

Darrell Gwynn: Born for Racing

By Josie Byzek

International Drag Racing Hall of Famer Darrell Gwynn first made a name for himself back in the 1980s when he was driving his dad's fuel car. At the time he was the young racer to watch. Now, as team owner, he's just as hungry for success at the negotiating table as he was on the racetrack, even if it means sparring with the likes of formidable New York Yankees owner and Darrell Gwynn Racing sponsor, George Steinbrenner.

Calling Steinbrenner a hands-on kind of guy is like calling a forest fire a spark. As Yankees owner, Steinbrenner made 17 managerial changes in his first 17 seasons. In 2001 he tried doing the same with Gwynn's team, which was struggling out of a slump. When Steinbrenner insisted Gwynn fire his crew chief, Ken Veney, Gwynn refused.



"We are heading to the biggest race of the year and I want the best chance to win that race," Gwynn told a livid Steinbrenner, as recounted in the book, *Darrell Gwynn at Full Throttle*. "Ken Veney gives me the best chance. Unless you have a better answer, Ken is the crew chief." By the end of the meeting Veney still had a job and Steinbrenner still sponsored a drag racing team.

Gwynn hasn't driven his team's car since the April 15, 1990, racing accident that resulted in a spinal cord injury. Previously behind the wheel of winning race cars, he is now behind the helm of a winning race team. He handles personnel matters, makes opportunities for existing sponsors and lines up new sponsors--and these days, more than ever, a team can't run without great sponsors.

The desk job keeps him in racing, but it isn't the same as sucking up those fumes from the driver's seat, says Gwynn, a C5-6 quad. "I've always been a team owner, the team has always been a family-owned team," he says. "But I also had the joy of driving the car and being with the car all the time. Now my arms and legs don't work, it's all about business. Unfortunately for me I was more of a mechanical guy than I was a businessman."

Is he always this melancholy about his role as team owner? No, not really. It depends on how well the team's doing. "I can sum it up in a real quick sentence," he says. "With drag racing it's either really, really good or it sucks. When you're winning it's great and when you're losing it sucks. When you're competitive and you're not winning, it's no good." At the time he was interviewed, DG Racing was fifth in points, a situation Gwynn describes as "a slump."



Married shortly after his injury, Gwynn remains a devoted family man."

From Kiddy Cars to Superstardom

Gwynn's father, Jerry Gwynn, was the first drag racer in the family. Darrell practically grew up in the driver's seat, intrigued with fast cars from the time he first sniffed race track fumes as a baby. When he was 6 his dad made him a kiddie hot rod that came complete with an adapted lawnmower motor. The car automatically stopped when young Gwynn took his feet off the pedals, so he was perfectly safe tooling around the street his dad blocked off in front of the Gwynn's South Florida home.

In time Gwynn outgrew toy cars and took a turn behind the wheel of his dad's full-grown dragster. He was fast and soon blew through his dad's best times. Eventually Gwynn became the sole driver for the Gwynn Racing team, a rising star in the racing world. Even now Gwynn is listed by the National Hot Rod Association as tied with Kenny Bernstein for the number 32 spot in the NHRA top 50 drivers, and he's tied with Shirley Muldowney for the number 26 spot on the all-time win list.

"Even though there were some veterans like Darrell's dad, Jerry, and friend Mike Cunningham guiding the team, there mainly was a bunch of guys in their early to mid-20s 'living the dream.' There was a lot of energy, attitude and testosterone in that bunch," says Bob Abdellah, managing director of DG Racing. "If you're a rock music buff, you might take a look at the mercurial rise of the Police as a parallel example of a bunch of young guys who quickly swaggered from obscurity to superstardom."

"Big Daddy" Don Garlits, thought by many to be the greatest drag racer ever, once described Gwynn as the poster boy for the sport of drag racing. "At the height of his career immediately before his accident I believe that was an accurate assessment," says Abdellah. "[He has] an interesting mix of charisma and good-heartedness. Throw in a little cockiness and a propensity for benign mischief-making and you get the idea."

Gwynn's good-heartedness actually contributed to his April 15, 1990, accident. He's a friendly guy who loves his fans and has always wanted to give them a good show, especially back when he was a driver. So even though England's Santa Pod



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Raceway was coated in slippery mist and the Easter Thunderball race wasn't until later in the day and this run was only supposed to be an exhibition--and Gwynn had loaned his gloves and arm restraints to a fellow driver--Gwynn felt he owed it to his fans to make a quick run. "We had a commitment," writes Gwynn in *Full Throttle*. "There were a lot of fans in the stands and we didn't want to disappoint anyone. We never planned to make a full pass, so it never should have been a big deal."

