

Local Club Home to Passionate Racing Fans

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By Cody Hills

They are the most passionate group of racing fans around.

And one look into a grandstand at a local racetrack lets you know they are there.

Decked out in their traditional and recognizable bright yellow club shirts, The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club has thrived in Florida's Friendliest Hometown for nearly a dozen years.

Founded in September 2006, the resident lifestyle group boasts more than 160 members and meets regularly each month to host guest speakers with racing backgrounds and attend local races.

"We seem to be a club that if it has a motor and it's racing something else with a motor, we're interested in it," said club President Tony Kennea, of the Village of Collier. "We've got motor racing fans from all walks of life in our club, including a lot of ex-drivers and talent buried within our club, as well. Not only do we take an interest in racing, but we come with a lot of history. It's all about racing for us, no matter what it is, and that's in the blood of all of our members."

The club has taken numerous group trips to races in the past including events at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, the final race at USA Speedway in Lakeland and an annual commute to the NHRA Gatornationals drag racing event in Gainesville.

The group also promotes an annual scholarship for local students, as well as financial support to local short track racers and their families, while also bringing in some recognizable faces in racing to their meetings.

"We've had great luck with our guest speakers and keeping the membership happy by bringing in guests who have brought a lot of intrigue to our meetings," said Jerry Conkle, former club president and Village Rio Ponderosa resident. "We've had two Daytona 500 winners (Marvin Panch, Geoff Bodine), a hall of fame sprint car driver (Jack Hewitt) and a lot of people who were very interesting when it comes to safety in racing and owning and operating a racetrack."

The club plans to gather for the 60th running of the Daytona 500 today inside SeaBreeze Recreation Center, hosting a potluck luncheon to watch the Great American Race with one another.

As the group prepares to enjoy the 70th season of NASCAR in their 12th year together, they do so with a continued growth in membership and an undying love for the sport.

"I think what's made this group so successful, and what will keep it going, is the fact that we're very open about the passion for the sport," Conkle said. "We're recognized at different tracks and events we go to with our yellow shirts, and people know when they see us that we have this love for racing and that's what we're all about."