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Duvall's Racing School

Cowpens, South Carolina was a hot bed of area racing March 11th and 12th. Just like it was every weekend in March. Say what? Cow where? Cowpens, South Carolina-site of a famous Revolutionary War battle, though drivers and crew from around the country are there for another reason-the Mike Duvall Racing School.

American businesses spend countless millions of dollars on continuing education for their employees. Sports camps for our youth have become big business too. So, why not a school to help grass roots racers improve their skills, both driving and preparing a race car? Thousands of late model, modified, and stock car drivers could benefit from a few days at Dirt University.

The Mike Duvall Racing School has a faculty of one. But oh the credentials this teacher possesses. Hall of Famer. 35 years behind the wheel of a race car. Over 1,000 wins-including the checkered flag every late model driver would love to post on their resume, the World 100. But just as important as Duvall's talent and experience is his patience, AND a genuine desire to see his pupils improve. His goal is for students to "learn more in two days than in five years just driving. I'll show you the way I do it, and ask you to give me a month when you go home."

Normally the racing school's Friday eight hours are spent in class at the Flintstone Flyer shop, with track time on Saturday. However, weather can change the school's schedule quickly.

Friday March 11th

Arriving at Duvall's rural Carolina shop, we learned Saturday's forecast called for rain, so drivers would be hitting the track a day early. A schedule was quickly set up, and an unlikely caravan of several haulers and a hoard of rental cars snaked its way north on I-85 for 49 miles to the Carolina Speedway, near Gastonia. The sky was a Carolina Tar Heel blue, and though it was a little breezy, it was quite comfortable for a mid-March morning.

One look at the track, and it was obvious this Midwestern boy was no longer in Nebraska. Red dirt, what is this? North Carolina red clay. Duvall leases Carolina Speedway for the day, and it had been watered and several vehicles were already packing the track when we arrived. Duvall jumped into the water truck to help finish track prep, while his crew unloaded the haulers, making ready for a long day at the track.

The school uses three cars at the track, a street stock Camaro, an IMCA legal modified, and a late model. All are two seaters, and are radio equipped so Duvall can converse with drivers. The track is set up with two cones entering a turn, a cone in the middle of the corner, and a cone exiting the turn to show drivers a preferred lane to run, as well as areas of acceleration, braking, and coasting.

Ads for the school state that drivers will learn how to drive on dirt tracks, how to enter and exit a corner, how to pick up the gas peddle with your foot, how to feel the bite in a race car, how to make changes in a race car, and how to be comfortable in a race car. Maybe the ad should simply say "you will learn to obey your right foot." Or, it could say "I am going teach you how to be a smooth driver." Be smooth was a phrase heard countless times during the day, and if drivers garnered only one tidbit of knowledge during the weekend, it was "before you can be fast, you have to be smooth."

Duvall showed he is a true racer this day. Less than two months after major surgery to repair bulging discs in his neck, he was back in a race car-actually it was the third school he had conducted since his surgery. Anyway, crawling in and out of three different race cars when you are still rehabilitating from surgery can't be a lot of fun. And though it might not have been racing, Duvall drove or rode 200 laps, taking the pounding all drivers do on a dirt oval.

Drivers run three separate on track sessions, the first riding with Duvall as he shows them how to maneuver the course. Duvall rides with each driver during the second on track session. "They need to show me they can do the job," states Duvall. "When they do, we pick up the pace some." And finally, the driver is on his own for the third session. Well, not exactly on his own. Duvall watches each lap closely and communicates his suggestions via radio, not caring that he is Hall of Famer Mike Duvall, only that he possesses experience he can pass on to those who want to learn.

With three sessions for 8 drivers, and the Flintstone Flyer crew making several changes to the car for each driver during the final session, it is a very long day at the track.

Not only drivers participate in the Duvall school. Duvall also encourages crew members to attend the school, so their fee is half the driver tuition. "If the driver and crew can't communicate what is wrong with a car, how can they fix it," is a common sense Duvall theory.

A diverse group, different expectations, yet each had one main purpose in mind-to learn racing from a master. The smiles of many exiting a car after an on track session, overwhelmed the frowns of a few who wanted to go faster, while Duvall was searching for smooth. The desire of the drivers to drive, to learn, even

bested some strange southeast weather. Driver changes, car changes, weather changes, it was quite dark when we left the race track near Gastonia.

Watching one car on the track for 8 hours can test the patience of even the biggest of race fans. Meeting the drivers and crew, talking racing, made the long day go faster-though aching feet and knees said otherwise.

Saturday March 12th

Psst-don't tell the drivers and crew. We're talking physics and geometry but they think it's just racin'. Who would want to spend eight hours talking geometry? BUT, the class room hours are equally as important as the on track hours at the Duvall school. There aren't many drivers who can run fast in an ill handling race car. So, set up is critical to success.

Every student receives a 24 page booklet that ought to be titled "35 Years Setting Up A Race Car." Repeating his ad won't divulge any of Duvall's secrets, so during this session drivers and crew learned chassis set-up, shocks and springs, wheels and tires, percentages, ride height, toe in/toe out, caster and camber, stagger, how to loosen and tighten a race car, and how to maintain a race car. A huge amount of knowledge to be passed on in a few short hours. Most sessions find questions still being asked long after the clock says eight hours have gone by. But showing the same patience as on the track, Duvall answers each to the satisfaction of the participant.

It is not my intent to pass along free what others pay hard earned money to learn. If you want to find out Duvall's 12 steps on setting up a race car, you are going to have to attend the class. If you want to read his two pages of driving tips, you are simply going to have to make the pilgrimage to the rural Cowpens shop of this racing legend. The class is not this year's gimmick that promises you drastically improved performance. It has been around for many years, and boasts hundreds of graduates. Mike Duvall's methods are tried and true, proven on dirt tracks throughout the southeast. His class is an investment. An investment in yourself that will pay on track dividends for years to come.

Sidebar: Racing's Mecca

Many racers will fly into Charlotte, NC and make the hour drive south on I-85. The Charlotte airport is relatively painless to decipher. Car rentals are a little cheaper than most bigger cities, and reasonable hotels are available along the interstate highway, in Gaffney and Spartanburg, both near Cowpens.

A trip to the Charlotte area would not be complete without playing Nextel Cup tourist. Lowe's Motor Speedway-Humpy's Palace of Speed-is an amazing facility

two miles off I-85 near Concord. Tours are given several times daily, and the track's souvenir shop is a must visit.

Most Nextel Cup race shops are in the Charlotte area. Barely a mile from LMS is the Hendrick Motorsports complex, including a museum. While access is limited to certain areas in each shop, the only off limits building in the complex is the engine shop. Even if you are not a Jeff Gordon or Jimmy Johnson fan this is also a must stop.

Check race team web sites for shop locations and directions. Or go to the Charlotte Tourism site and click on NASCAR shops to find more info.

There are also several dirt tracks in the Charlotte area. The Dirt Track at Lowe's, Carolina Speedway in Gastonia, and Cherokee Speedway in Gaffney are several. Tie in the school with the Nextel tours, and a dirt track visit by the Southern All-Stars or WoO, and you have a racer's dream vacation.