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Jeff Callahan smoked a cigarette as cars raced July 24 at Dominion Raceway and Entertainment in Thornburg.

McAuliffe's deal-closing grants have a mixed record

While fewer jobs materialized, incentive program scrutinized

BY MEL LEONOR

Richmond Times-Dispatch

When Democrat Terry McAuliffe took office, the "dealmaker-in-chief" made enthusiastic use of a deal-closing fund at the disposal of Virginia governors to woo companies to bring their jobs and business to the state.

After dozens of announcements and groundbreaking ceremonies, companies lured with cash incentives delivered only about half of the jobs that were promised, a Richmond Times-Dispatch analysis of the projects executed during McAuliffe's term shows. McAuliffe, who held the office from 2014 to 2018, is in a tight race against

VPAP report

In September, Democrat McAuliffe outraises GOP's Youngkin. **Page A2**

Dominion gift

Utility gave \$200K to secretive PAC attacking Youngkin. **Page A4**

Getting on the right track in a race against the odds

Once the soul of the sport, short track racing must reinvent itself to survive

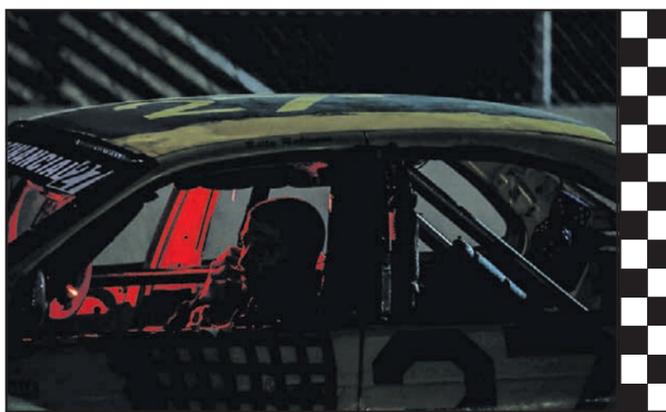
STORY BY ROSHAN FERNANDEZ
PHOTOS BY SHABAN ATHUMAN
Richmond Times-Dispatch

THORNBURG — Before the races, platters of hot dogs arrived at folding tables near the finish line.

The announcer at Dominion Raceway and Entertainment drew laughs as he introduced the frankfurter eating contest and its one rule: "If you puke, you're disqualified."

The connection to auto racing was tenuous at best, but gimmicks like this might end up saving the sport.

From a financial standpoint, Virginia's short tracks — dirt or asphalt ovals, most of which are shorter than a half-mile in length — have become difficult to sustain



Driver Billy Robinson adjusted his headset before a race at Langley Speedway, a race track in Hampton, on July 10.

with revenue solely from Friday or Saturday night racing.

But those that have continued to thrive embrace the trend toward an overall experience that includes an expansion beyond the traditional,

once-a-week race night and into other aspects of entertainment and revenue.

Dominion general manager Will Britt, 25, explained that unique

RACING, Page A16

Peer program gives lifeline to recovery for ex-drug users

BY FRANK GREEN

Richmond Times-Dispatch

A handful of professionals will soon hit Richmond-area streets helping to steer drug users toward recovery at a critical time — immediately following an overdose.

Working with police and emergency medical services personnel in Richmond and Henrico and Chesterfield counties, four certified peer recovery specialists will have an edge when assisting those suffering from addictions: They are recovering drug users themselves.

Victor McKenzie Jr., executive director of the Substance Abuse and Addiction Recovery Alliance of Virginia, which helped organize Project RECOVER, explained that "sometimes the only way to break through is to have somebody who can talk that talk." Other peer recovery specialists are

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In Nation & World | Lawsuits demand unproven ivermectin drug for COVID patients | Page B1

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Spotters watched as cars made their way around the track on Sept. 18 at Langley Speedway, which first opened in 1950 and features a .397-mile paved oval track.

Racing

From Page A1

promotions are the way to draw people back for future events. The hot dog eating contest was just one example of Dominion trying something new, but the principle applies to everything at the race-track — “If I don’t think it’s fun and cool, why come now? Why not come next week?” Britt said.

