



# A golden era?

Canadian short track racing is on the verge of greatness

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**A similar scene can be found throughout the racing season at speedways across the country.**

**Long before the evening's first flag is waved loyal fans, fixtures at any given track, assemble in the grandstands and reminisce about years gone by.**

They've witnessed the popularity of their track rise to great heights and, unfortunately, descend to the brink of collapse.

Despite all of the highs and lows, these fans have kept their souvenirs and burned their favourite racing tales into their brains. However, the racing banter detailing their fondest memories is often focused on a different era, often called the "golden years," when epic battles between fierce competitors were waged on speedways each week.

Although no one can argue that the sport has seen some epic eras in the past, the racing community has experienced a definite resurgence in recent years. As a race fan and competitor, I look toward the '08 season with great anticipation and argue that the "golden years" may be poised for a triumphant return.

The investment in real estate and construction is a great indicator of the general health of our economy. Applying the same logic to the racing community reveals a high level of confidence by speedway owners that local grassroots racing will continue to prosper. Delaware Speedway recently announced plans for two million dollars in facility upgrades. Although not insignificant, Delaware is merely the latest to join a long list of venues that have already made a substantial investment in track improvements. In fact, most of Ontario's paved ovals have completed significant renovation projects within the last 10 years, and similar examples can also be found from coast to coast.

The investment in facility improvements has a direct correlation with each track's ability to attract new race fans and satisfy its most loyal patrons. Potential race fans have many choices for their entertainment dollar and speedway promoters have realized that in order to be given consideration, the amenities provided must be on par with other entertainment options.

The effect of facility improvements extends beyond the cleanliness of washrooms and the well-manicured grounds. A well-prepared racing surface provides the

stage for close competition and in '07 Canadian promoters were recognized for being the best.

The World of Outlaws returned to Canada after a 25 year absence and was so impressed with Ohswegen Speedway that they recognized Glen Styres as their Promoter of the year. Similarly, Merrittville Speedway received a variety of awards from Dirt Track Digest including the best facility, best run weekly program and the best racing surface.

Merrittville's staff also received praise for their preparation of the track surface for the World of Outlaws' finals at Lowes Motor Speedway; an event promoted by Canadian standout Roger Slack.

## The 2008 season will be referred to as a return to racing's "golden era."

Improved facilities alone do not guarantee an exciting evening of racing. A high number of competitors, well prepared machinery and close competition are all required to engage fan interest. Strong support for the entry-level divisions and the introduction of crate engines as a cost-effective alternative to custom built engines have bolstered car counts at most speedways. Without a guaranteed starting position for the feature, teams have renewed their focus on car preparation, resulting in even closer competition and exciting finishes.

To keep the race teams engaged, track promoters have finally started to listen to the needs of the racers. In 2008, Flamboro Speedways will offer a flexible race schedule, allowing teams to drop their lowest finishes from the championship. This will provide each team with the freedom to achieve a greater balance with non-racing commitments, and will also encourage more inter-track competition.

Delaware Speedway has proposed to redistribute the championship points fund to the weekly purse, which will result in an increased payout for each event. The greatest impact will be felt by the occasional racer, who would not have participated



Patrick Carpentier, the world's fastest pirate.

in the traditional championship fund.

Beyond the local grassroots level, interest in Canadian racing appears to be at an all-time high. '08 will see more Canadians competing at the highest level of our sport than ever before. In just two short years since his stock car debut at Cayuga Speedway, Patrick Carpentier will attempt to become a regular in NASCAR.

Joining Carpentier will be part-timers DJ Kennington, JR Fitzpatrick and Pierre Bourque in NASCAR's development divisions and Jacques Villeneuve still might race in the Nationwide series after an aborted attempt to do the full '08 Sprint Cup season.

North America's premier touring series will also make Canada a significant part of their '08 Calendar. NASCAR's Nationwide series will return to Circuit Gilles Villeneuve for its sophomore year and ARCA's top division will headline Cayuga's '08 season. The World of Outlaws, ACT and the ISMA Super Modifieds will all return to packed grandstands in '08. I hope that the additional media exposure generated by these events will help to increase awareness about the excitement that can be found at the local, grassroots level.

Opening night for the '08 season will see avid fans once again return to the top row of the front stretch grandstand and although their great tales of racing past will never be forgotten, renewed interest in the current era will result in new stories that are told with equal passion, drama and conviction.

To help with the resurgence of local grassroots racing be sure to support your local speedway and race teams. In time, I expect that fond memories of the '08 season will be referred to as a return to racing's "golden era." ♦