wind direction and velocity, Doug may drive the truck through one corner at 5 mph, and the other corner at 15 mph to get the water spread right. I don’t know if that is art or science. Doug has been in this business for 30 years, and I have been for 25 years. We have thought of some good ideas, and have stolen some great ideas too.”

Early arriving fans see Reifkofski putting the finishing touches on the track, and watering the infield pits to keep dust down. NRP’s famous track packers take to the oval next. About 10-15 four-wheel drive vehicles circle the track clockwise for about 30 minutes.

NRP will often top-spray the track after heat races during intermission. This final watering ensures the NRP surface will be racy through even the final A feature, providing the fans with the 2-3-4 wide racing for which the track is known.

Safety Is King-The King and His Court

Carroll “Speedy” Hill is a Midwest racing legend. The 2004 season will be Hill’s 44th season on a track fire/safety crew. “In the old days, we might have had a pick-up and four or five extinguishers. Today, our race ready safety truck weighs 11, 865 lbs. and has a street value of \$125,000.” Things tend to happen quickly at super fast NRP. Several seasons ago, a violent A feature mid-pack accident sent 12 powerful Super Late Models crashing and tumbling along the track’s back stretch. With equipment stationed at both ends of the big oval, safety

workers were at the scene almost before the cars stopped moving. “That wouldn’t be a good time to discover our equipment isn’t working,” stated Hill. “During the week I hook up and operate all safety equipment to make sure everything is functioning properly.” All of the track’s fire extinguishers are checked and charged.

Hill also follows up on safety repairs to the track’s walls and fences.

“Speedy is a colorful character,” according to Kelley, “but because of his passion for safety, I know our drivers feel there is no place safer than a track where his safety crew is parked.”

The Details-Mom Always Said “Keep The Women’s Restroom Clean.”

Nebraska Raceway Park encompasses 100 acres of land near the Greenwood I-80 interchange. When asked about a typical week of maintenance at the track, former GM Craig Kelley laughed, “there is nothing typical about any week.” Jeff Hillman, an 18 year veteran of Sunset Speedway and NRP is a “Jeff” of all trades, spending 25-30 hours a week mowing and weeding, repairing grandstand seating, repairing restrooms, even driving a second water truck as needed.

After a typical Sunday racing night, a crew of four spends eight Monday hours scouring track bathrooms, grandstands, parking lots, and the infield pits. “One thing people don’t realize is that we have environmental concerns to deal with today,” stated Kelley. “We have tire dumps and fluid reservoirs and must follow EPA regulations to ensure these waste materials are disposed of properly.”

Don Murcek has been a pit steward for 30 years, and has served as NRP’s Chief steward since the track opened in 2001. “I think they offered me a job just to get me off the track,” laughed Murcek. It is Murcek’s job to license drivers and crew members, register car numbers, check in cars at the pit gate on race night, and to make line-ups based on four week point averages. No easy task, even with a computer. Race finishes are entered in Murcek’s computer, and race reports are sent to NASCAR headquarters in Daytona Beach, and NRP’s home office in Sioux City, Iowa.

Race officials meet at 4:30 p.m. to discuss the previous week’s event, as well as the upcoming night of racing. “Our officials carry small pads, and write down problems with a particular driver or crew member,” stated Kelley. “Normally these problems will be handled during the week. Other times officials have suggestions that might speed up a race. Our goal is for the last checkered to fly no later than 10:00 p.m. So, if an official has a suggestion that might shave even 10-15 seconds off the time it takes to run a race, we listen. With 25-30 races each night, 15 seconds can make a big difference.”

Famous Dave’s BBQ, Godfather’s Pizza. A concession heaven.

NRP concessions manager Craig Nelson has a full-time job, like all other NRP staffers. In Craig’s case though, his job at NRP is like a second full-time

job during the racing season. “I spend 25-35 hours weekly maintaining inventories, ordering food and supplies, and generally dealing with our suppliers to get the best possible prices for our items,” stated Nelson. “Then I arrive at the track by 10:00 a.m. on race day, and will work at least 12 hours that day.”

Numbers paint an interesting picture at NRP. Nelson supervises a staff of 30 concession and souvenir stand employees. On a hot summer night fans drain as many as 25 kegs of beer, while Godfather’s Pizza bakes 150 large pizzas. Hungry fans gulp down over 100 lbs. of Famous Dave BBQ sandwiches, 500-600 hamburgers, 500-600 hot dogs, and 200 lbs. of french fries and tatertots. Over 100 lbs. of popcorn is popped, and 2500 containers of soda and water quench the thirst of fans. An on-site ice maker has a 2500 lb. capacity, and during events such as the Alphabet Soup Race on the Memorial Day weekend, the track purchases additional ice. According to Nelson, “many tracks have an odd sort of item that seems to go well at their track, but maybe not as well at others. NRP serves 100 lbs. of chicken gizzards each race night.”

