

Thrill of the Race

Villagers enjoy sponsored driver's Governor's Cup victory



Mark DiOrio / Daily Sun

Villages Motor Racing Fan Club members Mike and Connie Scalzitti sign their names on the hood of Jeff Choquette's race car. The club sponsored the driver for Saturday's New Smyrna Speedway race.

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By Katie Evans

Joan Rybacki thinks her late husband, Charlie, would have loved the Governor's Cup Race at New Smyrna Speedway.

As she stood in the fleece jacket Charlie wore when he met Dale Earnhardt, she smiled, pointing to his name on the hood of Jeff Choquette's car, which The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club sponsored in the 42nd running of the race.

"I wrote his name," Rybacki said. As part of the sponsorship, all the club members attending got to sign the hood of Choquette's car. "It's the best handwriting I've had in a long time."

Saturday's race was Rybacki's first race since her husband died one year ago. She said he would have loved being at New Smyrna, sponsoring a racer with the club.

"He would have had his picture taken with every single one of the racers," Rybacki said, referring to the autograph session prior to the race. "He has been a fan since the dirt tracks when he was a little kid."

And for the Village of Ashland resident, who's only been in The Villages for four months, being with other members of the club felt comfortable.

"This club is such a warm, giving club," she said. "They make you feel at home instantly."

Rybacki was with more than 100 members of the racing club, which was sponsoring Choquette for the second time.



Joan Rybacki points to her late husband's name on Choquette's car at New Smyrna Speedway on Saturday. Rybacki signed her husband's name because he was a racing fan.

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"It's just so neat to talk to your driver," said Village of Caroline resident Alan Stone.

Choquette said he appreciates the support the club gives him.

"It's a big help to have them come here and hear them cheering for you in the stands," Choquette said while taking pictures and signing autographs for club members. Though, he admitted, it does give him a little added pressure to do well.

Before the race, people were invited down to the track to meet the racers and look at their cars, which was a big thrill for club member, Buster Burt, who used to race.

"I want to get in it and go," Burt said as he looked at Choquette's car. "Even in this capacity, it still gets to me. I still love it."

Club members withstood temperatures in the low 50s, bundled in heavy jackets, beanies and blankets, while they cheered on Choquette as he gradually moved to the front of the pack.

Even with the added pressure, Choquette came out on top Saturday night, winning his second Governor's Cup title in his career.

Rybacki said it was a great experience.

"I feel just like Daytona; it's the same atmosphere," she said. "People are just as enthusiastic."

She said she felt like Charlie wanted her to go.

"I feel like he's here with me," she said. "It's a very comfortable feeling. I'm just so happy tonight."