



Series vs. Specials

Is the lack of a LM touring series in Ontario a problem?

The goal of most competitive athletes is to reach the upper echelon of the sport they love.

And for stock car racers, success at the highest level of NASCAR is a common goal. Although young Canadians, such as Pete Shepard and J.R. Fitzpatrick have made the leap from Saturday night bullrings to the highest level of our sport, success in NASCAR is out of reach for many aspiring race drivers. But, exactly how did they get their opportunity in NASCAR?

The ladder to success is well established within the stock car community. Many drivers learned their 'race craft' in karts, or entry-level divisions at the local speedways. After achieving success, many racers trade in their old rides for a racecar in a higher division.

For many, this process is repeated several times, gaining valuable experience at each level. Some drivers are content competing at the local level and define their success by the enjoyment they have experienced and the friends that they have made along the way.

But for drivers who aspire to reach the top levels, they will eventually graduate from their local speedway to gain experience competing in a traveling series, such as the ALSTAR Super Series, which ceased to exist at the end of the 2006 season (and as a touring series in 2005).

Started by Sauble Speedway owner/promoter Joe Chisholm in 1997, the ALSTAR series provided a stage for the top competitors from local speedways to measure their performance against the best from other tracks. With races scheduled on Sundays, the traveling series was able to draw upon the talents of local competitors without forcing them to choose between their local track and the traveling series.

As the ALSTAR series grew, its strategy evolved. And before long, it enjoyed a strong following as a special guest during each track's regular night of racing. Its roster was filled with a strong contingent of dedicated competitors who followed each stop on the series schedule.

With the introduction of the crate engine, many area speedways experienced increased car counts during 2006. With a successful weekly program, it's widely believed that many area speedways were confident that their regular program could compete with the excitement of a traveling series at a significantly lower cost to speedway owners and promoters.



With the top Late Model racers making the rounds for high-dollar specials, is there a need for another Late Model touring series in Ontario?

PHOTO BY DAVE FRANKS

Without the support of track promoters, and competitors with crate engines, the ALSTAR series struggled with a schedule that was limited to three events in 2006, all at Sauble Speedway. Chisholm ended the 2006 season with announcement that ALSTAR Series would not take to the track in 2007.

Is there a need?

The demise of the ALSTAR Series has meant that many of Ontario's top Late Model teams have been left without a traveling series to race in. The question now becomes: Is there a need for a traveling Late Model series?

From the promoters' perspective, the absence of a touring series may actually be good news. Displaced race teams who don't want their equipment to sit idle may return to competing regularly at their local speedway. Increased car counts and greater competition could be the result and would likely create more excitement for race fans.

But will this really happen? Chisholm contended that ALSTAR's success was due to the support of elite teams and their sponsors; operations that were one step above the local Saturday night racers on the motorsports ladder. He believed that the competitors required the visibility provided by visiting different markets each week and that the series would not be successful without reaching each of these markets.

The racing community in Ontario consists of several series that frequent most of the area speedways. The OSCAAR Outlaw Super Late Models will welcome its largest

rookie class in 2007 and provides race teams with the opportunity to move up from a weekly Late Model series. With established veterans, greater technology and significantly more power, OSCAAR Super Late Models will provide an education for seasoned Late Model competitors.

The newly formed Ontario Sportsman Series (OSS) may also benefit from race teams and sponsors who require the visibility created by a touring series. The Lucas Oil Canadian Vintage Modifieds, Lucas Oil Can-Am Midgets and the Ontario Pro Challenge Series are all viable alternatives for teams who wish to travel to a different track each week.

For those Late Model drivers who wish to experience a variety of tracks with their existing equipment in '07, there are a number of special events on tap throughout the region. Some of these events may require additional preparation to meet each track's unique rules. However, in most cases, the required changes are relatively minor.

So it seems that at this point, Late Model competitors do not need another touring series to further fragment the current population of weekly racers. The special events at area speedways attract the best local competitors in the Late Model division.

They offer longer races, greater purses and increased media attention without the pressure of competing at a single speedway each week. Capturing the checkered flag at Flamboro's Oktoberfest, Peterborough's Autumn Colours Classic, Kawartha's Summer Sizzler or Delaware's APC 300 may be considered the crowning achievement of any successful season. ♦