

ENTERTAINMENT SEPTEMBER 20, 2014 7:00 PM

# Hillsborough has key place in NASCAR history

## HIGHLIGHTS

Meet Hall of Famers and enjoy NASCAR's last remaining dirt track at 2-day event Sept. 26 and 27 in Orange County.



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By Katie Jansen - Correspondent

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Standing on a dirt trail surrounded by trees just down the road from the Hillsborough Walmart, it is hard to imagine that this was once a popular NASCAR speedway.

Though it bears only passing resemblance to its glory days, it wouldn't be a racetrack at all today were it not for the Occoneechee-Orange Historic Speedway Group.

The track was bought from the France/Staley family in 1997, but nothing was done with it until 2006, when the volunteer group stepped up to restore NASCAR's last remaining dirt track to the way it was before it was abandoned in 1968. Bill France, a NASCAR co-founder, wanted to build a super speedway in Hillsborough, but when he couldn't get the town's permission, he left the dirt track and went to build in Talladega, Ala.

"When I first came down back in the '90s, everything had grown up so much you could barely see the track," longtime NASCAR fan and volunteer Laverne Zachary of Mebane recalled of an early visit to the site on Elizabeth Brady Road. "It had pretty much become a place of inactivity. We worked that whole first year, just cleaning everything up."

The track is now a public park and a favorite spot for joggers and dog walkers. To the untrained eye, it may look more like a series of running trails than a speedway, but close your eyes and you can almost see the race cars whipping around the track, stirring up dust. You can almost hear the rumble of the engines and the roar of the crowd – anywhere from 7,000 to 9,000 people during the track's heyday.

The track – not to be confused with the Orange County Speedway in Rougemont, which is still open for races – was used starting in NASCAR's first season in 1949 until 1968. On Friday and Saturday, it will be the epicenter of the speedway group's eighth annual racers' reunion and car show, celebrating Hillsborough's place in NASCAR history.

The free festivities begin Friday evening with the "Cruise-In With a Twist," featuring a car, truck and motorcycle show as well as live music by The Grass Cats. The fun continues Saturday with a parade around the track. About 22 former drivers and their family members are expected to attend. The public is invited to meet these drivers, including NASCAR Hall of Famers Leonard and Glen Wood, this year's honorees.

The event is also a chance to admire the volunteers' restoration efforts, including the ticket counter and concession stand. The group, whose efforts were recognized in Daytona, Fla., earlier this year by the Victory Lane Racing Association, aims to be as true to history as

possible.

But a full restoration would mean cutting down trees that others in town want to protect.

“I wish it could be what it used to be, but it’s gotta be a kind of combination between the racing people and I guess what you’d say the tree huggers,” Zachary said.

Group members want others to discover this often-forgotten chapter in town history.

“I talked to people that lived in Hillsborough, and they didn’t even know there was a racetrack over there,” said Frank Craig of Efland, one of the group’s founders. “We brought awareness to it, so that’s a good thing.”

#### Honoring the past

It all started in 1947, when Bill France spotted a dirt horse-race track next to the Eno River while flying over Hillsborough. He bought the land and turned the track into Occoneechee Speedway (renamed Orange Speedway in 1954). In 1949, it was the site of NASCAR’s third race.

“Back in those days there wasn’t much to do,” Craig said. “A big sport like that come to a small town was huge.”

Craig, who was 5 years old when he attended his first race at the speedway in 1957, remembers standing up against the fence to watch the cars.

“I liked the speed, the sound, and it was real dirty – and as a little boy, you know, dirt was good,” he said. “I always wanted to be close to the action. It was a lot of fun getting to meet all the drivers.”

Craig grew up going to all the races with his father, who worked as a security guard for the events. In 1967, when Craig was 15, his father died, but Craig’s love for the track lived on. Eventually he decided to start the Historic Speedway Group.

“Frank just got this idea like, ‘Maybe I could do this as a tribute to my dad and a tribute to the racers,’ ” Zachary said. “He was really instrumental in getting this group started.” Starting with just a dozen founding members, the group now numbers more than 40.

Its annual racer reunion and car show has been a big hit since the inaugural event in 2007.

“It’s one of the coolest events we have here in town – fun, it’s a place to take your family, and it really celebrates Hillsborough’s history,” said Mayor Tom Stevens.

“They come from all up and down the coast,” said Gene Hobby, a retired driver and current president of Historic Speedway Group. “Everybody tells us that Hillsborough is the place to go if you wanna see and talk to the old-time race drivers.”

Old-time race drivers

Hobby, who started his racing career in 1964, has fond memories of the speedway.

“We called it the super speedway of dirt,” he said. “It was right on the river, and it was kinda banked but there were no fences. You could run about 120.”

Ned Jarrett, a NASCAR Hall of Fame member who lives in Newton, N.C., ran 12 races on the speedway. He had two first-place finishes there.

“When you win on a race track, you like it,” he said. “So I enjoyed running at Hillsborough.”

Jarrett said the track presented special challenges.

“It was the longest dirt track that I recall that we raced on,” he said, adding that drivers had to be more mindful of their speed going into the turns because the 0.9-mile track had long straightaways and short turns.

Hobby raced on Orange Speedway, which held both fall and spring races, around four times. He even had a major accident there on March 14, 1965. He was running in seventh-place halfway through the race when he lost control of his 1964 Dodge.

“It would be pretty rough on those turns,” he said. “It went end over end and rolled about five times. It ended up right in front of the grandstand.”

Despite the flip, Hobby wasn’t hurt. Fortunately for him, 1965 was the first year NASCAR required shoulder harnesses.

“If it hadn’t been for that shoulder harness, it would’ve been bad,” Hobby said.

He laments that the Occoneechee-Orange Speedway is the only original dirt track still in existence.

“NASCAR doesn’t run any more dirt tracks, but they need to go back to that because that’s where the show is at,” he said. “The dirt tracks are more fun.”

Community connection

Now that the track has been cleared and is carefully tended, it is a popular recreation spot. Stevens said it is a great place for Hillsborough residents to exercise.

“It’s now preserved as a park open to the public every single day of the year,” Mayor Stevens said. “It’s very much in the day-to-day fabric of this community.”

The racetrack wasn’t always such a popular destination.

Hobby said it took time for that to happen.

“It took them awhile to realize what we’d done to the track,” he said. “(Our annual event) brings a lot of revenue into the town and that’s why it’s caught on the past couple years.”

In addition to the Cruise-In With A Twist, Hillsborough residents and visitors can enjoy the history of the speedway through an exhibit on view through Oct. 31 at the Orange County Historical Museum.

“I think it’s important because a lot of the focus is on Colonial history,” said Brandie Fields, museum director. “A lot of people think the last 50 years isn’t history, but it is.”

Fields is excited that the exhibit has attracted newcomers to the museum.

“It’s history that kind of captivates a different audience than what we normally pull in,” she said. “There’s so many people living in Hillsborough that have memories of the track. It’s sort of a living history, something that’s easier to connect to. It’s a chance to put their passion in a historical framework.”



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