

# LATE MODEL DIGEST

March 6, 2026

## Calm before storm at Auburndale



Maritime Canadian star Naugle continues Southern stint with runner-up in Florida • London McKenzie • Gina Knowles

TYLER SONTAG/SPEEDRACER PHOTOS

## closerlook: With March races, work trip pending, Naugle thrives ... by Jim Carson

Winter racing is nothing new for Nicholas Naugle. The veteran from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, has competed in the last four editions of the World Series of Asphalt Stock Car Racing at New Smyrna Speedway and seven total, peaking with a Pro Late Model win in 2020.

This off-season, the five-time race winner in the FGI Pro Stock Tour showed a greater commitment to racing outside of Maritime Canada. The Naugle family now has a winter home in Cocoa, Fla.

"We haven't been home in three months, not that I'm complaining about it, 'cause it's a little cold and wet back home," the 28-year-old driver said. "We're enjoying spending time in Florida. We've been lucky enough to acquire our own shop and house here and have more of a Southern race team."

Naugle plans on entering the March 15 ASA STARS National Tour event at Five Flags Speedway and then the next weekend's special also on the Gulf Coast, the Rattler 250 at South Alabama Speedway. The Rattler is now under the UARA National banner, and what he did last weekend has the UARA community looking his way.

The #08 Fury Race Car was second across the finish line in the inaugural Ken Hyatt Memorial at Auburndale Speedway. As was the case with winner Stephen Nasse and everybody else near the top of the rundown, their stories were about survival in the 142-lap Super Late Model main event.

"We showed good speed most of the weekend and didn't feel we needed to throw tires on it every session. When we qualified, we'd seen a lot of cars in front of us in practice not make it into the show; I don't know if the sun was playing a factor or if there was a big change in the cars when they put new tires on," said Naugle, who started fifth after top qualifier Colin Allman's 10-car inversion draw. "It was a shock for us more than anything. Come race time, I don't know if the level of aggression was that high or if it was just the nuances of the track, but it was more than I was expecting."

"We got tangled up in an early incident where everybody just accorded. The car ahead of me stopped and the car behind me didn't stop, so we had to



Tyler Sontag/SpeedRacer Photos

**Nicholas Naugle finished second** in the inaugural Ken Hyatt Memorial at Auburndale Speedway, a quarter-mile which Naugle had previously seen only in a legends car race in 2013. The Nova Scotia native was the only driver who's not a current full-time Florida resident to finish in the top 15 or qualify in the top 13 for the UARA National-sanctioned Super Late Model race.

go to the rear. We never got worked up and picked up spots when we needed to, and got in a position where we could actually race for it at the end."

Naugle held fifth with 18 laps left, at the pivotal point of the race when Jon Guy and T.J. DeCaire collided racing for the lead. He didn't have much for Nasse, but a runner-up effort was his best result in the Sunshine State.

"I knew how hard they'd been racing all night, and we figured that wouldn't leave them much tire coming back up through the field," he said. "It was a sore situation with the leaders, but it definitely was a little bit of a relief since it gave me two free positions."

Naugle had to adjust to the tire-saving mode, but he did feel familiar with one aspect of the event named to honor the memory of track owner Rex Guy's father-in-law. Auburndale is a quarter-mile oval, and the largest facility where he competes north of the border is a third-mile layout. New Smyrna as a half-mile, as is Five Flags, and South Alabama is also larger than what he sees in the Maritimes. And most of his crewmen are from his regular family team, although Florida veteran setup man Nick Manfull has been helping on the #08 Super and Pro cars, which have products from Hamner Performance and WAR Shocks.

Before the Pensacola and Opp trips, there was another March journey for the family. Naugle and his dad Bryan, who operate Brycon Construction, and there was the ConExpo convention in Las Vegas which they needed to attend. Being able to leave Auburndale on time was as big a key as avoiding serious damage in the early wreck.

"We weren't sure what the weather was gonna do; they were calling for rain," Naugle said. "We had to leave Monday morning first thing. It was good to be able to go to the house for a day and get packed up and switch back around."

# One Last Look

UARA • Auburndale Speedway



Tyler Sontag/SpeedRacer Photos

**Stephen Nasse wound up winning** the \$20,000 top prize in the inaugural Ken Hyatt Memorial race at Auburndale Speedway.