“That’s the modern way to do things.”

It’s the new formula that many of the less than two dozen remaining tracks in Virginia have turned to. Others collapsed and shut their doors for good when the pandemic pushed already struggling tracks over the edge. That included Southside Speedway in Chesterfield County, which had been open for six decades.

It’s a transitional period for the sport. For a time between 2007 and 2014, everyone was concerned that “short track was dying,” said Bill Mullis, the owner of Langley Speedway in Hampton. Car count — the number of drivers entered in an event — was an issue, and as a result the number of fans declined, too. Since then, many say there’s been a resurgence, and interest is increasing or coming back.

But even those optimistic about the future know that the margins to financially sustain a racetrack can be razor-thin. They’ve been that way for the last two decades, said Bill Sawyer, the owner of Virginia Motor Speedway on the Middle Peninsula, though they do fluctuate with the economy.

The mindset of “build it and they will come” is no longer applicable, said Chase Brashears, the new general manager at South Boston. Ownership keeps the tracks going because of their passion for racing and its community.

“I don’t think anybody is in short track racing to make money,” Mullis said. “I think most ownership for short track racing is for the love of the sport. And it takes a lot of dedication.”



The concrete safety barriers that line Dominion Raceway’s track are a prime example of the Britts getting creative while they were building the new facility in the mid-2010s. Those used barriers, Britt said, were purchased from the Grand Prix of Baltimore’s facility when it closed down. The two-hour drive to Dominion’s facility, which sits about 50 miles north of Richmond, wasn’t one they could do instantly to transport the barriers, so they paid the Baltimore facility’s rent for a brief period while they made the necessary arrangements. It was still a cheaper alternative to buying new barriers.

For those who own an existing facility, however, it’s become “extremely difficult” to make enough money solely from a short track, Britt said. At Dominion, the oval track is still the largest source of revenue.

“It’s a very, very difficult business model to pay back millions of dollars with an \$18 ticket,” Britt said. “It’s not for the faint of heart. ... Very, very tough business to make it in.”

A secondary income source

is crucial to “keep your head above water,” Sawyer said. An owner with “deep pockets” helps, too, particularly through rough patches such as 2007-14 or the COVID-19 pandemic.

Margins are thin because race-tracks have 365-day per year expenses, but they only run 50 events a year, Mullis said. He doesn’t mind pulling money from his own pocket to improve the facility, for costs such as repaving, but it’s much more enjoyable to spend when it’s not a desperate attempt to keep the doors open.

From a driver’s perspective, short track racing has become much less affordable over the years, said Bill “Mad Dog” Eaker. The prize payouts have shrunk, and the expenses for parts start to accumulate. It’s a hobby where nobody expects to make money. The chances of being the next Denny Hamlin or making it to NASCAR are one-in-a-million, said Jennifer Mullis (no relation to Bill Mullis), former general manager of Richmond’s Southside Speedway.

Today, for the most part, drivers spend a lot more money. Prices for parts have gone up. Stipends for “tow money” that used to cover part of the race day’s transportation expenses and crew’s expenses have disappeared, Jennifer Mullis said. Winners don’t make as much profit. Most drivers own their own cars, though a few have significant enough sponsorships that they don’t have to pay out of their own pocket for recurring costs. Crystal Powers, 38, a new driver, hasn’t found a sponsorship because nobody knows what she can do yet.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, short tracks nationwide shut down because their operating model was no longer sustainable. Aging facilities didn’t help their case, and many own-