But instead of a quick run to please the fans, Gwynn's car, traveling 240 mph, caught air, lifted on the left side and hit the guardrail less than a thousand feet into the run. The rail broke the car in half and the back end--with Gwynn strapped inside--crashed into the rail again. The whiplash snapped Gwynn's neck. Without arm restraints and gloves, he lost control of his arms--his left arm hung outside the car window while the car skidded sideways along the rail. He eventually lost the lower half of his left arm at the elbow.

After his hospital stay in England, Gwynn went home to America for rehab, mourned his loss, and then assessed the racing team's situation with his dad. Soon grieving was not high on his list of things to do. They still had great parts for a great car and they still had a great team. All they needed was a new driver and they'd be back on track.

Gwynn now had to learn a new role--driving a team instead of a car--and part of the new role was finding the best available driver. That was Michael Brotherton, but he didn't last too long. "We had a lot of nice equipment when we started the season," writes Gwynn in *Full Throttle*, "and not a lot of nice equipment at the end of the year. We had a couple of wrecked race cars and a lot of broken pieces." Gwynn phased out Brotherton. DG Racing has only had two other drivers in the over-10 years since Gwynn drove the family car.

"Back in the '80s you didn't have to be the best businessman to have a race team," says Gwynn. "You had to have a fast car and a great race team and you could go out there and be very competitive." To be competitive now you've got to have great sponsors lined up, like the New York Yankees and Berryman Products.

"My job is to create opportunities for existing sponsors and find new sponsors for the future," says Gwynn. This year the team's in a slump and on a tight budget. Gwynn says there's a connection. "It takes a lot of money to run these teams, and the way the economy is today, it's hard to find the funding. ... We're managing to be competitive even though we're running on what you'd call a third of the budget."

Still he has an impressive roster of sponsors and especially enjoys the ones that deal with mobility products. "I don't want to compare sponsors, but it's one thing to have a sponsor that just pays money. It's another thing for a sponsor to pay money and provide a 40-foot, fully-converted wheelchair accessible motor home from Winnebago and a fully-accessible GMC Pontiac Montana," says Gwynn, chuckling.

Gwynn makes it to about 60 percent of his team's races, and although he flies to some of them, more often than not he's traveling in the Montana and living in the motor home at the race track. "Talk about convenience," he says. "I don't have to fight the traffic at the races ... and the motor home's got a roll-in shower, a king-sized bed, a Braun lift with a big four-foot side door." It even has a huge awning that hangs off the side, which creates the hospitality area for the team on the racetrack. "So I'm actually right in our pit area. It's very convenient for me to have people like Winnebago--they've been affiliated with our race team for 10 years now."

Gwynn has developed a following of wheelchair-using fans, which has caused the NHRA to increase accessible seating. "That's because a lot of people know I have a Winnebago motor home and I have this tricked-out, converted van and they all want to come and see what those look like," he says. "Not everyday do you see a converted motor home, or the latest Quickie wheelchair that I happen to be in. The racetracks have had to put some additional wheelchair seating in because we turn a lot of wheelchair users into race fans just by them coming out to see these things."

The DG Racing team also has a long history with the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis. "I was involved with the Miami Project prior to my accident," says Gwynn. "I put the decal on the car myself about six months before I got hurt. It was an incentive program that Coors Beer [his sponsor at the time] liked to do with a local South Florida charity." When Gwynn came back from England, he had additional rehab at the Miami Project, and of course he's stayed involved with the project ever since. "So we essentially have always been doing charity work and never formed a foundation of our own until this past year. But the last several years we partnered with Quickie to try and give back in a formal way."

Giving Back

Through his nonprofit organization, the Darrell Gwynn Foundation (www.darrellgwynnfoundation.org), Gwynn teams up with Sunrise to give away approximately six \$10,000 Quickie wheelchairs each year. "The process is a few months long," says Gwynn. "We bring in therapists and the rehab hospitals to pick the recipient, the one that really needs the wheelchair."

A day before he gives the wheelchair away, Gwynn and his wife, Lisa, go out to the rehab to share their experiences with people who have recent SCIs. "We share some of our story, what we've been through, how we've been able to overcome some of those obstacles," says Gwynn. "Our daughter, Katie, was at the last one." Katie, 5 years old, was conceived with help from the Miami Project's fertility program.

The wheelchair recipient and family come to the racetrack. "So far we've been successful at turning them into race fans," says Gwynn. "They get to see some racing, meet the driver. We put them on the starting line and give them that wheelchair right when they're getting ready to start up all those cars. It's a cool thing for them, and for us it's a formal way to give back to the community. It makes us feel like we won the race before the race even started."

This past August the NHRA recognized his foundation as an official charity, the first time ever the NHRA made an official commitment to any nonprofit. "This means we'll be in the NHRA newspaper, on the Web site, and that's a cool thing," says Gwynn.