Tyler Sontag/SpeedRacer Photos  
**Jon Guy (42)**, showing off a tribute look to his grandfather and race namesake Ken Hyatt, was racing for the lead with T.J. DeCaire (88) when they collided with 18 of 142 laps remaining. DeCaire recovered and finished third, hearing plenty of cheers; he crossed the stripe one spot ahead of the son of track owner Rex Guy.



Tyler Sontag/SpeedRacer Photos

**Pretty much all of the Super Late Models** incurred some damage at the quarter-mile in Winter Haven, Fla. Ross Francisco recovered from this hood mishap to finish seventh.



Sunshine State Racing

**Steve Dorer (64) won the second of two B-mains** in the event which drew 38 entries. Among those who failed to qualify for the feature was Rich Bickle (45).



Tyler Sontag/SpeedRacer Photos

**Colton Bettis, who won Auburndale's Pro Late Model championship** in 2024, won the UARA Sportsman Series feature over the weekend. This was Bettis' fourth career appearance in the circuit once known as Wheel Man.

# closerlook: Lightning strikes twice: Rookie shines in two rides ... by Jim Carson

Many 16-year-old short-track racers reel off thank-you messages to, or count their blessings for, the owners and staff of one driver development organization for their efforts. London McKenzie can extend those sentiments for two.

McKenzie, from Asheboro, N.C., was a contender in both ends of the season opener for the zMax CARS Tour presented by SoundGear. This stop at Southern National Motorsports Park found both of his #95 machines sixth on the grid, and he held a podium position in both races.

His rides with Kyle Beattie Racing and AK Performance both came through his connections in legends car racing. AK's Kendall Sellers has a long history of grooming youngsters in the entry-level class and bringing several of them up into Late Model Stock Cars, and McKenzie is the latest.

McKenzie's legends time came with another team, 860 Motorsports, but one of his coaches was current NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series driver and former big-money legends race winner Daniel Hemric.

"We had intentions of moving up, and C.J. (D'Addario), the owner of 860, helped us search around," McKenzie said. "They set the pole at Martinsville last year (with Cody Kelley), so it definitely seemed like the right move. Kendall's a great guy and he's well-known at the track. I'm super-excited and happy we made that decision."

The happiness turned into heart-pounding thrills for part of the Folsom Fence 125. McKenzie was in a battle for second with veteran Chad McCumbee during one green-flag stretch, then lined up next to one of this century's LMSC elite, Lee Pulliam, after two cautions.

"My choice has always been one to gamble and take the front row, and see how it turns out," McKenzie said about the CARS choose rule on restarts. "It was a cool moment to be side by side with Lee, and I beat him into turn one both times. We weren't in the preferred groove and ended up dropping to third, but it was definitely cool, especially after being 18th in practice."

A problem with the right rear tire cost him some pace in the final third of the race at the .4-mile oval near Kenly, N.C. He watched replays of late battles



Angel Resendiz/eternallycaptured.com

**London McKenzie, shown with his parents Brandon and Jenna, finished third in his zMax CARS Pro Late Model Tour debut at Southern National and ran in the same position after halfway in the Late Model Stock event on the same evening.**

with eventual winner Caden Kvapil, third-place man Doug Barnes Jr. and others, but he couldn't pinpoint any hits on that tire on his Charlie's Automotive-powered R&S Race Car. He took a hit in the final rundown, finishing four laps down in 26th in a race with all but four cars on the track at the checkered flag.

"It was one of those situations where I didn't know if I wanted to feel happy and proud, or down about how things turned out," he said. "My spotter (Brent Younger) said that the worst we did on every restart was maintain our position. Driving to the track with my mom and dad (before the first practice day, which ended up getting rained out), they said they'd take a clean car and finishing OK."

The youngster, sponsored by Lumber & Supply, Trucordia Insurance, and family businesses McKenzie Properties and McKenzie Real Estate, already had high spirits when he took the green in the LMSC race. The Pro Late Model event went even better for "Lightning London," as he rode in third for much of the Kevin Powell Motorsports 100 and kept that spot through the end. A similar story started to develop in his

crate-engine Port City chassis, which was in the bottom half of the practice sheet, albeit with a happier ending.

