

NJ's Bruce Cook Is A NASCAR Champion; One Horton Rideless, The Other Not Racing



Focus On Speed

Point Pleasant, N.J., native Bruce Cook was this year's championship crew chief on the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series.

The former Street Stock racer from the Garden State worked with six different drivers on his way to securing the Owners Championship for Kevin and DeLana Harvick's No. 2 truck.

It's been quite a year for Cook. He started the season in February calling the shots for Elliott Sadler who finished second in Friday's Truck race during Speed Weeks at Daytona International Speedway.

The very next day he was back on the pit box as crew chief for Tony Stewart when he drove Harvick's Chevrolet to victory in the Nationwide Series race. During 2011, the No. 2 Truck won seven times with three different drivers. Late in the season Ron Hornaday became the sixth different driver in the No. 2 truck. Hornaday was in position to win the driver's title before his well documented incident in Texas with Kyle Busch. While Hornaday's chances to be champion ended in Texas, Harvick won that event and also secured the owner's title.

Cook, 43, now will be moving on. Harvick is not going to field a Truck on the series next year. He's also moved his Nationwide Series program over to Richard Childress Racing.

While attending the Turkey Derby at Wall Stadium to catch up with friends, Cook said he wasn't sure where he would land. Like many of the Harvick employees, he moved over to RCR shop. But just this past week he made another career decision.

Cook is now employed by Dale Earnhardt Jr. He'll be the crew chief at Junior Motorsports for a third NASCAR Nationwide team being put together. The car will run a limited schedule of 10-12 races. Earnhardt will drive the car in about five. Cook felt that Ron Fellows could be a driver in several road course events. Other top NASCAR drivers would than complete what would be an "all star line-up".

When Cook's car is not competing, he'll be the right hand for veteran crew chief Tony Eury Sr. for the Nationwide Series car that will be driven by Aric Almirola. A third Nationwide Series car will be driven regularly by Danica Patrick.

Cook got his first taste of racing by attending events in the Northeast with his father. When he was 18 he jumped behind the wheel of his own No. 84 Street Stock. He won his first feature at the paved Flemington Speedway in 1991 and his last of nine in 1996. Cook moved up to the Modified division, but then made a move that would pave the way for his future career. He began to work as a crew chief and in 1997 won the Modified Championship at Flemington while teaming with John Blewett III.

In 1999, Cook moved south to Charlotte, N.C. to find a job working in one of NASCAR's big three divisions. He first landed at Rah-Moc Racing as a mechanic and later moved to Rensi Motorsports. He became a car chief in 2001 for Cicci-Welliver Racing with veteran drivers Tim Fedewa, Geoff Bodine and Casey Mears.

Cook took a mechanic position at Roush Fenway Racing in 2003, joined the No. 17 team with driver Matt Kenseth and won the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series championship.

His next stop was Robert Yates Racing (RYR) where he spent three years. During the 2005 Nationwide Series season, he worked as car chief for drivers Dale Jarrett and Elliott Sadler.

The 2007 season found Cook back on the pit box as crew chief for Stephen Leicht and RYR's No. 90 team in the NASCAR Nationwide Series. In 2008, Cook served as crew chief for the No. 7 Nationwide Series team with driver Mike Wallace and Germain Racing.

Cook then joined Harvick as a car chief for the No. 33 in the Nationwide Series in 2010. The team finished an organization-best third in the year-end Owner's Point standings, recording three victories.

This year Cook concentrated on the Truck series for Harvick's team. Dealing with driver changes on a regular basis, he still was able to be part of his second NASCAR championship.

BIEVER PARKS HIS MODIFIEDS - Jimmy Horton is looking for a ride to race weekly next season. Car owner Dick Biever has parked his No. 14 big-block Modified team.

Biever told Horton of his decision prior to the season-finale for the division in November at Bridgeport.

"He told me at Bridgeport that he was done," said Horton by phone on Monday. "If he runs anything at all it would just be selected shows. He said he was going to back-off and this would be the final race. We laugh and joked, raced and finished second and that's the way we left that day on very good terms."

After two season of struggles and mechanical breakdowns, Horton said Biever has decided it's time to take make a change.

"He wants to sit back and reevaluate where he's at," said Horton.

Biever's son, Josh owns a 358-Modified driven by Doug Manmiller weekly at Pa.'s Grandview Speedway. Horton has a feeling Dick might just help his son next season.

"I've heard other guys are going to get into the car," said Horton. "But I don't think that's the case. I still have one of his cars and a lot of his equipment and he said there is no urgency to get it back."

