

'Hedlund' Could Aid Auto Racers

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By Phil Pash

"Bring the Hedlund" may become a new phrase in the jargon of auto racing safety.

The "Hedlund" is a specially-designed and built back board which can be slipped into the cockpit of almost any race car to help with the removal of an injured and/or unconscious driver.

If the driver has an upper spine or neck injury, its purpose is to prevent additional injury when he is being removed from the car.

Jim Hedlund of Rockford, Ill., one of the men who brought it into being, didn't name it after himself, but new items in auto racing safety have a way of being named after the people who push them the most.

By that, don't be misled into thinking Hedlund is pushing the back board so he can make money on it.

Quite the contrary; he is pushing it for the sake of perhaps cutting down on the serious spinal injuries which could leave a driver crippled for life, or maybe even kill him.

In that respect, Hedlund is like many people who give freely of their time – and in some cases, their own money – to work on safety crews at various auto racing events. They do it because they have a certain "feel" for the sport, but they have no desire to be involved as a driver or mechanic.

As an emergency medical technician licensed in five states and a former fireman, Hedlund is well-qualified for his work on safety crews.

In fact, he will be in Daytona Beach, Fla., all this week to work on the safety crews for the Daytona 500 – which is the Indianapolis 500 of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing.

Hedlund plans to take one of the back boards with him and show it to NASCAR officials to get their seal of approval on its use. It already is used for many United States Auto Club races and has been used at Road America in Elkhart Lake, Wis., and a number of stock car short tracks, including Rockford Speedway.

The need for the "Hedlund" was discovered three years ago during a USAC championship car race at Wisconsin State Fair Speedway in West Allis, Wis.



Jim Hedlund of Rockford slips a new style back board behind midget race car driver Kevin Olson of Loves Park. The board, designed to help extricate injured racers from wrecks, is narrow enough to fit into the small cockpits of today's race cars. (Gerald McCullough photo)

"Gordon Johncock was in a bad one (crash)," recalled Hedlund, who was a member of the emergency crew on the scene. "He was unconscious and the back boards we had didn't fit in the cockpit so he could be removed."

Using a back board to remove an unconscious driver – when there is no threat of fire – is a common practice, according to Hedlund. An unconscious driver can't tell you if his back or neck hurts, and if he does have an injury, moving him around to extract him from the car could cause more – and even permanent and/or fatal – damage.

"It took us 20 minutes to pry the car apart enough so we could get him out without risking back injury," said Hedlund. "If we would have had the back board we do today, we could have gotten him out a lot sooner."

"Afterward, the two doctors (Dr. Bill Conners, who was a paramedic before he became a doctor, according to Hedlund, and Dr. Tom Dean) and the emergency crews got to talking about the need for a back board that would work in the small cockpit area of today's cars.

"We all decided it would be a good idea to try to come up with something," said Hedlund, who took the lead on the project.

"We started with a 'papoose' board that they use in hospitals for women when they are having babies and just kept modifying it until it was right."

John Giglio, a Rockford paramedic who is Hedlund's "partner" on whatever crash trucks they are working at various races, came up with the idea for a hole at the top of the board, according to Hedlund.

"With an unconscious driver, there are times you don't want to take his helmet off until the injuries are determined," Hedlund said. "The hole for the helmet makes a firm resting place for the driver's head so it won't move from side to side or up and down."

At that stage of the "team's" development work, Hedlund said he showed it to Dr. Bob Behmer of Rockford. Dr. Behmer is associate director of the Office of Family Practice of the Rockford School of Medicine, and sometimes serves as race physician at Rockford Speedway and for sports car races at Blackhawk Farms Raceway near Rockton, Ill.

"Dr. Behmer had a few suggestions for it, and then we put it in its final form," said Hedlund.

That final form is a short board with a hole at the top for the driver's head (with or without helmet) and straps to hold the head and upper spine in a fixed position during extraction from a wreck.

"It's like a shoe horn that fits behind the driver so you can get him out of a wreck without any additional injuries to his neck or upper spine," said Hedlund.

There are now six "Hedlunds" in existence. "John and I carry one with us wherever we work and there's one on the main fire truck at Milwaukee," said Hedlund.

Hedlund, 40, started working on motor sports safety crews in 1956 at Oswego (Ill.) Drag Strip. Since then, he has worked at most of the major and short tracks in the Midwest, and many major tracks in other parts of the country.

He has gotten to know many drivers after being on the crews that pulled them from wrecks. "Let's see," said Hedlund, "I've been in on responses for A.J. Foyt twice, Johncock, Tom Sneva, Richard Petty, Johnny Rutherford and Dave Decker three times."

He became an EMT while working for the AIDS Ambulance Service of Rockford and now is a licensed EMT in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan and Florida.

Prior to that, he was a volunteer fireman for three years and worked four years on the crash crew at Greater Rockford Airport. During that time, he attended some courses at the U.S. Air Force Crash Rescue School.

He is now co-owner of Uncle Sam's Tavern on Seventh Street in Rockford and also works as an armored car guard.

Despite the two jobs, he worked at 32 major races last season.

“Most of them were out of my own pocket,” said Hedlund. “Oh, some of the tracks like Daytona and MIS (Michigan International Speedway) take really good care of you. And at Milwaukee we get a party and a steak every year.

“But a lot of the tracks want you to pay your own expenses to and from the races and then while you’re there. Safety costs money just like anything else, but a lot of people aren’t willing to pay for it – even though we need it.”