closerlook: WIR champion's efforts go beyond home track ... by Jim Carson

The 2023 season at Wisconsin International Raceway couldn't have begun any better for Sawyer Effertz. The 30-year-old veteran from Kimberly, Wis., captured the traditional opener for the TUNDRA Super Late Model Series at the D-shaped half-mile in nearby Kaukauna.

Over the next four months, things kept getting better for the #2 operation. Effertz earned his first Super Late Model championship under the Fox River Racing Club banner and won five main events in the Thursday-night action. He was also the top points man in all three of the Red, White & Blue State Championship doubleheaders and triumphed in every RW&B nightcap.

"It was almost an unimaginable year," Effertz said. "We won the second night out, then the fourth, and the sixth. We had an every-other-week streak going for a little bit."

There were a couple of hiccups, but his bad finishes still found him on track and he avoided any DNFs. His success, sponsored by Mr. Brews Taphouse, Global Fab, 4M Machine, Fox City's Towing, Emerald Electric, Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Gerard Machine, Thern Plumbing & Septic, Monday & Associates, Icon Electric, Prestige Auto Sales, Praxair, Precision Powder Coating, 920 Wraps & Shirts, Pagoni's Pizza, Lake Park Pub, Midwest Properties, Roxy Supper Club, All-Sport Trophy, Bentley's Restorations, Kamps Bar & Grill, Jersey Mike's, BC Auto Body, Bay Point Bar & Grill, Scotty's Bar, Jacob's Meat Market, Brat-Wave, UAW Local 578, Wisconsin Timber Rattlers, Dr. Eugene Righted and Advanced Engine Concepts, continued the nice run of Pathfinder chassis at WIR. Five-time track champion Jeff VanOudenhoven and 2022 titlist Dalton Zehr have also represented that brand.



Ricky Bassman

Sawyer Effertz shows off one of the six feature victory trophies he earned this year at Wisconsin International Raceway in Kaukauna, Wis.



Ricky Bassman

Sawyer Effertz captured his first overall Super Late Model track title and the Red, White & Blue State Championship crown.

Effertz represented more than just his own success this season. During part of the summer he was on the crew for Donnie Wilson Motorsports for six races: the three in the Badger State, plus the Glass City 200, the Winchester 400 and even the Snowball Derby. He even had a hand on a winning effort at Toledo Speedway, having his photo taken with Jesse Love's crew after the Glass City show.

"James Edwards has been helping me out even before he was with Wilson. He's the cousin of one of my pit crew guys," Effertz said about the Minnesota native who went to school near Charlotte and never came home. "He worked for Hendrick, then when NASCAR switched to the new cars he wanted to try something new. He calls his business Mr. E Performance, but he's been so busy with Donnie's stuff. If I need help on a Thursday (WIR's primary racing night), I'll call and he'll tell me to try this. He's the one who taught me how to use a load machine, do the bump stops, and stuff to be consistent and repeatable.

"James let him know that I was interested in helping out, and they called me. I just filled in wherever they were light on whichever team. Usually I was with (team manager) Bond Suss on whatever car he was the crew chief. I was with William Sawalich quite a bit. I was trying not to be nosy because I was grateful to have an opportunity to be there, but inherently you're gonna see some things that'll help if you know what to look for. They were on Hamke stuff and that's not necessarily gonna transfer to my car. But I learned more of the procedural stuff that I can bring back to our team to be more efficient, at the shop and at the track.

"I'm hoping I can work with 'em again. Rarely do you get to be a part of a high-end operation where the motto is whatever it takes. And they took care of everybody; their accommodations are awesome, and I really think they care about you. My best friend Taylor Vandermoss came a couple of times too; it was nice to have someone to travel with to the Snowball."



Bruce Nuttleman/Ultimate Lap Photo

Sawyer Effertz was on the crew for Jesse Love when he won the Glass City 200 at Toledo for Donnie Wilson's team.

closerlook: ‘Brock Rocket’ launches to Super title at State Park ... by Jim Carson

Brock Heinrich’s 2023 record featured three weekly Super Late Model victories at State Park Speedway plus a win in the track’s signature Super show, the Larry Detains Memorial which was part of the ASA Midwest Tour. If those seem like Justin Mondeik numbers … well, there’s a connection.

