Onondaga Enthusiasts Want to Bring Back 1960s Dragway

TECH CENTER NEWS PHOTOS

ONONDAGA. Mich. - Like a modern-day motorsports Lazarus, the long-defunct Onondaga Dragway may have some new life after all.

A group of motorsports enthusiasts are seeking to restore the Dragway to its former glory following its closure back in 1978. Onondaga is 24 miles south of Lansing and 18 miles north of Jackson, which is a polite way of saying "out in the middle of nowhere."

But from 1961 to '78, the Onondaga Dragway was as well regarded as Milan, Stanton, Martin and the other few remaining dragstrips around the state today.

Michigan has 31 circular race tracks located across the state, but only 5 total drag strips remaining.

Dan Pranshka, who runs a concrete business, races a 1985 Ford Mustang with a Chevy engine and he simply wanted a local outlet where he could race his car.

"I'm from Hastings and I never knew the dragway existed until I moved up here 18 years ago," Pranshka said.

"Four-five years ago, I found a 1968 Chevelle, so I traded a barn floor for the Chevelle and I built a pro street car."

Pranshka and a GM Lansing Grand River employee, who lives in Onondaga, together own the current "dragway" although there is a pending court battle with homeowners who live near the site about permits and use.

Pranshka says he has put about \$300,000 into the restoration, but the court case has put everything on hold.

Earlier, Pranshka sought to test out his cars on the weedcovered track, and before you know it, he said, 30 to 40 guys started showing up to test run their cars, too.

Then, in 2009, the informal club of Onondaga racers hosted a classic car show that drew about 300 cars and 5,000 people. From there, interest in revitalizing the track took off.

"Word got out . . . guys started coming and next thing you know, 30 to 40 to 100 guys started showing up every weekend, on a Sunday, and we'd go out there and play from 1 to 6 in the afternoon,' Pranschka said.

"I cleaned all the weeds out of the track, I went through and cleaned all of the cracks, cleaned the track up, we resealed about 200 feet and just started drag racing.

"There were trucks, limestone, farming equipment, semi-trailer, parts of the track had been broke and we re-asphalted portions at that time, Fred and Sheryl James are reg-



Off to the side lay some old racing slicks, a reminder of times past.

pushing me to do that. So I went down to the Township to get a special use permit so we could open up a business.'

Defunct for 33 years, Pranshka says he actually deer hunted on the property in the interim, it was so overgrown and neglected.

In its day, the likes of drag racing legends Don Garlits and Dick LaHaie raced at Onondaga Dragway, which was originally built as a World War II-era runway for military aircraft.

"It's listed on FAA maps as an emergency landing site, vet," said Dewey Ketner, now 80 and the original owner. "They put 14 inches of concrete down so bombers could practice 'touch-and-go' landings.

Back in 1957-63, Ketner owned a hot rod shop in Jackson, where he now lives.

Ketner became the CEO of the small company that would form the Onondaga Dragway and today Ketner still wears a T-shirt that reads: "Onondaga Dragway 150 mph Club - July, 1961."

Ketner is the keeper of the flame of Onondaga, it seems, as he remembers all the fun times when hot rodders from all over the state came by to check out the then-new track. He said they started exca-

vating in late 1959 and held

mile track.' A lot of guys were there in April, 1961. If it had a heyday, he added, it was the era of about 1961-67, when small-town drag racing was to the North what dirt tracks and then-fledgling NASCAR were to the South.

"I visited all of the hot rod clubs in Lansing and Jackson back then and told the guys that I needed some volunteer labor because we were going to build a dragway at the old airport," Ketner said of the facility's original roots.

But for now, there's no more weekend racing at the ersatz track until the legal issues get settled and it's all bogged down in court.

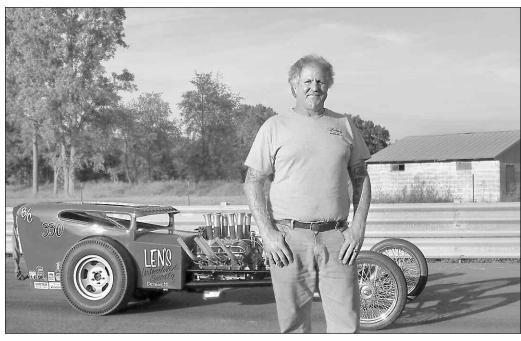
To a visitor, however, the outlines of a viable dragway are there - Pranschka bought discarded Michigan interstate highway guardrails and put them up on both sides of the straightaway, the original restroom building and concession stand are there, as is the concrete pad where they hope to build a brand new timing tower if the project ever moves forward.

Photographers who specialize in drag racing work sometimes take a car on the track for pictures, but no actual racing or testing is allowed for the time being.

"I resurfaced 770 feet of the track and widened it out 60 feet, put up the guardrail, the concrete's new - the concrete starting line, and we put a rethe first timed drag races turn road in," Pranschka said.



At the other end of the dragway, aged asphalt that has not been kept "alive" through use, belies the efforts of many who want to make sure that the Onondaga Dragway is revived.



Paul Arft of Flint with his reproduction 1958 Chassis Research dragster, which he built for his dad this year. It has a small block Chevy 283, which Paul had been saving for the dragster, new in the crate.





Mike drove his Mustang out to



just patched it - it was in pret- ulars at the track, and owners of

ty bad shape.

"The track's about 3/4-mile long. The return roads were both ripped up on the track. We played for three years and a lot of guys just said, 'We ought to just open up a 1/8-

the 1963 Chevy Nova convertible and the 1955 Chevrolet pickup in the background, at right. Fred and Sheryl bought the car at auction in time for Sheryl's 2010 graduation from Spring Arbor College



Mike Meisch and Barbara Fogle of Eaton Rapids with their 1968 Mustang at the entrance to the track.