A Family Affair

Most of Nebraska Raceway Park’s employees are long-time track workers. Many worked at Sunset Speedway prior to its closing, and some work at other area tracks too. One special night during the 2003 season provides insight for NRP’s great success. Trucking giant Werner Enterprises held a day at the track for 1500 of its employees. Preparing for the night was a major undertaking, requiring a team effort. Without worrying about job titles or responsibilities, many staff members pitched in to make the event successful, installing additional air conditioning in the track lounge, The Deuce, as well as repainting the lounge. Bathrooms floors were repainted, Famous Dave’s Pavilion was cleaned, and picnic tables were touched up. Several sand volleyball courts were constructed, as were four horseshoe pits, and a softball diamond. According to NRP Marketing Director Susan Hampel, “teamwork at the facility is what makes the difference.” Reflecting on that comment, Hampel corrected herself, stating “it goes beyond teamwork and becomes like a family. Just like a family we love and sometimes hate each other; we fight and cuss at each other; but, people who work there help out just like a family.” Just like a family?? JUST like several thousand “families” at tracks throughout America. Families who work together for the love of the sport, not for a paycheck. People who deserve our thanks, for without them, we could not plop our butts on wooden bleachers; sweat in the summer, freeze in autumn; drink a few beers, breathe in seeming tons of dust, cheer our favorite drivers, and yes, cuss those we don’t like. Without them, there would be no Super Late Models dueling at eye blurring speeds, no hearing loss inducing 700 h.p. engines pulse pounding our senses. Without them, well, what would your home track be??? Mine would be a Nebraska cornfield, just off I-80. And wouldn’t that be sad??

SIDEBAR:

Carroll “Speedy” Hill is a man with a mission. During racing’s off season, the owner of Five Star Fire and Safety of Omaha conducts fire/safety seminars and classes for race track crews throughout Nebraska. Local community volunteer firefighters often man track crews in rural Nebraska, and Hill is proud that his seminars impart not only knowledge of techniques, but provide crews a good idea of equipment needed for race track safety. “Right down to proper uniforms. The regular fire fighter suit is too bulky and hot for use at the track, and many crews are switching to uniforms that we use.” Hill’s passion though may be Purple K, the chemical powder used in NRP extinguishers. “Even in the hands of a novice, Purple K will knock down a fire in seconds, much faster than multi-purpose extinguishers. Most people seeing the chemical in action for the first time are shocked. It is expensive, but worth it if it saves even one life, or keeps a driver from a serious burn injury.”

SIDEBAR-Omaha’s legendary Sunset Speedway closed following the 2000 racing season, an innocent victim of the city’s urban sprawl. Area drivers and fans feared Sunday night NASCAR racing would become a memory, a 40 year saga saluted at racing reunions. However, Iowan Ted Carlson and former Sunset Speedway co-owner Craig Kelley were contemplating a far different fate. Rumors flooded internet racing forums. Attempts were made to purchase land near I-29, southeast of Omaha. Day after day passed with no announcement. Winter snow melted, and so did fan’s optimism. Then, a press conference. Carlson had purchased I-80 Speedway, a track midway between Omaha and Lincoln. The track would operate weekly-ON SUNDAY’S, with NASCAR sanctioning. Four different classes of cars were scheduled to compete, with the feature class to be Super Late Models. Not yet ready for summers of racing road trips and watching from the stands, Kelley signed on as track GM. With the season opener mere weeks away, repairs, renovations, and additions began immediately. Three years later, after three seasons of hard work by staff, after three seasons of great competition in all four classes, the track rightfully lays claim to being one on the elite dirt venues in the nation. Satisfied that Sunday NASCAR racing will remain a fixture in eastern Nebraska, GM Craig Kelley is retiring to devote more time to his family and law firm, and to racing road trips with his buddies. Dave Freuer, previously of Wichita and the NCRA is taking over Kelley’s duties as GM, while veteran scorer Jim Hitzemann will be taking over race director responsibilities.

Sidebar

Even NRP announcers prep for Sunday night races. “According to my wife, I get off the couch, grab my briefcase, get in my pick-up, and drive to the track,” laughs 15 year veteran Stan Cisar. Cisar’s business, Action Signs, equips local racers with numbers and sponsor decals, so he is already familiar with most cars racing at NRP. “Because of the nature of our business, our shop becomes a hot bed of weekly racing gossip,” quipped

Cisar, “and where possible I try to pass on this information to fans at the track.” Pit reporter Joe Proctor is Cisar’s chief assistant and Actions Signs, so he is also familiar with local racers. Proctor, aka Stroker Ace, considers drivers to interview, and where they park in the pits. While the famous Stroker Ace often chats with winning drivers, his questions are influenced not only by the evening’s action, but previous weeks’ action, and racing at other tracks as well. “It’s more than just congratulating winners,” stated Proctor. “I try to make fans aware of activity they cannot see from the stands.”