closerlook: Saturday night's all right ... except in March ... from track and staff reports

Some of the most imaginative elements of race promotion in the mid-Atlantic region have been found at Southern National Motorsports Park near Kenly, N.C. But the prevailing image from this year's schedule at the .4-mile oval is a move to get aligned with more than 90 percent of paved short tracks.

Southern National's first season back with regular activity was in 2023, and most of those races were held on Sundays. That allowed SNMP to attract some Late Model Stock Car racers who were chasing NASCAR Advance Auto Parts Weekly Series points; national champion Connor Hall dropped in once and won to add to his total. But it wasn't great for building a following, as only two divisions had more than one racer compete in every points race, and it wasn't great for the front gate either. So when the first race counting toward the 2024 standings rolls around March 30, it'll be on a Saturday, as will all of the oval action until the 24th annual Solid Rock Carriers Thanksgiving Classic in November.

"Sundays did not work," track owner Mike Diaz said.



Eric Creel/Screaming Chicken Photography

Late Model Stock Cars are set to run at Southern National Motorsports Park every night from March 6-9, ending with the Kevin Says Yes 125 for the zMax CARS Tour.

Diaz is trying several ideas on his schedule. One embodies the saying "less is more," as there are only five oval points dates, all with twin features for the LMSC class and one other plus some entry-level divisions. After June 8, the SNMP agenda consists of drifting and autocross, plus some track rentals for those preparing for the big-money Thanksgiving weekend show.

There will be more for one spell, starting this weekend. The zMax CARS Pro Late Model Tour is set to open its 2024 campaign at SNMP, then the CARS organization's Late Model Stock Car circuit is on tap for March 9. In between those dates is a new program that's normally only seen at New Smyrna Speedway in February. Its inaugural Speedweek has scheduled LMSC races for Wednesday through Friday, leading up to the CARS headliner sponsored by Kevin Powell's Automotive and Powersports Group. Well-known racers such as Hall, Andrew Grady and the returning Jeff Oakley have signed on for the four-day grind.

"I am always thinking out of the box," Diaz said.

That statement is fairly accurate for the father of versatile racer Mason Diaz. In 2017 he brainstormed the Racing Roulette idea for the Thanksgiving Classic, where racers could pay one of three different entry fees and compete for escalating purses based on what they paid at the start of the weekend. That idea will be back for the March 6-8 shows, with up to $5,000 per night as the dangling carrot for the drivers and teams. The Wednesday and Thursday format will feature twin-35-lappers for the LMSC ranks, while there'll be a 100-lap race slated for Friday. The Speedweek finale under the CARS banner is set for 125 circuits.

closerlook: Father's Day coming in October at Hickory ... from track and staff reports

For a number of years, the Fall Brawl Late Model Stock Car race at Hickory Motor Speedway was scheduled for mid-October. After two straight years of getting rained out and postponed to early November, a week or two after Halloween became the permanent slot on the calendar for the Brawl, sponsored by Calico Coatings.

In 2024 the time just before Halloween won't be a barren spot for the top regular division at the historic .363-mile oval in Newton, N.C. Track owner Kevin Piercy set Oct. 12 as the date for Hickory's first two-generation LMSC event.

That one will have a twin-30-lap format. The first feature will pit a group of racing fathers, many of whom have long histories of success at Hickory and the surrounding area. The second race will be for their children, and the best finish by each family will lead to the crowning of team winners.

The first reaction is to call the show a Father-Son event, but that looks to be a misnomer. Among the first families to sign up for the creative event are Gracie Trotter, who won a Hickory LMSC feature in September of 2020 just before receiving NASCAR's Wendell Scott Trailblazer Award, and her father Tracy, a former driver and car owner. Tracy, also a former official with the Carolina Ford Focus Midget division of USAC, owns Calico Coatings.

