

Sprint Car Mecca Beckons Iowa Girl Home

By Polly Shea
EDITOR

Although I spent my early childhood in Eastern Iowa, up until this year I would have guessed the world-famous Knoxville Nationals take place in Tennessee. Apparently this is true for many Iowans. But au contraire, folks travel to Knoxville, Iowa from as far away as Australia to compete and cheer at the “Sprint Car Capital of the World” each year at summer’s end.

This time I was in the stands.

My best sources are in conflict as to the age of this race. The Des Moines

Register, along with a local newspaper, both agree that it was the “46th annual.” However, the Knoxville Raceway Web site said 2003 was the Golden Anniversary of racing at the raceway. Another page of the Web site said the first automobile race at that site was in 1901 — “the first automobile race attempted on a fairgrounds in Iowa, if not the country.” Back then they were called “racing meets.”

Suffice it to say there is a rich tradition of racing in Knoxville, Iowa.

The town itself, with a population of just over 8,000 on a normal day, transforms into a giant campground at the end of August. RVs, t-shirt stands, and 75,000 happy people line every street. The festival atmosphere is simply intoxicating.



Although I’ve attended a number of Indy and NASCAR events, race fever at the Knoxville Nationals is unparalleled. Maybe it’s because there are speedways going up in every major city these days and the big races are becoming a dime a dozen. Maybe it’s because of the small-town camaraderie harkening back to a

19th century Fourth of July celebration. Whatever the reason, it was worth the four-hour drive just to sit in the stands and soak up the atmosphere.

And then there was the breathtaking Iowa scenery. Nowhere in the Midwest will you find a more vivid, vibrant landscape than in Iowa. Everything just seems greener, bigger and healthier in this part of God’s country.

Ironically though, it’s hot as Hades in August.

Nestled in the middle of the madness I found rebuilder Mark Neil, owner of the one-man shop Knoxville Alternator, Generator and Starter Service. Neil has been the local farmers’ mainstay for 34 years, and according to mail carrier William Campbell, is a “magician” who can fix anything.

Neil is literally the salt of the earth — no computer or fancy equipment can be found in his two-room shop. He apologized because the toilet wasn’t, uh, functioning when I dropped by. Yet he expects to be in business for a long time to come in spite of industry trends. Cheap imports simply haven’t had as much of an impact on his ag business as they have on the rest of the rebuilding industry. He buys “quality” Delco rebuilt parts so his customers don’t have problems.

Neil’s local competition made me grin. Of course there’s the Iowa big box auto parts store O’Reilly’s, but his father owns another independent parts dealership right across the street from his shop. He doesn’t hesitate to say his quality far surpasses that of his sire.

Although the races create a multi-million dollar industry in just 10 days,



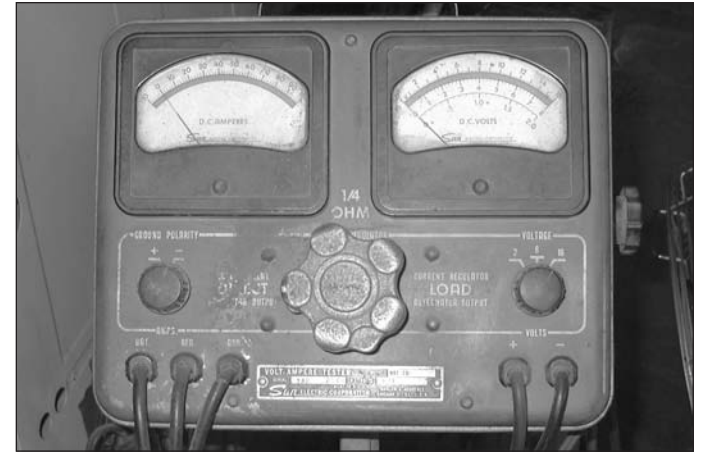
The “Big Jelony” 1972 —

This tire was a Firestone Rain tire made for dirt sprint cars. It is mounted on a 20" wide Weld wheel.





Local shop owner/rebuilding magician, Mark Neil.



Tester found in Neil's Shop—Sun Electric VAT 20.

Neil's business falls off during race week. The farmers he serves simply won't hassle with the crowds and traffic in town when its population swells to 10 times its normal size.

But back to the races.

Ten days of racing in 90-degree heat would have been way too much for my delicate constitution, so I just went for the finale on Saturday night. If you don't mind a drunk race fan stumbling over you now and then I highly recommend it.

The Knoxville Raceway Web site says the "power to weight ratio of a sprint car is unmatched in motor-sports." At speeds topping 150 miles per hour, I was simply amazed that they go so fast. Many times they just look like they're about to topple over—and sometimes they do. The 410 sprint cars will do a half-mile lap on dirt in under 15 seconds. Talk about exciting.

This year's winner, who had often been a "bridesmaid" with an impressive record of second place finishes, was the crowd sweetheart. Donny Schatz, a 29-year-old Midwestern boy, put the finishing touches on the adrenaline-soaked weekend by crossing the finish line first and making the leap from the Second Place Hall of Fame to the Winner's Circle.

I celebrated with another funnel cake.



Cores to be processed: Rebuilder Mark Neil sorts alternators the relaxed way—not in a bin or a 50-gallon drum, but in a pile on the floor. It works for him.