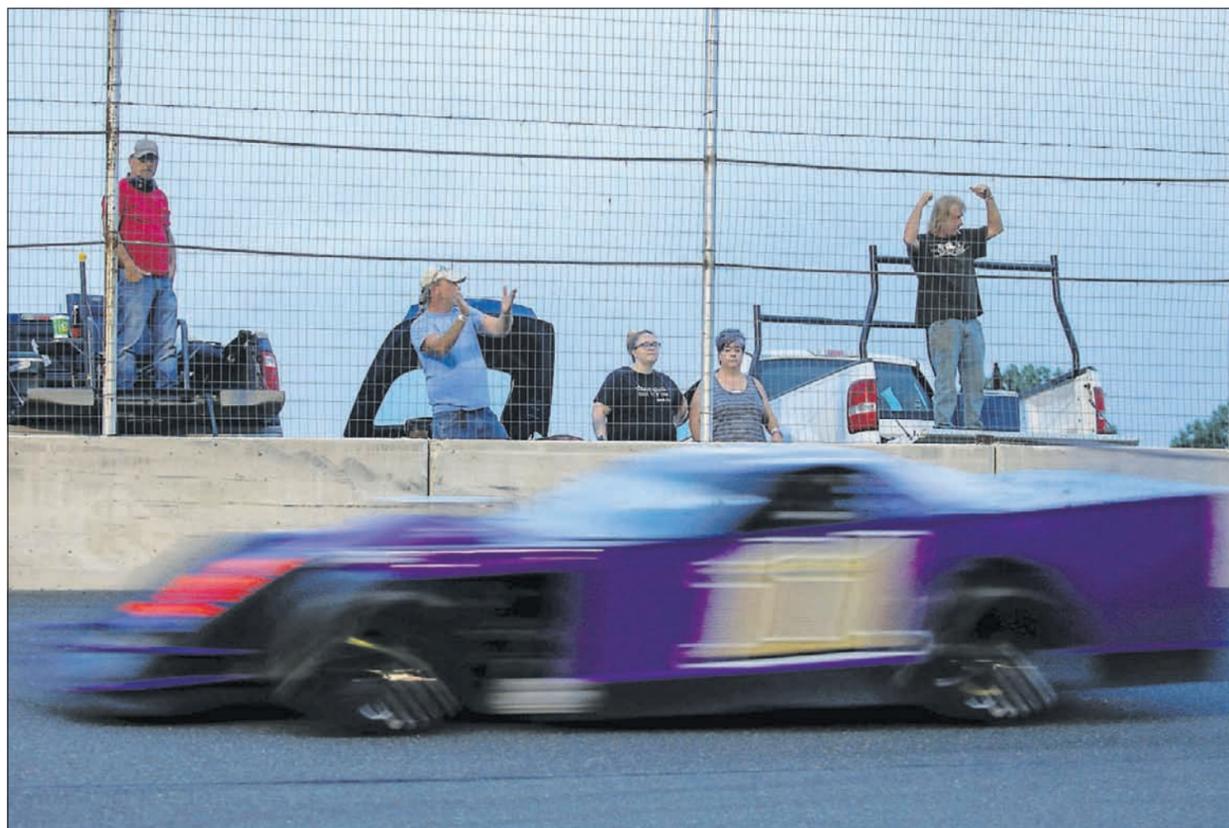
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The Fowlkes family worked on their race car at their home in Midlothian on Aug. 17.



Dennis Fowlkes pushed his son, Eric, to the starting line before a race at Dominion Raceway in Thornburg on July 24.



Fans watched enthusiastically as cars made their way around the oval track at Dominion Raceway in Thornburg on July 24.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: At Langley Speedway on July 10, fans watched as cars raced during a nighttime competition. Trace Whyatt prayed with his family before his go-kart race at the Hampton track. Shane Zupo kissed the belly of his girlfriend, Victoria Strohm, as his car was being worked on.



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ers' pockets just weren't deep enough to outlast the pandemic.

"The pandemic, they said they'd had enough. They had enough of throwing money down a hole. It's like a bottomless pit," Sawyer said of tracks that closed. "So again, you try to control your costs to do the best that you can do, at least to make it a break-even point as far as your Saturday night events."

At Southside, the racetrack had just come off its best season in years, Jennifer Mullis said. Closing wasn't on their radar, though she adds that overall, she's noticed a market decline since almost 20 years ago and a downward trend in terms of interest.

