

To be the Class of the Field, You have to Beat the Class of the Field

Late Model Field at Hickory Dubbed Toughest Competition in the South

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It's 11:30 p.m. and the lights begin to go out around the "World's Most Famous Short Track", Hickory Motor Speedway. A few fans are still rambling the pits for an up close look at their favorite driver's car, while many teams have loaded up and are headed out of the bull ring to anticipate the next race. But not for one team, they are still hard at work outside the technical inspection area. Jay Gerst, driver of the Blue Ridge Harley Davidson #8 Chevrolet works feverishly with his crew to dismantle part of his engine for inspectors take a look at. Why you may ask? Its simple. Gerst just became what some would call the "surprise winner" of Hickory's second 100 lapper of the 2005 season. In only his fifth start at the famed track, he showed his hand and beat some of the best late model drivers in the business. "I haven't ran here very much but definitely running against guys like Scott Kilby, Pete Silva and Keith Bumgarner, it's pretty much an honor to come here and race against them and actually beat them", said Gerst as he and his crew finished up in post-race inspection.

Hickory Motor Speedway has always been well known in the racing world. Just look at the billboard posted outside the entrance gates to the track and you will see names like Junior Johnson, Ralph Earnhardt, Harry Gant and Dennis Setzer, all of which have won championships at this bull ring of a track. But like many short tracks across the nation, it has seen its years of adversity. Even years as recent as 2003 and 2004, car counts were beginning to dwindle and the late model field was many times described as boring. The problem with that is the late model division is what a high percentage of the fans want to see. They are fast, topping speeds of nearly 100 mph and above all they look like the style of cars that the fans watch on television every week on the NASCAR circuit. Yes, of course they are different, but try telling that to a 6 year old kid whose eyes light up when they meet their favorite driver during one of the track's many on-track autograph sessions.

However, in 2005 a lot has changed at Hickory Motor Speedway. It is nothing uncommon to have over twenty cars show up to battle each other for the trip to victory lane. In the first seven races of the year, there were seven different drivers that went to victory lane. By all means, that is not your typical boring late mode race. Keith Bumgarner, driver of the #95 Country Chair Late Model became the first repeat winner of 2005 with his dominating performance on June 4 th . "By far this is the toughest competition I have seen here at Hickory", said Bumgarner. "I don't think any other tracks compare to this, especially not this year...there are several cars here that could win every week".

Sherry Clifton, Hickory Motor Speedway promoter says that this is the toughest late model field that she has seen here since she became promoter four years ago. "Good rules, good enforcement and a very strong dedicated field of racers have really helped the competition become what it is in this division", says Clifton. "The better the show, the more fans you will have that want to come out and see it. These drivers are attracting a lot of fans; a new groups of fans, as well as the older ones who stopped coming to the track for various reasons in the past." Fan count plays a big part in the racing at short tracks. It's the revenue from ticket sales that helps pay the bills in order to put on a good show. Clifton is determined to let fans know how much they are appreciated. She says, "Many people drive by about eight other amusements to get to our track, but our price for entertainment is cheaper than other events and the fans seem to like that". Clifton also coordinates many special events with sponsors throughout the year to give fans a special deal and let them know they are appreciated. Pepsi Family Night at the Races drew one of the biggest crowds so far in 2005, and that alone is sometimes all it takes to put a big smile on Clifton's face.

Several tracks across the nation have fell victim to bad management, but just walk around the pits for a while and see what drivers have to say about Hickory Management. "I think the good competition and the people who run the track are the reason there is such a good car count at Hickory", said Jay Gerst. Brian Connor, driver of the #21 LP Gear Late Model drives his rig all the way from Augusta, Georgia just to compete at Hickory. Connor says, "The people that run the place here at Hickory make us want to race here, and the competition level is great." And Connor isn't the only one who makes the long haul. Joe Henderson III, driver of the #77 Kodak Late Model makes the trip from Nashville, Tennessee when he runs at Hickory. This year alone, there have been drivers from as far north as New York and Pennsylvania trying their hand at some of the toughest competition in the south.

Many drivers in the late model division like the cost cutting efforts that Hickory Motor Speedway is helping them with. In particular, for a regular 50 lap event, the track only allows the drivers to purchase two new tires. The other two tires are left in the tire barn from the previous week. When asked about the two tire rule, Keith Bumgarner says "I don't have a problem with it either way, but the money saving is good. We are able to save at least \$250 each week". However, not everyone likes the idea. Jay Gerst says, "I definitely like running the four tires better like we did tonight, I'm not a big fan of the two tire rule." The track allows drivers to purchase four tires for special events such as 100 lappers. Overall, the drivers may not like the idea but they are perfectly fine with it because they know they are on the same playing field as the next guy, and it eliminates all the "gray area" when it comes to tires.

Clifton has worked hard over her four year tenure as Hickory track promoter to get it to where it is. She knows that she can't give up or else it could start heading in the other direction. "We plan to keep listening to our drivers, addressing their issues and providing a good compact show for our fans." Many nights this year, racing action has wrapped up by 10:00 p.m., allowing plenty of time for fans to go elsewhere after the show. Its especially good for the younger fans. If people with children know that the show will drag on until the early hours of the morning, they will most likely stay home and not support the track. Some people may not think of that, but Clifton does. Without the younger fans, there is no future for the sport. And don't think you won't get your money's worth just because the show wrapped up in a timely manner. This year has already proven to be one of the best years of competition that Hickory Motor Speedway has ever had.

So as the 2005 season rolls on, everyone at Hickory Motor Speedway would agree that whoever takes the Late Model Division Championship will have to work harder than ever. It's a level of competition that most drivers aren't used to. "The competition here is tough, if you can win here its considered one of the toughest tracks in the country", said Jay Gerst after he was declared the winner of the 100 lapper just after midnight. "You have to run very hard from the drop of the green flag, there's no letting up and there's no chilling out".