Mondeik reeled off three straight titles at the quarter-mile in the Wausau suburb of Rib Mountain, Wis. In 2021 he recorded seven wins at State Park, then last season he scored six. The pandemic-shortened 2020 campaign found Mondeik in victory lane three times in regular-distance shows plus the Detains special.

The comparisons are justified from hometown driver Heinrich, especially because their cars have the same roots. Mondeik is the Badger State resident with whom famed crew chief Toby Nuttleman works most closely, not counting two-time Snowball Derby winner Ty Majeski who now lives in North Carolina. Heinrich’s chassis is another one of the Lefthander cars around the upper Midwest which have enjoyed clips and other service from Toby Race Products.

“We run a lot of the same equipment. I just picked up on it,” said Heinrich, a mechanical technician for a Wausau hospital. “Last year we just got caught in everything. This year I don’t think we even replaced a body panel. In the last race of the year we broke an upper control arm, but the car was still on the track at the end and we finished fourth.”

The highlight was obviously the Detjens triumph, his first in a touring series; he has followed the TUNDRA circuit for four-plus years. The fact that he inherited the win after John Beale and eventual Midwest Tour champion Gabe Sommers collided up front with four laps left didn’t lessen the accomplishment for the #52. The Detjens show is named in memory of the Wisconsin short-track legend and uncle of longtime stars Scott and Chris Wimmer, who also used to run #52 on their cars.

“That’s a connection through the Merwin family; #525 was Flip Merwin’s snowmobile number,” Heinrich said. “When I first went to State Park and saw Chris Wimmer running #52, I became a big fan, but #52 being my number has nothing to do with the Wimmers.”

Scott and his dad Ron Wimmer currently own the State Park facility, and that’s where Heinrich won two Limited Late Model championships in the 2010s before moving up. The 26-year-old driver, whose supporters include Northern Trial Express, United Structures, Zilisch Asphalt, Revi Design, B&D Plumbing, Joe Rader Towing, Todd’s Tap Service, Wausau Mine, Sprinkler Pete, Charlie’s Bar, Krasowski Dental, Wausau 525, Ritchie Oil & Propane, Beyond Paint & Design, North Advance Auto, Ciao Restaurant, FSS Business Systems, Hayes Graphics, Jeff’s Auto, El Tequila Salsa, Wesdon Automotive, JV Smith Ltd., PGA Inc., Crystal Finishing, Fastenal, Mississippi Welders Supply, Glen Ray Radiator, Whiskey River, Kim’s BS Sauce, Naef’s Sugar Bush, WC2 Motorsports, Impact Racing, FRS Shocks and engine builder Wegner Automotive, has spread his wings a bit through his TUNDRA touring. His peak away from home was a second this year in TUNDRA action at Norway, Mich.



Paige Oakes/Paige Marie Photography

Brock Heinrich receives the coveted Larry Detjens Memorial trophy from ASA Midwest Tour announcer Eric Huenefeld after his July victory at State Park Speedway near Wausau, Wis.



Paige Oakes/Paige Marie Photography

Brock Heinrich won a total of four Super Late Model races and his first top-class championship at his home bullring.

There’s more traveling in his future. Heinrich plans to chase the 2024 title at Golden Sands Speedway (where Mondeik has two titles) and would love to visit Slinger Super Speedway and the Milwaukee Mile at some point. And State Park will always be his home; occasionally he helps SPS regulars such as Mark and Dillon Mackesy when they’re racing elsewhere.

“The little track just kinda fits the way I like to drive,” Heinrich said. “I’ve gotten used to it and I’m able to run with it.”

closerlook: Saskatchewan veteran goes Sky-high once again ... by Jim Carson

Jim Gaunt might be the best-ever pavement stock car driver from Saskatoon, Sask. It's a sure bet that he's the most loyal racer in the province.

