

NASCAR feels loss of Hamilton, Parsons

By Mike Mulhern
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The loss of Benny Parsons and Bobby Hamilton in the past two weeks has made for an uneasy start to the new NASCAR season.

COLUMN

Even though drivers and crews are trying to begin things upbeat, it's been hard so far. When two of the really good guys pass away, their deaths tend to linger.

And everyone is hoping that the homily "Bad things come in threes" doesn't pan out. Losing two of stock-car racing's most popular men has been bad enough.

Elliott Sadler, whose career has been full of ups and downs, was hit hard by the death of Parsons last week, after the death of fellow racer Hamilton just the week before.

"We've lost a great friend in Benny Parsons. That's hard to swallow," Sadler said slowly. "I met Benny when I was 12 years old and had Thanksgiving dinner with him. That was pretty cool. To lose him — not as a driver or analyst or announcer or anything like that — but to lose him as a



AP PHOTO

Autographs from drivers and crew members and a tribute to Benny Parsons decal cover the side and trunk of driver Michael Waltrip's car at Daytona (Fla.) International Speedway during testing Jan. 16.

friend has been tough.

"My brother went to the University of North Carolina, and when he was a freshman, his suitemate was Keith Parsons, Benny's son. We knew Keith, but we didn't put two and two together until he invited us all over to meet his dad.

"I was always a race fan growing up, and I definitely knew who

Benny Parsons was. So when they invited us to Thanksgiving dinner at Benny's house, that was a treat for me, 12 years old getting to go to his house. Spending the day with him and seeing his trophies and seeing his accomplishments at his house was amazing to a 12-year-old kid..."

Parsons and Hamilton were so full of life that they could fill a

room just by walking into it. And once they got wound up on something, there was no off button.

They were running until the end of it.

Everyone has a Benny Parsons story. Several, probably. One summer long, long ago, he taught me how to shoot craps in Vegas.

It was on a tour run back when the tour didn't fly but rather hit the road in doilies and cars, a long, extended circus train meandering from track to track to track. And Vegas was a good post-California stop on Mondays and Tuesdays, particularly since part-time racer Mel Larson was the PR man at Circus Circus casino.

Watching Parsons work the craps layout was high-drama, mesmerizing. He was a Nureyev at the table, always in motion, cajoling the dice, carrying on a running conversation with all about him and never failing to make a bet for the table or tip the dealer. He not only knew all the numbers but also the etiquette.

One fall Wilkesboro (N.C.) Speedway weekend, Parsons invited a few friends up to the old family homestead near the track for a small Friday evening cookout, and to show them the world he grew up in, the back-

woods life down at the end of a desolate dirt road, where there was still no electricity and the only running water was what you ran to fetch.

Parsons also taught patience, so many times, once particularly at Talladega, where he had just lost a vicious last-lap duel for the win at that high-tension track, and he knew his job was on the line. Yet he stood there as cool as could be for those aggravating post-race interviews, even as his blood-pressure was clearly rising.

Parsons was a role model that many of today's newcomers would do well to emulate.

Matt Kenseth is, in some ways, a kindred spirit.

"Even though you know Bennie was sick, and you knew things weren't good — and the same for Bobby — it's always tough when they go," Kenseth said.

"Probably all of us have known somebody that's been bit by cancer: Robbie's (crew chief Robbie Reiser's) dad last year and Bobby, and my uncle Gary a while back, all of us who have been around long enough know somebody.

"They're a survivor or know somebody that's got it.

"It's a terrible disease. But more than anything, I remember

how happy Benny always was, how he was always around the sport that he loved....

"Even the last time I saw him, at Homestead (in November), and he had this girl carrying his oxygen bottle, but he's in the garage and he's just as happy as could be. You knew he didn't feel good. But he still came down to see everybody and wish them luck and hang out in the garage, because that's where he wanted to be."

Jeff Gordon, torn between the loss of two friends and his own impending fatherhood, said, "I'm having a hard time talking about it because I'm still blown away.

Most of us thought 'OK, he's cancer-free, and he's going to be back and be Benny.' And for this to happen so suddenly, it's really heartbreaking.

"He was somebody who was really good to me early on in my career. He had moved into a new house and had a lot of friends over.