For years, she said the racetrack put everything it made back into the facility, and into paying its employees and taxes. If her husband didn't have a job that paid all the bills, Jennifer Mullis said she's not sure she would've been able to work at Southside. Lin O'Neill, leader of the "Save Southside" movement,

disagrees, saying that the track didn't go out of business because it was no longer profitable. It closed because the county offered the owners \$5 million to buy the track, a deal too good to turn down, O'Neill said.

Jennifer Mullis, like Sawyer, emphasizes how difficult it is to make a year's profit by only running events from April to July. Southside tried investing in concerts and other entertainment events, but it was "always a losing situation" for the 60-year-old facility because the "base just isn't here."

The facility is outdated, and it wasn't built with a multi-purpose intention like Dominion's new facility. Branching out didn't work, so they doubled down and stayed true to the legacy that got Southside where it was, Jennifer Mullis said. She's grateful they stuck with that until the end.

"This is nothing that I would recommend my children go into, this is not a money-making lucrative avenue," Jennifer Mullis said. The track's survival for over six decades was because

her mother, co-owner and promoter Sue Clements, was so dedicated to the work that she did.

"My mother is exceedingly frugal and very tight with a dollar. And her dedication to the facility, her humility and her attention to stretching every dime is the only reason that Southside continued."



The Britt decision to build a new facility was easy. They could've bought two or three existing facilities for the amount they ended up spending on Dominion Raceway and Entertainment, but those would've been aging facilities. They were in it for the "long haul," and it was important to start with a "fresh piece of paper and a clean slate," because it's very difficult to make the switch to overall entertainment with an existing racetrack, Dominion owner Steve Britt said.

"We just knew, right out of the gate, that the only way that we were going to be able to pay the bills was to have a multi-fac-

eted facility with lots of revenue streams."

The Britt decision to build a new facility was easy. They could've bought two or three existing facilities for the amount they ended up spending on Dominion Raceway and Entertainment, but those would've been aging facilities. They were in it for the "long haul," and it was important to start with a "fresh piece of paper and a clean slate," because it's very difficult to make the switch to overall entertainment with an existing racetrack, Dominion owner Steve Britt said.

"In our case, it was just a realization that if we built just a single-purpose facility, we wouldn't make it," Steve Britt said. A drag strip, oval track, or 2-mile road course wouldn't single-handedly offset the land costs of a facility that's in a prime location, directly adjacent to Interstate 95 — so they built all three, and then more.

For instance, on July 24 it rained for much of the day ahead of Saturday night's

events, and on a day that coincided with Langley's marquee Triple Crown event, Will Britt anticipated that Dominion would make money because of the simultaneous concert that they held on the stage downstairs during the races.

The facility houses three stages, a large outdoor one, a medium-size one downstairs and a small one on the uppermost level of the building. They've done banquets, weddings and quinceañeras. They hosted a Porsche USA corporate event.

Will Britt laughed nervously as he anticipated an upcoming event for electric-car enthusiasts, scary for both him and his safety team because of the prospect of a lithium ion battery fire in the event of a crash.

Dominion Raceway's grandstands are smaller than those at some similar-sized tracks because some fans like to watch from inside in the track's air-conditioned suites. The track touts its food as better than that offered at a typical concession stand — Will Britt cites "Mexi-