Five other families have joined the Trotters on the entry list, and three are legendary names at Hickory. Former NASCAR national-series drivers Shane Huffman and Andy Houston have committed; their sons Landon Shane and Clark Houston won Hickory races in 2023. It's been a minute since those two dads have seen action. Shane Huffman, now the team manager at Pinnacle Racing Group in the ARCA Menards Series, last tested a LMSC last summer at Tri-County Speedway. Andy Houston, now a noted NASCAR Cup Series spotter, last drove in 2006; he'd likely drive a team car out of the Dwight Huffman Racing stable, which has fielded entries for Clark for several years.

Lee and Michael Faulk, the Florida natives who run the successful Lee Faulk Racing driver development team out of nearby Denver, have signed up, as have Scott and Layne Riggs. A more interesting case is the Canipe family, where Dexter Canipe Jr. and his son Dexter III make an obvious team, but Canipe Jr. is hoping to get his dad and 1997 NASCAR Winston Racing (now Advance Auto Parts Weekly) Series national champion to compete.

"Or find another car and all three of us can do it," he said.

Hickory is limiting the entries for this special to 12 teams of two. One clan which hasn't yet been mentioned is boss Piercy, a racer from a generation ago. His son Matt Piercy runs a LMSC team which won the 2023 track title with Kade Brown and a race the previous year with Katie Hettinger; Matt won the track crown himself in 2015.



McCallister Precision Marketing

Driver development team operators Lee and Michael Faulk, shown with PR representative Tonya McCallister, are scheduled to compete in a Late Model Stock Car father-son special Oct. 12 at Hickory, N.C.

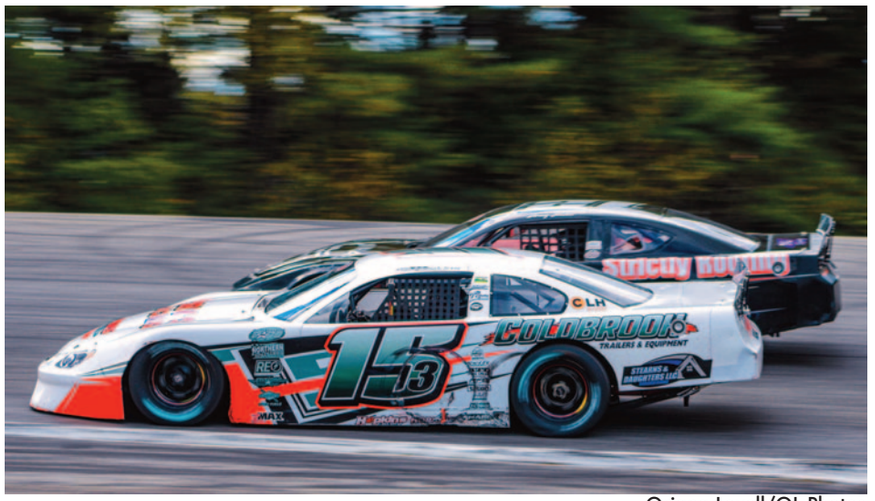
Maine

closerlook: Oxford to become spring construction zone ... from series and staff reports

For more than a decade Travis Stearns has been a mainstay in the short-track racing scene in New England. His triumphs include wins in American-Canadian Tour cars at Oxford Plains Speedway and Thunder Road International Speedbowl, driving cars fielded by Richard Green and also the staff of the old Crazy Horse Racing chassis shop.

Stearns, who rarely raced a full schedule anywhere, has cut his driving slate back quite a bit more in recent years. Since the pandemic his only times behind the wheel came in the second half of 2023, in cars which he and fellow Pine Tree State veteran Mike Hopkins keep together.

"He is one of my really good friends and conned me into racing the (Oxford) 250 last year," Stearns joked. "The car has been really good every time I ran it. We broke a shock in qualifying for the 250 and it ruined our weekend. But we were really, really good. We had a shot to win (the first race of a doubleheader weekend at Oxford Plains Speedway) … got messed up with some lapped traffic."