"To be as good as we were, with how things were in the practice hour and not hitting on much in the morning, was outstanding," McKenzie said. "Qualifying rolled around and we took a big swing at it with some adjustments. It shows a lot of character to do it when it matters. I tried to remember to not get too excited about it and keep the nerves in check."

"The two leaders had kinda run off. My spotter kept reminding me and calling out 15 car lengths back to Max Reaves in fourth. There was no sense in

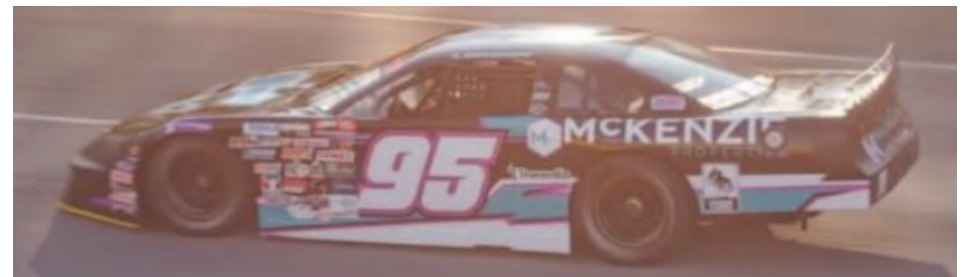
trying to catch the lead pair. In the last 20 I was definitely praying for a caution, 'cause I felt like I'd saved my stuff better than Keelan Harvick and (eventual winner) Mason Walters. Soon they had a straightaway on me, and at Southern National that means they're just gone."

All of this speed came from a driver who had only a handful of Late Model races under his belt, coming last summer with Ross Dalton Racing; the stretch included getting collected in a first-lap crash in the Independence Day race at South Boston Speedway. McKenzie also entered two ARCA Menards Series East races last spring with CW Motorsports, finishing one lap down once and failing to start once.

The full-season CARS effort is nothing new for the AK squad, which has had teenage drivers run the whole circuit for years and won with the more-experienced Jared Fryar three times in 2025. But it is an adjustment for Beattie's outfit, which had concentrated on the scaled-down cars for a few years.

Beattie's last regular Late Model driver was Austin Thompson, who last raced a full-sized fendered car in 2015. The McKenzie family acquired one of the Port City Racecars which Tristan McKee drove in CARS action last season, and Beattie and Mark Durgin will be splitting crew chief duties. In the last decade the only involvement above the legends level for Durgin and Beattie has been time serving on crews for Trans Am road racing, with the same Nitro Motorsports team which currently has the largest fleet in ARCA.

"London has been with us since bandoleros," Beattie said. "We had no intention on getting back into Late Model stuff, but London decided they wanted to do it on their own, and on their own meant doing it with us. They convinced us to give it a go."



Angel Resendiz/eternallycaptured.com

**'Lightning' London McKenzie qualified sixth for both the Late Model Stock Car and Pro Late Model races.**

# One Last Look

CARS • Southern National Motorsports Park



JR Motorsports

**Caden Kvapil** scored his second straight win in zMax CARS Late Model Stock Tour action, dating back to last October.



Setzer Racing & Development

**Mason Walters** won for the first time in the zMax CARS Pro Late Model Tour presented by SoundGear. This was the fourth-ever CARS start for the 2025 Carolina Pro Late Model Series champion.



Blake Harris/H3 Photography

**Late Model Stock Car legend Lee Pulliam** sat on the pole for the Folsom Fence 125 and finished second.



Setzer Racing & Development

**Chase Burgeson (22)** leads **Rodney Dowless Jr. (25)** in the Pro Late Model event. Dowless began his second season in the series by taking 13th; he joined the Rackley WAR team late in 2025. Burgeson placed 14th in his second start in the East Coast-based crate-engine tour and first race with Bryson Lopez Racing.



Devyn Graham/Four Cent Media & Design

**Second-generation star Case James** wound up sixth in the Pro Late Model feature at Southern National Motorsports Park near Kenly, N.C.



Sunshine State Racing

**Treyten Lapcevich (77)** battles **Conner Jones** in the season opener for the Late Model Stock Car circuit. Canadian visitor Lapcevich did double duty on the night, finishing ninth in the LMSC race for Chad Bryant Racing and fifth on the Pro Late Model side for Rette-Jones Racing.