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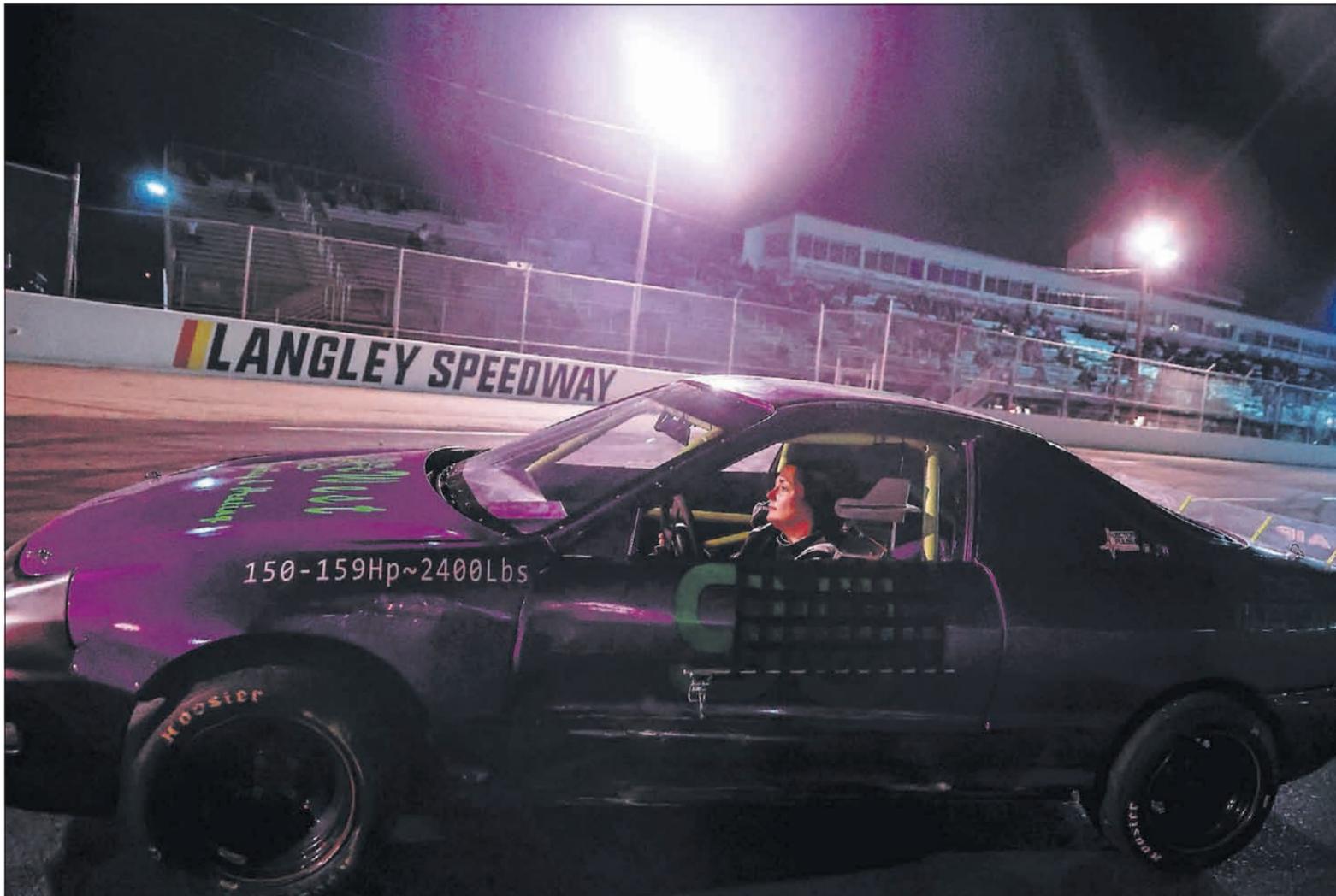
Heather Edwards is comforted after her husband, Mark, crashed his car into a wall during a race at Langley Speedway on July 10.



Mark Edwards took a moment to collect himself after crashing during a race July 10.



Tori Brinkley watched a race with her father, Aaron, on July 10 at Langley Speedway.



Crystal Powers, 38, made her way off the track at Langley Speedway on Sept. 18. Powers, a new driver, said she would like to see more women like herself in racing.

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can street corn" as an example of something simple they tried out this summer.

On Dominion's 2-mile road course, they host "Track Attack," an experience designed for beginners. Paced by an instructor, it includes two racecourse portions and three classroom sessions so that those interested in racing can dip their toes in.

There's a luxury car garage, located behind the track, so drivers can store their race cars near the track instead of transporting them weekly with a trailer. One is built and recently gained occupancy from tenants, and six more are on the way.

It all correlates to more drivers, and more fans as a result.

Elsewhere, Virginia Motor Speedway hosts two truck races known as mud bogs per year, one in the spring and one in the fall. They're also in the farming business, growing 1,000 acres of corn and soybeans in the areas surrounding the racetrack.