Oriana Lovell/OL Photos

Travis Stearns, driving a team car to Maine veteran Mike Hopkins, takes the inside line against Corey Bubar last October in PASS action at Oxford Plains Speedway. Stearns' business will sponsor Oxford's April 27 PASS race.

The 39-year-old from Auburn, Maine, will be involved in the sport and at his home track in a different way this spring. His family's companies, specializing in excavation and all other phases of building custom homes and garages, will be sponsoring a Pro All Stars Series race at Oxford in April. His first venture into title sponsorship will be the Stearns and Daughters 150 presented by CLH & Son.

"It is always good to partner with great companies that provide a quality service," PASS president Tom Mayberry said about Stearns' business and also CLH, started by Stearns' grandparents Calvin and Judy Hunter.

This isn't the first time that an Oxford-based driver has provided the backing for a PASS event. Spencer Group Paving has had its name on several big Oxford Plains shows and was the presenting sponsor for the 250 last August. Dennis Spencer Jr. earned his only PASS victory late in 2021, but his best result in a race with his company's name on it was fourth at the end of 2022. When a recent Oxford PASS event hasn't had a title sponsor, Mayberry has usually named it for the Honey Badger Bar & Grill which is adjacent to the property of the 3/8-mile oval.

Ontario

closerlook: Champ, staff optimistic on top Sauble class ... from staff and track reports

Sauble Speedway brought back its Pro Late Model class for the first time in four years last season. Its top performer was someone who's familiar to Late Model community around Canada's most populous province, but having the division back was good news for more than just track champion Tom Gibbons.

Gibbons won three of the six points races in 2023 at the quarter-mile near Sauble Beach, Ontario. Those were the first triumphs in the Pro class for Gibbons, who has been a regular in the APC United Late Model Series since the tour's inception in 2015. It had been tough going in the Auto Parts Centers-sponsored action in recent times; from 2017-23 his best series finishes were fifths.



Eric Uprichard/ontariooval.com

The first Pro Late Model champion at Sauble Speedway, which brought the class in on a regular basis in 2023, was Tom Gibbons of Southampton, Ontario.

Most of those races brought car counts in the single digits. Only four drivers ran every Sauble points event. The biggest participation boosts came in the weeks before the APC circuit visited, as series followers took advantage of opportunities to get extra competitive laps at the facility.

But the response was strong enough for track owners Paul and Lia Gresel (parents of Late Model driver Andrew Gresel) and Jeff and Tina Cassidy - plus incoming general manager Brad Holmes - to commit to the division. There are eight Late Model dates on the 2024 schedule, not including the two APC events and the one visit by the Ontario Outlaw Late Model Series. Sauble plans on ending its year with an immersion in Late Models, with a mid-August points race, an APC show, and then a Saturday-Sunday doubleheader called the Boss of the Beach event on Labour Day weekend.

"They're doing what they can to build the car counts," Gibbons said. "They've upped the payout this year, to $2,000 to win. They've also made amendments to allow the old Limited Late Models to run, and there are still a few in our area. There are a couple who ran the united-eight class, and they have the opportunity to move up."

The Sauble rules mirror those at Sunset Speedway, a little over two hours to the east. Sauble has no conflicts with APC dates and doesn't start until June (meaning Sunset's May 7 Steve Slaughter Classic is unopposed), but there is a race at the Beach on the same day as the Junior Hanley Classic July 27.

That means more chances to compete for racers such as Gibbons, sponsored by his own concrete finishing company plus Graham Family CarQuest, Graham Driving Service, Gingrich Service Centre, Faust Construction, Lighthouse Restaurant, Image Wraps, Saugeen Shores Transmission and KNK Lawn Care. Last year he used his McColl chassis which he purchased in 2022, but he also has an older car which he kept as a backup.

"We're gonna get it out this year too," said Gibbons, a graduate of Sauble's street stocks and challengers-turned-Limiteds which were discontinued in 2018. "It'd be nice if we get a bunch more cars. I told them we'd support them if they started the class again, so we ran it. I live less than half an hour from Sauble and I love it there."