## North Carolina

# closerlook: Historic track adding Texas flavor to its landscape ... by Jim Carson

The state of North Carolina has seven paved racetracks which are slated to contest true Late Model Stock Cars or Limited Late Models on at least a semi-regular basis in 2026. Crossing state lines into South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee reveals another seven asphalt speedplants with one or both divisions within a 220-mile radius of Mooresville, considered the stock car racing capital of the country.

That is the biggest difference between Gina Knowles' current home and her old stomping ground in the eastern part of Texas. Houston Motorsports Park is the only paved short track left in the Lone Star State. In her new position, working with Hickory Motor Speedway promoter Kevin Piercy, she doesn't have to act as if she's on an island.

"There you have to think out of the box and do things differently," Knowles said. "Here the sport is more prominent, and people have more options, so you have to run your show accordingly."

Knowles does have experience in the sport in pavement hotbeds. While based in Houston, she also had a spell promoting Mobile International Speedway in Irvington, Ala., and its proximity to and partnership with Five Flags Speedway automatically adds some prestige to that half-mile.

For five years her full-time job has been as a representative for GM Performance Parts, dealing with pavement and dirt racers and especially pushing the CT525 crate engine, which has caught on more on dirt but has been

made an option for the Modifieds of Mayhem Tour. Her time with a bowtie on her shirt brought her into this role.

"I was working over here, and talking with Kerry Bodenhamer some," she said about the longtime KLB Race Cars chassis builder who built Banjo Matthews-type rides for her dad Larry Schild. "He said I needed to talk to Kevin and that there might be some things I could help them with. I was tired of traveling and being on the road so much. Hickory needed a little sparkle, and I'm super blessed to be here."

One of the biggest changes for the historic .363-mile oval in Newton, N.C., has been the switch to Limited Late Models for Division I honors in the NASCAR Local Racing Series presented by O'Reilly Auto Parts. The LMSC class will still have a spotlight with more than 10 dates at Hickory, including the cornerstone shows of the Bobby Isaac Memorial on Labor Day weekend and the Fall Brawl November 7 plus the newer tradition of the Jack Ingram Memorial August 1.

It's in the Limited ranks – which occasionally had double the car count of LMSC fields in weekly races last year – where Knowles' collaborative efforts seem most promising. LeapFrog Landscaping, the company operated by Jody Chandler who owns the Late Model driven by Thomas Beane, has stepped up to sponsor the Tri-State Triple Crown, a six-race series with two dates each at Hickory, Anderson Motor Speedway and Newport Speedway. The



track photo

**Gina Knowles**, the new operations and marketing assistant at Hickory Motor Speedway, is joined by track promoter Kevin Piercy and his wife Leshea.

first Crown jewel is slated for May 23 at Newport, then Hickory has the double-points finale set for October 10. The points payout calls for \$10,000 to the champion and \$3,000 for fifth place.

"Right now the Limited racers have an opportunity for some serious bank," she said. "If there's a racing family out there looking to put their driver in the spotlight in a hotbed of racing, I'd look at Limiteds ... There'll be minimal travel for the LeapFrog points. When the deal comes to someone's home track, it's gonna favor them, but then they're gonna want to go to the other tracks and beat their home cars. It could be like Freddy Fryar did with my dad back in the day in Texas."

Knowles, whose brother Michael Crofford and son Mason Mitchell both had driving careers, is looking forward to another aspect of the sport this season. In her role with GM, and when she was on the staff of Track Enterprises which operates the then-new ASA STARS National Tour (which has Hickory on its schedule May 21), she didn't get much time to actually watch races. Her duties will mostly be handled during the week, so on race days she'll have chances to just be a fan.



Gardner Street Photography

**Aiden King (5) and Helio Meza (27)** both won Limited Late Model features last year at Hickory, N.C., and King ran away with the track championship. Hickory's Limiteds will run for Division I points this season in the newly-renamed NASCAR Local Racing Series presented by O'Reilly Auto Parts, and the division is also the focal point of the new LeapFrog Landscaping Tri-State Triple Crown miniseries.