In its Aug. 29 press release about the Gwynn foundation, the NHRA notes that Gwynn raised funds for people with SCI even before his accident. He has raised about \$1 million for spinal cord research as well as direct assistance. "To have NHRA acknowledge and embrace the Darrell Gwynn Foundation and its mission is particularly gratifying," says Gwynn.

Besides the wheelchair giveaway, another activity the foundation does that Lisa is especially passionate about is aimed at children. The Gwynn foundation, along with Homestead-Miami Speedway, helps support Spediatics, the only pediatrics unit for kids with SCI in deep south Miami-Dade.

The Family Man

Right after Gwynn's accident, reporters asked Lisa, his then-fiancée, if she still planned on marrying him. "We were still in shock, trying to figure everything out," she says. "But we were head over heels

in love before the accident and that didn't change. He was still Darrell. He wasn't bitter or morose, he was still fun to be around."

Lisa, a pediatrician and former beauty queen, says she does not want to minimize the hard parts of being in a marriage in which one partner has a significant disability. "You have to make sure you have your own life, your own interests," she says. "The balance can easily be tipped and your life can become too wrapped up in your disabled spouse's life." In the case of her marriage, she has as strong a personality as Darrell has, so the balance was easily reached--especially after they figured out how to handle issues like personal assistance.

"L-I-S-A," says Gwynn. "That's the definition of love." The couple married a few years after Gwynn's accident on Jan. 9, 1993. "We had to figure out how to live our life--the attendant situation, how to do this and that, from having fun to having sex to walking the dog--we had to learn how to do it all over again. We figured out we could still have fun, do all those things--we just had to do them a little different. We're still in love with each other."

When it came time to have a baby, Gwynn turned to the Miami Project for help and in a few years their daughter, Katie, was born. "She's a little miracle baby," says Gwynn. "We tried for two or three years to have a child--it seems like everything in our lives is dramatic. We just can't go have a baby." Instead they used artificial insemination, and when the magic window of conception opened, Gwynn was sick as a dog. "But you just can't postpone the whole cycle ... all the drugs she was taking at the time, all this garbage ... you just can't postpone this and say, 'Ah, we'll wait til Darrell feels better.'"

It's not like he had a cold. He was in the hospital with a kidney infection and a 103-degree fever when it came time for their first attempt at fertilization. Timing was especially important to Lisa, who was starting her third year in medical school and really didn't want to be a pregnant resident.

"All these medical teams in South Florida were waiting for Lisa, waiting for me. It was almost like a heart transplant from one hospital to another. For beautiful Katie to come out of all of that, it was the most unbelievable thing. She's the cutest, most independent little kid you'd ever want to meet."

Ah, but how does she feel about racing--is she the next Gwynn in line for the driver's wheel? "It's similar to what growing up was like for me," says Gwynn. "She likes it, but I don't drag her to every race. She goes to one or two a year when her mommy goes, but she certainly is a big Cory Mac [the current DG Racing driver] fan. At the same time, if one of her little girlfriends shows up at the races, another driver's daughter or something, she doesn't even know she's at the races--she's in the Winnebago playing." Good thing little Katie's surrounded by strong role models. If she doesn't grow up to be a dragster like her dad and grandfather, maybe she'll be a doctor like her mom.

Gone Fishing

"As much as I enjoy working, I enjoy playing as well, and my playing is if I can dream it up, I try to do it," says Gwynn. Since his injury he has hung upside down in Lear jets, been on blimp rides, taken a 170-mph stock car ride around the Daytona Speedway--and he fishes every chance he gets on his adapted fishing boat.

"I just caught me a big old catfish last week, and I caught two bass on the same lure at the same time last week," he says. The Gwynn family's goal is to build a home on the Island of Orada, Fla., down in the Florida Keys. "We want to build a home down there some day because we love the outdoors and Katie loves to snorkel, ride the innertube behind the boat ... she's a water nut. That's one of the things we have in mind that we'd like to do."

The Gwynns live on a fresh water canal in Fort Lauderdale, but the fishing's not near as good as it would be if they lived on salt water. "I don't think we'll ultimately move down there, but we'd like to have a vacation home. Our life is very, very busy between race teams, family, foundation. And I have a collectibles business and, oh ... what else am I doing? We are just a very busy family and busy couple all the time."

Even when he does have a chance to sit behind a fishing pole in the Keys, Gwynn admits more often than not he's thinking about the calls he has to return or the sponsors he's trying to line up. "If racing were all bad, meaning if we weren't having fun at it, I wouldn't be doing it," he says. "What makes it fun is being competitive, doing the right thing, winning races and coming home to a great family."