"Somehow I got on that list and found myself hanging out at Benny's, and it was really a cool thing."

Mike Mulhern covers auto racing for the Winston-Salem (N.C.) Journal. Send comments to mmulhern@wsjournal.com.

Howard joining Benton team

Greenwood driver Shelby Howard IV has left Tony Stewart Motorsports and will drive for Ricky Benton Racing in the USAR Hooters Pro Cup Series this season.

The team also will compete in select NASCAR Busch Series races.

Howard has raced in the Hooters Pro Cup Northern Division the past two seasons but will compete in the Southern Division in 2007. He was second in the series' championship series last season after finishing third in the Northern Division standings.

Veteran NASCAR crew chief Chris Rice will lead the Ricky Benton Racing team. Joey Gwin of Greenwood, who worked with Howard last season, will join the team and will be involved in activities in the team's shop and at tracks.

Benton's team won a Hooters Pro Cup race in Bristol, Tenn., last season with driver Marty Lindley. The team won the series championship with driver Jason Sarvis in 2002.

Pit stops

- The Indy United Racing League recently announced it has changed its name.

Early this month, series founders Mike and Joy Price of Greenfield announced the name had been changed to the American Racing Series. Late last week, the name was changed again to the Advance Racing Association.

The series also has started calling its stockcars division "limited late models."

The first Advance Racing Association race of 2007 will be April 21 at O'Reilly Raceway Park in Indianapolis. Seven ORP dates (one of them tentative) are on the 2007 schedule.

The series' new Web site is www.advanceracingassociation.com.

- ORP recently announced its 2007 schedules.



Jeff Decker
FULL THROTTLE

Among the highlights of the drag-strip schedule is the 53rd NHRA Mac Tools U.S. Nationals, Aug. 29 through Sept. 3. The track's weekly racing series, the VP Fuels E.T. Bracket Racing Series, will kick off a 17-race schedule April 1.

The highlight of the oval-track schedule will be the Kroger SpeedFest, including the United States Auto Club J.D. Byrider 300 on July 26, the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series Power Stroke Diesel 200 on July 27 and the NASCAR Busch Series Kroger 200 on July 28.

- Paragon Speedway recently announced it was adding a pure stocks division.

Pure stocks will join sprints, street stocks and bombers on the Paragon schedule.

- The King of Indiana Sprint Series announced its 2007 schedule this week, with nine races planned from May 11 through July 1.

Gas City I-69 Speedway will host the first race May 11. Tri-State Speedway in Haubstadt will host the finale July 1.

In between, races will be at Twin Cities Raceway Park in Vernon (May 12), Lawrenceburg Speedway (May 26), Bloomington Speedway (June 15), Lincoln Park Speedway in Putnamville (June 16), Kokomo Speedway (June 17), Paragon Speedway (June 23) and the Terre Haute Action Track (June 30).

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Roush ready for fight against Toyota

By Chris Jenkins
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CONCORD, N.C.

With Toyota poised to enter NASCAR's Nextel Cup series this season, Ford team owner Jack Roush is revving up the combative rhetoric.

Roush, the loudest critic of NASCAR's decision to allow the Japanese automaker to enter the Nextel Cup series this season, said he's "preparing myself for siege" on the track and in the boardroom this year.

"I expect to hand Toyota their head over the short term," Roush said on Wednesday during NASCAR's preseason media tour.

Roush, who has said in the past that Americans shouldn't buy foreign cars because it hurts the economy, believes that Toyota's entry will hurt NASCAR because the automaker will outspend teams affiliated with domestic automakers.

But he's ready for a fight.

"Nobody's frightened," Roush said. "We're going to go to war with them, and they should give us their best shot."

Given current events, this might not be the most sensitive time for Roush, a war history buff who owns a World War II-era P-51 Mustang fighter plane, to compare sports to war. But at times Wednesday, Roush seemed to be channeling Winston Churchill.

"Toyota will not find that the established teams and manufacturers will wither in their path, as has been the case where they have tried to engage elsewhere," he said.

But Roush's preparations to take on Toyota go beyond talk.

He is negotiating to sell a significant stake of his team to an investment group headed by Boston Red Sox owner John Henry to raise more money to race. And Roush somehow prod-ded Ford Motor Co. to help him meet the extra \$10 million for research and development.

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