

closerlook: Another Prunty reaches peak in Slinger 2023 closer ... by Jim Carson

Since 1991 the Prunty family of drivers won 15 championships at Slinger Super Speedway. The latest season-long honor for the clan from Lomira, Wis., was the 2018 Super Late Model crown for Alex Prunty, the nephew of multi-time top-class track titlists Dennis and David Prunty.

In the Limited Late Model class, Alex's brother Zach Prunty came close to his first championship last year. At age 22 Zach entered the season finale tied for the points lead, but a bearing in the transmission of the #39 cost him a chance at that crown and even knocked him to third in the standings. He finished fourth in points during his second year in Limiteds in 2021.

All of this title contention came before he had ever won a feature at the historic quarter-mile oval. Quite often in this division, there's one driver who wins multiple times, and that doesn't leave many victories out there for anyone else. This year Jesse Bernhagen has been head and shoulders above the field. In 2020 that spot belonged to Jacob Nottestad. Last season the honors were seemingly split between Jeff Holtz and Ryan Gutknecht.

This year Prunty missed one race at Slinger, so points weren't a concern, although he did reach fourth in the final standings. The most important box was checked when Prunty led the last 32 of 50 laps in the afternoon feature for his breakthrough moment.

"I put a lot of pressure on myself, especially with this being year four," Prunty said. "I'd always finished second to them guys. This time I started fifth and just drove right up to the front. There was a caution late and Mike Held was on my outside, but I was able to hold him off. He was on my bumper the rest of the race, but when he drove into the backstretch wall a little bit, I knew I'd sealed the deal."

This was Prunty's first year in a newer Fury Race Car, matching the brand which Alex used this season in the Super ranks and won the Labor Day weekend finale for the higher-powered class. Zach's purchase was actually from a Southern car owner who watched his machine get wrecked, but rebuilding this relative bargain was nothing new to the family.

"I'd grown up doing that my whole life," Prunty said. "Last winter we rebuild four cars including three bad ones, and it was a lot of work. Alex and I had both gone to Rockford (for the 2022 National Short Track Championships weekend), and I ended up having to stub my car in the front, and he took out the rear clip in his car, plus we both had a lot of body work to do. Then it was February when we found this car, and that thing was stripped down to a bare chassis.

"He really likes his Fury, and a good thing about me getting one was so that I could take everything he's been doing, and hopefully it worked for me. It was pretty good out of the box, but it just wasn't where I wanted it. It took until the Slinger Nationals (in July) when I hit on it and found something I really like."

It took another few races before Zach brought home that elusive trophy, placed next to his #39 with



Ron Erstad Jr.

Zach Prunty emerges from his Limited Late Model after his first feature win in four years in the division. Prunty beat veteran Mike Held (72) and relative newcomer Drew Bernhagen in the Sept. 10 season finale at Slinger, Wis.

the decals of All Out Marine, Tracker Boats, Perron Trucking, Bonafide Security Solutions, Transportation Connection, Steger Tech Services, Bill's on the Hill, Let's Get Roasted Pig Roast & Catering, Advance Auto Parts, Confections for Any Occasion, Schaeffer's Oil, Behling Racing Equipment, Five Star, KRC Power Steering, Bassett Wheels, West Bend Dyno Tuning, and engine builder Wegner Automotive. The car and hardware will reside in the same shop where Alex and Dennis Prunty keep their cars and equipment, and everyone in the family spends plenty of time there.

"We do it all except the engines," Zach said. "We build the transmissions, the rear ends and everything from the ground up. That's where we feel better than the competition that way. We're not paying people to work on everything for us."

The brothers' dad Dan Prunty drove street stocks for years before becoming a father, but since then he has enjoyed the roles of mechanic and cheerleader. He supported his brothers Dennis, David and Dale throughout their driving careers; David's company Wind Access Engineering also employs Zach.

"My dad drove the car off the track after we took the pictures in victory lane. He was quite proud of himself," Zach said. "He is our wizard behind everything; there's nothing that he can't figure out."

Dan Prunty has come up with another plan to help

his sons reach their peak for next season. If Alex and Zach are seen at Rockford in a couple of weeks, it'll be in street clothes.

"We've decided that we're wrapping up the cars in bubble wrap, so we can sit back and relax," Zach said.



Ron Erstad Jr.

Zach Prunty enjoys the spotlight with his brother Alex (left) and father Dan (right).

Jegs CRA All-Stars Tour

closerlook: VRD learning tree extends to Birch Run podium ... by Jim Carson

The most improved driver in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series this season is assuredly Carson Hocevar. This is his third full year at the national level, and all three of his wins in the Trucks have come in 2023.

On 10 occasions this year Hocevar returned to Late Model racing, but there's improvement in his operation even without the 20-year-old Michigan native behind the wheel. His Late Model crew chief Zach Dunson has helped Dave Liaeff learn his way around the sport. The latest start produced Liaeff's best-ever result in the Jegs CRA All-Stars Tour presented by Chevrolet Performance, as he placed third in the Big One at Birch Run Speedway.