At South Boston, near the North Carolina border, Brashears said they're looking to expand the number of rental events, business outings and car shows, among other forms of entertainment. They host "drifters" weekly, which requires far less preparation and costs far less than a full weekly motor sports show. Many tracks sell racing tires and fuel as well.

At Langley, their stage has hosted concerts from artists like Lee Brice and Sam Hunt, Bill Mullis said. They sell sponsorships to advertisers and stream races online. They host a weekly event called "Wacky Wednesday" where patrons can drive street legal cars on the oval track for \$15.

Some drivers can beat the times of modified stock cars in their street cars, too, said Powers, a driver who started out with Wacky Wednesday but expanded to Langley's Saturday night events. She takes her kids' car seats out of the car to race on Wednesdays.

"I'm big, like I said, on having Wacky Wednesday. People come out and try this, or at least give them a taste," Powers said.



As driver Kayla Surles stood next to her car at Dominion, which was parked diagonally near the finish line for the meet-and-greet portion of the July 24 event, she handed out mementos with photos of her and her car. The week prior, she gave two cardboard boxes full of T-shirts to a long line of fans; this week, there are only five large-size shirts remaining.

Driver and fan interaction helps shape who fans support. Letting a young kid sit in a parked car during the meet-and-greet event leads to prolonged support from the child and their family, Will Britt said. The No. 1 reason fans return to the track is because they "identify with a driver," he added.

"[It's about] creating heroes out of local drivers," said Chris Stefi, the race director at

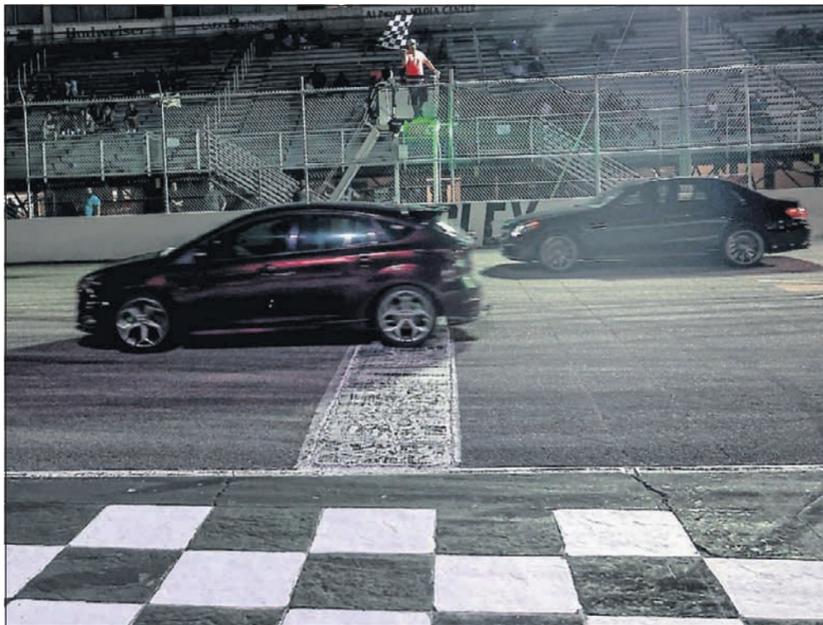
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Crystal Powers accepts a race challenge from Kevin Magee Sr.



Crystal Powers drags a jack to change the racing tires on a car at her home in Langley as her daughter follows.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT: At Langley Speedway on Sept. 15, Crystal Powers defeated Kevin Magee Sr. during a Wacky Wednesday race. Powers is reflected in the window of her car as she prepared to race at the track in Hampton. Powers calls her boyfriend, William Sparky West, from behind the wheel to consult about making adjustments to her car.



Crystal Powers plays with daughter Ryleigh Smith after racing in a Wacky Wednesday event at Langley Speedway.



Go-karts raced on July 10 around the oval track at Langley Speedway in Hampton.

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Dominion.

