



Back on Track

Speedway Reopens to Racing Faithful

BY JON STINNETT

For some locals, it might not amount to much more than a distant rumble on spring and summer Saturday nights, a quirky feature of life in Cottage Grove.

To the faithful, though, it can represent the thrills and heartaches of competition; it's tradition, togetherness and celebration rolled into one. It's also the hands-down best option for hair-raising, heart-pumping adrenaline that can be had within many miles of this town of ten-thousand.

On this brilliant, sunny Saturday in early April, area racing fans have begun lining up even earlier than usual in front of the gates outside the Cottage Grove Speedway — hours before the first green flag will start the day's action. Opening Day always draws a crowd, of course, but today's season opener is undoubtedly different than any that have come before.

Like so many of our recreational pursuits, the Speedway has spent the past year-plus adapting to restrictions brought on by the Coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown meant to curb its spread. Restrictions on the Speedway's capacity mean that not everyone who wants to enjoy tonight's racing will be able to do so, and die-hard fans don't want to be left out, especially following a 2020 season in which they weren't allowed to enjoy the action from the bleachers at all.

Inside the gates, in the pit area, dozens of drivers from around the region and the small crews often comprised of their



friends and family make adjustments to their cars, reconnect with old acquaintances or walk the grounds in search of something to eat. The proceedings have a 'hurry up and wait' tension about them. There'll be a meeting of all the drivers soon to go over the ground rules, but there may not be much else to do until it's time to make the dirt fly around the quarter-mile track.

Back here, much of the action swirls around Heather Boyce, who could've had little inkling of the changes that she'd be forced to confront after purchasing the Speedway just before the lockdown went into effect last year. Despite her youth, Boyce has already managed operations here for nine years. This becomes clear as she calmly consults with members of her team, taking near-constant phone calls and ensuring that all is well prior to race time.



Like many locals, Boyce practically grew up at the Speedway. Her grandfather was among the group of Jaycees that built it, her dad has sponsored and worked on lots of cars and many of her friends are drivers. And as its new owner, she's as excited as any of them to see its return.

"People are thrilled to be back," she says. "The race-track has been here since 1956, and it's a staple in our community. There are people that have been coming here every weekend since it opened. To have that taken away was pretty tough. But we're definitely excited; it feels like life is returning to normal."

A little over a year ago,

could continue to do what they love, that they were still racing," Boyce said. "We didn't want to give everybody a whole summer off, because then they may sell their cars, or find other things to be passionate about."

The Speedway held 11 fan-free races last year.

"Those were definitely an interesting 11 nights," she said. "It was a whole different year. I hope we never have to repeat it."

Boyce said 2020 was a disaster for the Speedway financially, that anything they'd saved for a rainy day is long gone.

"But we did the best we could; we're here now, and we're hoping this year sets us on the right track," she says. "We are so ready."

A few weeks into the 2021 season, it appears that a repeat of last year isn't in the cards, thankfully. Restrictions eased in March to allow the Speedway to permit some fans in the stands. Still, Boyce says there will still be limits on the number of spectators, and tickets are only being sold online or in the Speedway office. Like most of our public spaces, signage directs spectators to wear their masks and keep their distance.

And yet, racing continues at the Cottage Grove Speedway, with 4-5 car classes in action on most Saturday nights. No one's here seeking wealth or fame, and the prize money that's available pales in comparison to the funds necessary to keep a racecar on the track.

"You don't make any money racing," says Springfield-based driver Steve Sturdevant as he tunes up his IMCA Modified racer. "But it's an adrenaline rush that just can't be matched."

Boyce says she and her team had everything in place to open on schedule when, as she says, "It all happened." Like many business operators, she struggled to keep pace with how the Speedway was and was not allowed to operate during the lockdown. Months passed without much guidance, and Boyce says she sent hundreds of emails and made countless phone calls without any direct answers.

"We sent multiple proposals on how we planned to open and make sure we were meeting all the guidelines, but we couldn't get anybody to answer," she said.

Apparently unable to conduct normal operations, the decision was eventually made to open the Speedway for racing in July — but without any fans in the stands, despite the business that would surely be lost.

"We wanted to make sure that drivers had a place to go so they