



Reversing the trend

How can short tracks attract the attention of today's youth?

In the political arena, many platforms are designed to appease the public by highlighting how investing in today's youth will help to pay handsome dividends in our collective future. However, with self-preservation being a primary concern, actions of our elected officials are designed to attract the votes of a powerful, aging population.

But, without efforts to understand and appeal to the next generation of voters, politicians may eventually wake up to the realization that they no longer have the majority support of the voting population.

The local stock car racing community is a mirror image of Canadian society, with a demographic profile that is top-heavy, filled with passionate but aging supporters. Efforts to build loyalty within this large group of race fans should continue, but not at the expense of the next generation of young race supporters. Much like our elected officials, failure to recognize the importance of the next generation has the potential to jeopardize the future of the sport that we all love.

With today's youth comprising just 12 per cent of its fan base, stock car racing is at risk of having more people exit the sport than are replaced by newcomers. Has the interest of our youth simply shifted away from the automobile as a viable form of entertainment?

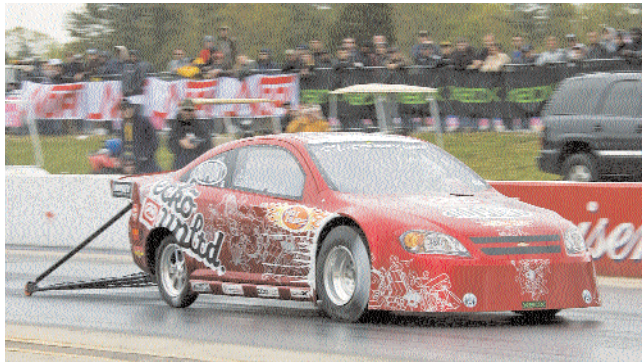
Without a large influx of new interest from the youngest generation, the question becomes how to attract their attention to ensure the future health of stock car racing, reversing this alarming trend.

The explosion of the urban tuner lifestyle, following the success of the 'Fast and the Furious' movie franchise, reveals that the automotive culture is alive and well with youngest enthusiasts. With an estimated market size in excess of \$200 million in Canada for custom and performance automotive products (excluding rims, tires and truck accessories), nobody can argue the lost opportunity this group represents. However, efforts by area speedways to attract and retain new fans and competitors should begin much sooner than the legal driving age.

Most professional racers started their careers as young children in go-karts, competing at their local track. Partnering with a karting club provides the opportunity to build a great relationship with many potential fans and competitors, increasing their awareness to other forms of

Motorsport. Delaware Speedway has a very successful junior racing program, and many graduates are currently competing in full-size stock cars. The program, which includes many classroom sessions help to prepare the competitors for many years in the sport.

As these children grow older, many leave racing to pursue other interests. Track promoters must seek every opportunity to keep the speedway top of mind with these young students. Involvement within the community by partnering with area high schools may present many unique learning opportunities for technology and communications students. Under the correct conditions, some of these students may also wish to try their luck behind the wheel of a stock car.



Attracting fans and competitors from the sport-compact scene could be one way to help bolster aging fields.

PHOTO COURTESY GM CANADA

Has the interest of our youth simply shifted away from the automobile as a viable form of entertainment?

Competing in any division at the local speedway requires a substantial investment in time, money and personal commitment. Area speedways have responded to the rising costs with the introduction of economical, entry-level divisions.

Featuring many sport compact cars that today's youth can identify with, the four-cylinder class at many area speedways often create the closest racing action. The rulebook for the entry level division must remain fair and consistent, with safety initiatives receiving top priority. Above all else, the objective of fun competition should be shared by all participants.

The growth of import drag racing and the rise of drifting as a viable form of competition provide clear evidence that interest in motorsport remains as today's youth grow older and enter the workforce. Stock car racing has merely failed to capture the

imagination of this important sub-culture.

Switching the focus of young enthusiasts from the urban lifestyle to stock car racing is not going to be an easy task. Import enthusiasts have the freedom to build a dual purpose machine that is equally at home on the drag strip as it is returning a Friday night date. In contrast, stock car racing requires a dedicated vehicle, with strict safety regulations that limit creative expression.

What can local speedway promoters learn from the tuner lifestyle? Participating in an import festival is much more than watching a race or viewing a car show. Everyone in attendance is part of a much larger cultural event, with many social activities, both on and off the track, to hold everyone's attention.

DJs, bikini contests and burnout competitions should not become the mainstay of local, Saturday night racing, as its position is firmly planted as a family-friendly form of entertainment. The point is that area promoters must focus on creating the atmosphere of a special event, each and every week.

The passion for automotive culture will likely remain, including local, grassroots racing. However, the future direction of automotive enthusiasts is currently unclear. Diverging alternatives within the motorsport industry may upset the current balance and popularity of area speedways. The time is now for area promoters to plan for the future by gaining a better understanding of the impacts of popular culture that extend beyond their immediate market niche. ♦

(Scott Gibson races in the Late Model division at Flamboro Speedway. For more information about Scott and his racing efforts, visit www.gibsonmotorsports.ca)