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What Is More Fun Than A Swarm Of Hornets Buzzing Around A Race Track?

Ask a Hornet driver, and the reply is liable to be “nothing.” And just like Africanized bees that have invaded the United States in recent years, Hornets are taking over local speedways throughout the country.

What is a Hornet? According to Ed Kosiski, co-owner of Nebraska Raceway Park and founding father of I-80 Speedway's Ed's Hornets division, a Hornet is “a 4 cylinder, front wheel drive race car, no turbocharger, running D.O.T. spec tires.” This type of car is the average American's SUV, so used versions can be found anywhere-car dealers, auctions, tow lots-with a price tag of \$300-\$500 fairly common. Getting the car race ready-stripping it, installing a roll cage, race seat, five point harness, and window net can add another \$700-\$1000 to the total, depending upon how much work the racer does. But are the Hornets safe? “You see teenagers driving the same type of cars at 75 mph on the interstate, talking on a cell phone,” according to Kosiski. “And those cars don't have a roll cage. My family races in these cars, and I wouldn't put them in a race car that wasn't safe.”

Who drives a Hornet? A better question would be who doesn't? In 2005, I-80 Speedway at NRP's first season with the class, promoters “hoped for 30-40 cars,” and ended up with 65 Hornets zinging around the 4/10ths mile dirt oval. Some like Jay Hobscheidt were low budget racers who burned out on the sport, fighting dollar problems racing against better financed Modified and Grand National teams. For them, Hornets is an affordable way to get back on the track. Family members of Modified and Late Model drivers find Hornets their ticket into racing-and not just sons and daughters, but wives as well. And it is a perfect entry class for young drivers, a not too expensive way to learn what racing is about.

And racing Hornets is about two 'f' words. Not fame and fortune, rather fun and family. The Pro Hornet division at I-80 Speedway pays \$60 to win, \$20 to start, while drivers in the track's Novice division race for a trophy. Scratch fortune, but add a whole lot of fun. According to Kosiski, I-80's Hornets “raced seven weeks without a yellow flag in either division.” And Hobscheidt found himself not just smiling, but actually laughing on occasion racing Hornets. Said Hobscheidt, “One time we were lining up for the feature. I heard AC/DC playing on the radio of the car ahead of me. I wasn't about to tell them that stripping the radio from the car would save five pounds.”

Family? Everyone knows racing is about family, but perhaps nowhere is the truism more true than with Hornets. Husband and wife team Brian and Lana Castilla both race the #42 at I-80, Brian in the Pro Division, Lana in the Novice. In 2006, three generations of the Prall family-Jack's Jr., III, and IV-will be

weekend warriors at I-80 racing Hornets. And while politicians clamor for the NASCAR Dad vote, fathers like James Hayes are more than just a spin doctor's demographic. The Hayes' family story is rerun in virtually every pit stall featuring a teenage driver. "My son and I have had an OK relationship," stated Hayes. "He lives with his Mom about 80 miles from Omaha. When I brought up the idea of us racing, it was like 'whatever.' But once we got a car things took a turn and we are now closer than ever before. I don't even know where to start with the family atmosphere in the pits. For us this has been a huge life altering event."

Do NOT ask a Hornet chauffeur if the car is really a race car. Winning driver Hobscheidt suggests doing the math. "The cars weigh around 2,000 lbs., less than cars in most divisions, and the dual ohc engines can generate about 150 h.p. They go plenty fast. Though sometimes the back stretch at I-80 seems like Daytona in a Hornet, the races are almost always close."

Are Hornets a great division for every track? "Maybe not for those bigger or faster than I-80," stated Kosiski. Still the old cliché "success breeds success," fits the Hornets. Kosiski expects as many as 100 Hornets to race at I-80 Speedway in the coming season, and seven tracks within 150 miles of Omaha will host Hornets in 2006. Call this phenomenon "having a blast with junk cars," but fun and family are what successful grassroots racing is all about.

Sidebar-"We Need To Lower The Cost Of Racing"

The Kosiski family of Omaha is known for being among the toughest competitors in Midwest super late model racing. However, after purchasing Nebraska Raceway Park in 2004 they got to experience the other side of racing.

Racing is a part of the entertainment industry, and competing for the entertainment buck is tough. "We know we can not charge more at the front gate. Fans have already told us what the limit is," stated I-80 co-owner Ed Kosiski. "Drivers want bigger purses, but our other costs are climbing too, and we need to make a profit to stay in business. We need to lower the cost of racing."

"Engine costs have nearly doubled in the years I have been racing," noted Kosiski. "My dad-famed racer Bob-said he felt that going from coupes to late models in the early 70's was a step back. But sometimes taking a step back is needed to keep going forward." Racers are notorious for hating change-unless the change gives them an advantage over competitors, but the promoter Kosiski's see crate engine late models as a way for that class to keep moving forward. "The cost for a race ready engine is much less, and everyone is the same," stated Kosiski. Both Ed and brother Steve have more than talked the talk, entering crate engine late model specials in Georgia and Florida, and oldest brother Joe's son Andrew races in the crate engine late model class at I-80 Speedway.

When Kosiski started the Hornet class in 2005, he found that some drivers were interested in racing the car, but “my wife would never let me have that in our driveway,” or “I really don’t have any room to keep it at the house.” NRP has acres of facility, and an area was set up for drivers to leave their Hornets at the track—a good way to get more people involved in racing, and a cost saving measure for drivers too.

After introducing Hornets last season, Kosiski has another cost lowering project in store for this season. The Nebraska Raceway Park complex includes Little Sunset Speedway, a go-kart track located behind the grandstands at I-80 Speedway. “Go-karts are even more outrageous in spending than late models,” stated Ed. “Some fathers will spend hundreds of dollars a week on things like chemicals to alter the kart tires. And they are racing for nothing but a trophy.”

So, to help bring karting costs back in line, which also helps develop future racers for I-80 Speedway, Kosiski is developing a “cage-kart” or totally stock go-kart class. He has purchased 28 karts, and they will be all be spec motor and spec tire karts.