"We've had a couple of times working with Zach and Carson, learning from them," said Liaeff, from Holland, Ohio. "I was able to go to a couple of test sessions with them, helping other people with VanDoorn chassis. That way we've been seeing everything that it takes, from different points of view, instead of just driving. When we came into this I didn't know anything about



Photos by Kuyoth

Eventual Big One winner Kyle Crump (71) leads Dave Liaeff at Birch Run Speedway. Liaeff placed third for his best finish in the Jegs CRA All-Stars Tour presented by Chevrolet Performance.

Late Model racing."

Liaeff's time in the pits wearing street clothes has also included one race and one test with fellow VanDoorn client Billy Van Meter. Those commitments, plus his work situation, have kept him from competing in more than three Jegs CRA shows this year. Quality instead of quantity has followed the #7 team this year, as this Birch Run race resulted in his second straight top-five.

"We're definitely just a small team - usually just me, my dad and one buddy," said Liaeff (pronounced Lee-uff). "My dad raced on dirt for 25 years, so he didn't have much knowledge

about the asphalt world. We struggled last year, especially at Birch Run where we got lapped (in two of three 2022 series visits plus one this May)."

The 29-year-old Liaeff didn't step into any race car until the late 2010s, when he found his way into street stocks at Flat Rock Speedway and won several times. His current #7 crate-engine Late Model, which has one of VanDoorn Racing Development's new-last-fall Diamond front clips, is an upgrade from his 2022 machine.

One of the best parts about his climb into Late Models has been the progress of fellow Flat Rock street stock

graduate Ethan Stadniczuk, another VRD customer who introduced Liaeff to some key figures. Stadniczuk won at Birch Run in July, in a race where Liaeff sat out to turn wrenches for the visiting Hocevar. The Flat Rock folks shared some laughs after that event.

"Our first race together was when I had been in street stocks for two years and he was a rookie. He was on the front row and I was on the outside of him, and in the first corner I came down and we wrecked each other," said Liaeff, who gets help from Airdas and Auto-Zone. "Things couldn't have started off worse, but now we're friends."

closerlook: Late duel highlights Varney brothers' Big One run ... by Jim Carson

One element of the cars used in the Jegs CRA All-Stars Tour is an area with which brothers Brandon and Evan Varney are very familiar. The 21- and 18-year-old Varneys work alongside their father Bob at Van's Tire Center in Richmond, Mich., and that's the tire distributor for all of the Champion Racing Association circuits.

It has taken the Varneys a little longer to pick up the nuances of the rest of the crate-engine Late Models. They have shown flashes of brilliance in the #61 machines; Brandon placed third earlier this year at Salem Speedway, while his younger brother was second last Labor Day weekend at Indiana's other half-mile in Winchester. They have also taken their lumps, especially Evan whose next-best series result entering this September had been eighth.

They've had chances to battle for position several times in 2023. Their most extended time side by side came near the end of the latest Jegs Triple Crown race at Birch Run, Mich., as Evan completed a pass against Brandon for fifth place in the event known as the Big One.

"I think he did it just for fun," Brandon said. "Marc Metz, my crew chief, radioed in telling me, 'One car(-length) back to your brother.' He was bearing down on the inside. When he passed me, I thought, 'I'm gonna get out of this car and I'm gonna kill you.'

We were also side by side at Winchester for a few laps."

Their Jegs CRA runs have marked the first times that the Varney kids have been in the same class together, at least since their early-childhood days. Brandon won the Late Model Sportsman championship at Corrigan Oil Speedway in 2017, then spent parts of the next three seasons in the Vore's Welding CRA LMS circuit and won twice. Evan raced two years in the now-defunct CRA Junior Late Model tour, then hopped into the car which Brandon ran under LMS rules.

Now both brothers are in VanDoorn Racing Development machines; Brandon's in a 100-percent VRD while Evan's is an older car with new VRD suspension and front clip.

This Birch Run show marked the second time in which Brandon has led laps in the 13-year-old series. The draw of the top qualifiers put Varney on the pole, and he remained up front until dropping behind eventual winner Kyle Crump. At that point Brandon's ride had lost its rear brakes due to a faulty master cylinder, and running with full front brakes made his #61 extremely tight. The family can chalk it up as another building experience for the team, also sponsored by Bassett, Wyatt Performance, Forever Dry Waterproofing and DTS: Drive Train Specialists.

"The race results need to be a little bit better, but

both the boys are learning their race craft," Bob Varney said. "We do all our work here in-house. I jokingly but seriously say that we are the 5-to-9ers of the racing world, racing against 9-to-5ers with money. Running competitive with them is rewarding in just that. It's fun to watch the boys against each other with their fun banter; they support each other better than I could've hoped."



Photos by Kuyoth

Evan Varney (top) snatched fifth place from his older brother Brandon Varney (bottom) in the penultimate 2023 Jegs CRA event at Birch Run, Mich.