

'Real' Race Fans Make Up The Villages Racing Club

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By Ron Hedger

THE LONG LOOK



RON HEDGER

When we first visited The Villages in north central Florida, we made a pilgrimage to Don Garlits's superb museum for a racing fix. This time, a two-week rental and a gracious invitation from club president Glen Carter let us attend a meeting of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club to hear guest speaker Joe Lewandoski, a much-traveled racing executive currently engaged in marketing for FASCAR and Robert Hart's New Smyrna Speedway.

We went expecting a small group of Sprint Cup fans wearing the shirts of NASCAR's current stars with a few Dale Earnhardt logos mixed in.

Instead, we encountered a ballroom full of enthusiasts clad in bright yellow club shirts eagerly awaiting Lewandoski's talk on area short-track racing. It could have been a HARF meeting in suburban Indianapolis or a Foar Score gathering in Buffalo, and the first driver name we heard was not Dale, Jr., it was Florida legend Buzze Reutimann.

"We started the club on a whim," recalled club media rep Gerry Hafer. "It's grown like mad ever since, and while we do go to Daytona, we really like the local tracks and usually take more than 100 people to our nights at local speedways. We're in our third year and already have more than 250 members."

"We took two busloads to the Governor's Cup at New Smyrna last fall and I just love seeing that block of yellow shirts cheering," added Carter. "The tracks give us a group discount, then we apply that discount to sponsoring a local car for the night. It's not a lot of money, but it helps. We love to sponsor Buzze Reutimann and we're helping him out on a late model he's getting ready for a show coming up at Ocala. David and Brian Pattie just hung the body today and we'll all be there cheering for him."

Lewandoski entertained the group with a review of his racing background, beginning as a youth at Connecticut's Plainville Stadium and then in NASCAR after meeting Brian France in a health club while working at Stetson University. After running a NASCAR speedway in Arizona, he moved on to the group's weekly racing series and at short-tracks in Washington, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

On the Florida scene, Lewandoski tipped that the weak economy has hit New Smyrna's car count and sponsorship sales, but fan counts remain steady, boosted by a ticket reduction to \$10 for regular shows and \$15 for special events.

Lewandoski also feels that the big half-mile's size and speed discourage some racers, as they hit hard and crash damage is very expensive compared to the costs of similar shunts at their much smaller Orlando Speedworld.

"But the racing is superb now," added Lewandoski. "The track took two years to come in after it was repaved. It had one really fast groove for a while, but now they run two or three wide, and the

February World Series battle between Ted Christopher and Ryan Newman was one of the best short-track races I've ever seen."

Much to the delight of the fan club members, Lewandoski related his theory that they were the "real" race fans of America, rather than the NASCAR souvenir bedecked "fans" seen in malls or restaurants.

"I ask them if they go to New Smyrna or Ocala and they have no idea what I'm talking about," declared Lewandoski. "The real fans watch our show at New Smyrna, then call Volusia County to see if they're done yet. If they hear that they have features to run yet, they're in their car and on their way to the dirt track to catch the last races there."

Lewandoski indicated that the speedway had talked with NASCAR about a sanction for 2009, but finally decided to remain independent, as the track has many racers too young to race under NASCAR's rules. Ironically, one of New Smyrna's up-and-coming talents is 16-year-old Ben Kennedy, son of International Speedway Corp, executive Lesa France Kennedy.

"Kids start in the quarter midgets with us, then move up to the trucks and then the super late models," said Lewandoski. "There's a lot of talent coming along for the future."

The rousing hand that Lewandoski got indicated that The Villages residents, whether they came for Long Island, Indiana or California, as those we spoke with indicated, are all "real" race fans. And with 75,000 residents now in The Villages and buildout expected to top the 100,000 mark, the club can expect more to turn out in the future.