The 68-year-old Gaunt's career total of Late Model championships is in the double digits, including his latest title from 2023 at his hometown track, Sutherland Automotive Speedway. He has also competed in every event in his division in Saskatoon - both at the current 3/8-mile oval and its predecessor, the old Bridge City Speedway which closed for good in 2005 - in 42 of the 43 years he has been in the sport. And his wife Pam's mortgage company, Sky Financial, has been a sponsor of racing in the city for more than 20 years.

"I haven't got a complaint in the world," Gaunt said. "I'm very lucky to get to play at a sport like this and still compete. There's not too many games where you can do this."

His 2023 campaign was his best in quite a while - likely dating back to his 2014 track crown and his 2015-16 championships in the Western Speed Association miniseries, which used to go to two other tracks. Gaunt won three features this year, and it had been nearly a decade since he had won more than once in a single season.

"Everything seemed to go our way," he said. "We didn't have any crashes, and there were no flat tires. We were third in the 200-lapper. Last winter we spent some money on the car and did some upgrades; as you know, you don't get better with age. This has been the best car I've ever had."

Even before Gaunt's and crew chief Roger Carrier's off-season work, this #55 had a good pedigree. Gaunt acquired the Hamke chassis from neighboring province Alberta about 10 years ago, but its original assembly was done by Wes Burton Performance in North Carolina.



Kemmer Racing Photography

Jim Gaunt drove this car to three victories and another Pro Late Model title at the only paved oval in Saskatchewan.

The dedication will likely still be there in 2024, as Gaunt retired from his potash mine job in the mid-2010s and can spend more time on his car, also sponsored by Commercial Sandblasting & Painting, Pulsar Hydraulics, NSC Minerals, J&L Enterprises, Messer Gases and the Plumb Shoppe. But there is a possible reprieve for the others in Saskatoon's Pro Late Model class, as that #55 is for sale, and he'll hang up his helmet after it sells.

"If it's still sitting here in the spring, I'll take it out, and that will push me over the edge," Gaunt said. "I tried to sell it seven or eight years ago, after I won the series. I'm not asking the moon for it, but I'm not gonna give it away either."

closerlook: Ramm repeats in EIR's in-house effort ... by Jim Carson

In the three years since the pandemic, Edmonton International Raceway has taken a rarely-seen approach to rebuilding a division. The majority of the cars in EIR's Late Model class, which had the name super stock until 2022 and has rules more like the sportsman ranks at Sutherland Automotive Speedway, are kept either at the shop of track owner Ron Thiering or at the facility around the quarter-mile oval in Wetaskiwin, Alberta.

"He owns probably seven or eight of the cars," 2022-23 track champion Mike Ramm said. "A whole bunch of guys were selling 'em around COVID time, and Ron bought them and made it largely an arrive-and-drive program. I owned my own for four years. At the end of '22 I looked at mine and it was old. I was gonna get into a Super Late Model, but it ended up that my team had other priorities so I got into one of Ron's."

Hometown driver Ramm won nine of the 11 features last season in this class, which ran for Division I points in the NASCAR Advance Auto Parts Weekly Series for the first time. He admits that he isn't the most setup-savvy, and that the track management handles a lot of the expenses for his #18 ride.

"Most of my crew knows all that stuff. In essence I'm the steering-wheel holder," said Ramm, a 32-year-old oversize-load hauler driver. "I can tell what's going wrong with the car, but I'm definitely not (Alberta veteran and good friend) Trevor Emond when it comes to working on them. Two years ago he started the program, and he's trying to get the gist of it out there to other potential racers, but it's about who can afford the extra money. A lot of guys stick to the feature stocks (a support class) because they still get to race every weekend."

With new car owners possibly on the way, the Thieving-owned machines are still the targets. Last summer two of those targeted cars were driven by NASCAR Pinty's Series racers Brett Taylor and Dexter Stacey for a special Late Model event on the undercard of Canada's national tour's visit to Edmonton.

"I beat Dexter but I couldn't catch Brett," Ramm said.



Velocity Motorsports Pictures

Mike Ramm, shown with his spotter and thunder car driver Jonnie Peters, won his second straight crown in the top class at the bullring south of Edmonton, Alberta.