It isn't a new concept, and they've been helping drivers build a local fan base for years. So have "open pits," where drivers can interact with fans after races. Those types of events are crucial because the average NASCAR fan is 42 years old, and drawing the younger fan is becoming more important — and challenging — than ever.

There's not much concern about the week-in, week-out fans, but attracting new people and getting them to stick around is the current focus, race-track executives said.

"It sounds horrible to say, but it's, 'How do I get more people addicted to racing?'" Will Britt said.

To attract younger fans, it's important for race-tracks to keep up with the times, Brashears said. Presence on social media, promotion videos, and digital ticketing are just a few of the essentials of a modern brand.

Vaughan Crittenden, general manager of Langley Speedway, supported streaming Langley's races online via a partnership with NASCAR and NBC Sports because it would expand the track's reach.

For Sawyer and Dave Seay, the director of marketing, sales and public relations at Virginia Motor Speedway — a racetrack that sits about 60 miles from bigger cities like Richmond, Fredericksburg and Newport News — using social media promotion is even more crucial. But they maintain that delicate balance by continuing "old-school" promotions as well, to continue satisfying loyal, older fans.

Weekly fan attendance is largely dependent on car

count. Each driver brings friends, family, neighbors, associates and more; Bill Mullis said there's guaranteed to be more fans with 100 drivers than 50.

"Those drivers are walking billboards," Jennifer Mullis said.

Will Britt said there's currently a revitalization of young, new drivers, which correlates to young, new fans. There was a period of time when racers "outgrew" the sport and not enough were "regenerating," Bill Mullis explains. Some divisions had as few as five cars show up on a given race day. But now, there's a transition between generations, Crittenden said, because the kids of older drivers are beginning to race.

Amanda Satterly, 16, continued the tradition her father and grandfather started when she began racing go-karts at about 10 years old and modified stock cars at about 15. Other high schoolers are currently racing, too.

The future of racing lies in the children of racers, said Powers, a new driver who has kids. When Powers' 2-year-old is ready to race a go-kart, her mom says she will.

In a predominantly male sport, Powers emphasized how it would be great to see more women like herself. She said she's working toward "being good, not just good for a woman." There's room for growth in terms of expanding to more female drivers and fans, as well as expanding the sports' racial diversity, executives say.

No business model will predict racers' interest in the hobby, Bill Mullis said, but current driver interest is high, which means fan interest is, too. July 3 was one of South Boston Speedway's largest

crowds since the 2000s — Brashears estimated just under 10,000 fans.

"The racers regenerated the sport," Bill Mullis said. "They drew the fans and they saved the racetracks."



Steve Britt calls it his "continuation plan." By the time the owner, who's in his early 60s, is ready to retire, his son will be ready to take full charge at Dominion. It's important they keep the business in the family. Having youthful faces in management is also crucial because they connect with younger fans in a way that he and other older owners can't, Steve Britt added.

That's also why Brashears is taking over for South Boston Speedway 30-year general manager Cathy Rice. The former is someone from the younger generation who knows what will sustain the race-track for a long time.

That's why Bill Mullis brought in Crittenden at Langley Speedway, too.

"He's just kind of my young-blood look into the future for that place," he said of Crittenden.

The key for the long term isn't to reinvent the wheel, Seay said. It's about adapting alongside the rest of the industry. "You can follow in their footsteps," he said.

Virginia has a wide variety of motor sports and entertainment, and younger promoters understand the "fine balance" of changing with the times while continuing tradition. The diversity of the state's motor sports offerings, and the expansion of those offerings in the decades to come, depend on the success of those promoters.

"If you're not innovating and growing, you're dying," Will Britt said.



Mark Edwards strapped into his go-kart at Langley Speedway July 10.



Brad Adams (left) looked on as the Rev. Tom Potter (right) gave a fist bump to Christopher McIntosh before his race July 10 at Langley Speedway.



A car crossed the finish line at Langley Speedway on Sept. 18.



Casey Wyatt stroked the head of her husband, Bobbie, while they sat near the track at Langley Speedway on Sept. 18.