

Father and son live, breath short track racing

By GUY LORANGER : The Herald-Sun of Durham
Jul 8, 2006 : 2:14 pm ET

DURHAM, N.C. -- They don't do it for money.

If they did, they would have left racing a long time ago.

And they don't do it because it's a steppingstone to NASCAR stardom, because it might never happen.

Instead, David Triplett Sr., the crew chief, and his son, David Triplett Jr., the driver, do it because -- as Triplett Sr. said -- "We live and breathe the stuff."

"It takes a lot of heart and dedication," Triplett Jr. said. "And it's like anything -- if you're not into it, then you should be doing something else."

Every March through November, the Triplett's travel through South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia to compete in late model stock races at short tracks that are throwbacks to NASCAR's past.

Unlike NASCAR's top-tier division, the Nextel Cup Series, the admission prices are affordable for fans, ranging from \$2-\$10 per ticket. And, unlike the superspeedways, the admission allows them to sit right on top of the action.

Like many late model stock drivers, Triplett Jr. said, he tries to make himself accessible to those fans as much as he can before and after races, especially the younger ones.

"I'll sign autographs, or I'll let them sit in my car," he said, "because I was there once myself."

But for Triplett Jr. and his father, being a racing fan has never been enough.

When he was 16, Triplett Sr. got his first car and began competing at TriCo Speedway, now known as Orange County Speedway. He has been involved with racing since, taking his son to the track for races as far back as either can remember.

"But what I never liked is that I was too young for them to let me into the pits," Triplett Jr. said. "I didn't want to just sit in the stands."

After racing go-karts for several years, he finally got his chance to get in on the action when he was in high school by competing in the Allison Legacy Car Series.

Then, when he turned 19, Triplett Jr. received a late model stock car as a gift from a family friend, Bobbie "Pops" Gullie, and the father-son racing team was formed.

Although they consider Orange County Speedway to be their home track -- it's located just a 12-minute drive from the Triplett's racing shop and family farm in Timberlake -- the team has traveled throughout the region and earned a reputation for being a threat to win everywhere they go.

Since 2001, Triplett Jr. has won 15 races and 18 poles, including the pole at major late model stock events like the Taco Bell 300 at Martinsville Speedway, the Bobby Isaac Memorial at Hickory Motor Speedway and the Sleep Inn 400 at Myrtle Beach Speedway.

That success, Triplett Sr. said, traces back to OCS.

"What we've learned is that if we run well at Orange County, then we can run well anywhere," he said. "Orange County has always been that way, because of the drivers there, and because the way it's built -- it's one of the fastest tracks around."

But when Orange County Speedway's former owners closed the track and put it on the market two years ago, the Triplett's went through a transition.

They competed at Myrtle Beach Speedway, Southern National Speedway in Kenly and South Boston Speedway near the Virginia border. But they never settled down at a track.

In the meantime, Triplett Jr. married his longtime girlfriend, Lauren, and decided that while racing would remain his passion, it couldn't be his career.

Sure, there's always the chance that he could become the next Jeff Burton, Elliott Sadler or Scott Riggs -- drivers who got their start on area short tracks before moving on to the Nextel Cup Series. But the chance of it happening, he estimated, is "about 1 percent."

"NASCAR nowadays wants 14- or 16-year-olds to sign. I know 26 doesn't sound old, but it is today in racing," he said. "I think it's become too much about politics and who you know and how much money you've got, instead of the way it used to be, where you could get there on talent."

"It could still happen, but it's matter of being at the right place and right time, and even then, there's no security in it. When you've got a family, you want security."

So last year, Triplett Jr. graduated from the Durham Fire Academy and went to work in the Durham Fire Department, where he has found his job to be just as exciting as anything on the track.

"My wife says that I've always got to be doing something dangerous," he said. "The calls we go out on, the people I meet -- every day is different. And it's like a brotherhood. You spend 24 hours at a time with these guys, and it's like you become a second family."

When Vance Agee bought Orange County Speedway and reopened it in March, the Triplett's returned to the track and remained regulars, even though the transition to new ownership has not been smooth.

Many drivers have stayed away from the track because it is sanctioned by the American Speed Association, or ASA, and not the NASCAR Weekly Racing Series, which offers a points fund.

The track also lost drivers to disagreements over officiating and post-race inspections.

"But I think what Vance has done well is that he's listened to the fans and the drivers, and he's learning from them," Triplett Jr. said. "It'll take some time, and I want to stick with him. It's the track I grew up on, so I want to race there."

Another reason why the car count is down, Triplett Jr. said, is the cost of fuel.

The first-place purse at most area short tracks tops out at \$3,000, which means that most of a team's funds come from sponsors.

Triplett Jr. said he is fortunate to have one longtime sponsor, Ken Smith, and another sponsor, Mack Bailey, who is one of the top sponsors in the area's short-track racing scene.

Other drivers, however, have felt the pinch.

"It used to be where you'd get 20-25 cars at the track, but the way gas prices have gone up, a lot of guys are having to leave their cars at home," Triplett Jr. said.

But the Triplett's feel like their best days of racing still lie ahead.

At the start of the month, the Triplett's went to South Boston Speedway to figure out what was wrong with their car. They still had not won a race this season.

They spent the entire day testing and tweaking, working straight through lunch and into the evening.

"We made some little changes, and we made some big changes, and we then we tried stuff that didn't even make sense," Triplett Sr. said, "but we kept working at it until we got it."

The next week, they went to Orange County Speedway. Triplett took over the lead on the first lap and led the rest of the way.

"To see the way that car ran, it was unreal," Triplett Sr. said. "That's an amazing feeling."