California in 1992 when he was in the navy. He began his restoration project there, where he says there was a good supply of parts. Under the hood is a small block Ford 247 with a Garret 76mm. turbocharger.

NASCAR's Dale Earnhardt, Jr., Back in Chase for Sprint Cup Title

By JENNA FRYER AP Auto Racing Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) -NASCAR has never hidden its desire to have Dale Earnhardt Jr. in the championship field. As the sport's most popular driver, his participation in the title chase raises the profile of the 10-race series.

After a two-year absence. Earnhardt finally is back in the Chase for the Sprint Cup championship. But is he a legitimate title contender? Probably not, based on the last three months of racing, with just one top-10 finish in the last 12 races.

NASCAR will soon find out if Earnhardt's mere presence is enough to sustain fan interest over the next 10 weeks.

If he's not running up front and challenging for wins, he'll stav close to the bottom in the standings, and all those eyeballs NASCAR is hoping for won't be watching come mid-November.

Earnhardt, by the way, has never said that simply making the Chase is his end game. He's chasing the Sprint Cup, the ultimate prize, and considers the Chase just a brief break from the constant scrutiny on his failure to contend for a championship.

"Making the Chase is impor-

that feels like. My main consaid. "It is really frustrating to make the Chase and then not be as competitive as you want to be during those races. That is really all I am thinking about."

The last few weeks have been jarring for Earnhardt fans, who were ecstatic when his pairing with crew chief Steve Letarte resulted in a fast start to the season. It raised hopes that this might finally be the year Earnhardt claims his first Cup title.

Three top-10 finishes in April – and near-wins at Martinsville and Charlotte moved him to third in the standings, where he hovered through 15 races.

Then he overheated on the road course at Sonoma and finished 41st. He's had just one top-10 finish in the last 12 races, a slide that put his Chase participation in serious jeopardy. Although he went into Saturday night's race at Richmond ranked ninth in the standings and only needed a finish of 20th or better to make the field, the entire 400 miles were a nail-biting test of patience.

He ran in the 20s most of

Chase before. I know what about how difficult his car has been to drive over the last 10 cern is for us to be more com- races and seemed at times petitive as a team," Earnhardt rattled to the point of resignation

"I can't think of the big picture because I really can't see it. Y'all can see it," Earnhardt sighed.

Letarte, who plays the role of cheerleader and mental motivator to perfection, urged Earnhardt to stay focused when the driver seemed to be on the edge of despair.

In the end, Earnhardt finished 16th and made the Chase for the first time since 2008. Although he three times needed the NASCAR free pass to get back on the lead lap, he insisted he never worried that he'd be shut out of the 12-driver field.

"I felt like if we were a good enough team, we'd get the job done," he said. "I knew my team could fix the car good enough, and if everything fell the right way for us as far as them cautions and getting them lucky dogs, getting an opportunity to work on the car, we'd be fine."

For now, sure.

But 16th-place finishes won't cut it going forward. Starting Sunday at Chicago, all 12 drivers in the Chase must be perfect to have a The field is too deep for anyone to be mediocre, and it should only take a race or two for the top teams to move to the front of the standings.

Earnhardt, who has not won a race since 2008, is already in a hole: Seeded 10th in the field, he trails co-leaders Kyle Busch and Kevin Harvick by 12 points. It doesn't help, either, that this field is stacked.

Carl Edwards has been the strongest driver through a long stretch of the season, and former champion Matt Kenseth has two wins and has been quite consistent. Jeff Gordon, a three-time winner this season, is running far better than he did in his nearly perfect 2007 campaign, and Brad Keselowski was on fire all summer as he stormed into Chase contention.

Don't forget five-time defending champion Jimmie Johnson, who has stepped it up a notch over the last month. Denny Hamlin, who nearly dethroned Johnson last season, has a fresh chance to redeem his disappointing year.

It's unclear where Earnhardt will land when it all shakes out with this group, which also includes Ryan Newman, and former champi-

tant, but I have made the the race, griped to Letarte chance at winning the title. ons Kurt Busch and Tony find something within. But Stewart.

Earnhardt knows he must find his early season form, and he's hopeful Letarte has something up his sleeve for the Chase.

"We had a pretty good run at it going the first 15 races, and for whatever reason we sort of fell off and forgot some things or over engineered something," he said.

'We need to look hard at what we're doing, what we've enough to draw the interest been doing, sort of a pattern, the series craves.

City Council Okays '12 Grand Prix

of the Detroit Grand Prix are setting up sponsorships that could return the race to the city next year.

The City Council recently approved an application to bring the race back to Detroit's Belle Isle next June, event chair Bud Denker told The Associated Press.

"We have to start with the landlord first, and (the city) owns the park." Denker said. "Now, we have to put the pieces of sponsorship together. Nothing is confirmed.'

The application was approved for multiple years. Denker added that he expects to have sponsorships in the next few weeks. Race officials

Steve has told me he's been kind of conservative.

"We'll just see. I don't think that any of that stuff is really going to make us faster, but we'll go in there with a good attitude.

That might help, but what NASCAR really needs from Earnhardt are strong results. Without him in the mix, even the greatest championship battle in history might not be

DETROIT (AP) - Organizers are eyeing June 1-3 for the event.

> The Detroit race series on Belle Isle started in 2007 after a six-year gap. Earlier auto races took place on streets around the Renaissance Center.

> The last race was held in 2008 in Detroit and later was canceled due to the poor economy and trouble getting sponsors.

> "A lot of people were disappointed, but people understood we were going into a very difficult recession," said Denker, a senior vice president at the Penske Corp. "Now. they are excited we are bringing it back. We want to bring back the excitement."