Horton still has the Modified he drove at Bridgeport, a car that was new for Syracuse's SEF 200 in October. Another Modified that he raced at Octoberfest at the Hagerstown Speedway was taken to Biever's warehouse and covered over for winter storage.

"I'm going to go up there away from the race track and sit down and talk with him in the next couple days and see exactly what he wants to do," said Horton, leaving hope that the two might race together next year at least on a limited basis.



IN NEW JERSEY, Bruce Cook celebrates with the race sponsor representative after a 1992 Great American Street Stock division feature win at Flemington Speedway.

After also winning just one feature in 2010, Horton got Biever's permission to move the race team from his shop to Pat Michael's shop which is located near his Neshanic, N.J. home. This way, Michael and Horton could pay closer attention to detail.

"I thought that would help," said Horton, dejectedly.

"I'm not saying anything bad about anyone, but it didn't change. We ran the same as the year before. It was a little less tiring on Dick, which was a good thing, but he also enjoys working on the car and I think he missed that a lot."

Horton isn't upset with Biever. In fact, he might be relieved.

"I can see his part of it. We never really clicked like we should have. We got going at times, but fell apart at others. It never was an easy deal, it seemed like we always had to work for everything."

"I sensed it might happen. Maybe it is because I wanted to stop too. It was one of those deals where it wasn't working for either of us. We couldn't find the combination to be dominant at one spot like we should have been. There was always something getting in the way."

Over the years Horton has driven for many great car owners. He rates Biever as one of the finest.

"He is right there on the top of the list of all the guys I've driven for. We never wanted for anything. He got strange at times, but all car owners do."

Horton does have a ride with car owner Dieter Schmidt and his gold No. 5 Modifieds. But, Schmidt isn't interested in racing weekly.

"I have my 'ace in the hole' with the five car," said Horton. "He said he can't run every Saturday night anymore. He'd like to run special shows, which we were trying to do this year, but we just couldn't get together but a few times."

Horton feels Schmidt would consider a weekly effort if he could get sponsorship for tires, fuel and expenses and then line-up crew help.

"My goal this winter is trying to get the five car back to where it used to be," said Horton. "When it rolled out of the garage years ago it was always right. He stepped up his motor program a little bit last year and he needs just a bit more."

But with Christmas just two weeks away, Horton is asking Santa for the combination that will again make him a regular feature winner. He's hoping Biever might consider just racing weekly on Saturday nights. Then he could drive for Schmidt in the special events.

"I'm looking," he said. "I'll just wait and see what comes up. People around me wonder why I'm not nervous. I am, but what are you going to do? If I don't get a ride I don't get a ride. I've been through this before. Something will come up."

During his career Horton has won over 450 feature events. He has won every year since he started racing back in 1974.

"That's the cutting point," said Horton about his win streak.

"I said from day one when I started racing that the year I didn't win a race is the year I'll quit. I've only won one race the last two years, but I still got one."

Horton started to question his own abilities this summer.

"There were nights coming home from the races driving in the car with my dad that I'd turn to him and ask him if I lost a step or what was going on. He'd tell me I'm not working hard enough. I can see what he says. There were a lot of times I didn't work on the car like maybe I should have this year, but I had good people working on it that I trusted."

Horton no longer works full-time in racing like he did during seasons when he was a big winner. He puts in hours at other jobs, then concentrates on his racing later at night.

"It's a lot different than the way it use to be when all I did was race," said Horton. "I'd love to go back and give it just one full blown year that way. But I've already done that and I now have to wonder how many years could I do that anyway?"

Horton left dirt Modified racing for several years to pursue a career in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series. He won seven ARCA races including two at Daytona. He made it to Cup series where he ran 48 races in an eight year span.

Now 55, would he even consider hanging up his helmet?

"I think I could do it if I went a year without winning," he said. "It would be nerve-wracking. I'd keep building parts for race cars, but I don't think you'd see me at the tracks very often if I wasn't driving.

After I quit the Cup deal, I've not been to a (Cup) race since. I'm just not a good race fan."

Horton informed that his son, Jimmy IV, is currently planning on not racing next season. The young Horton was a winner in Sportsman competition at Bridgeport Speedway in the past. In 2011 he moved his efforts to Grandview Speedway where he completed the entire season for the first time. "He's talking about packing it in and not racing next year," said his dad.

Jimmy IV, on the urge of family members, took a different route in life than that his dad. Instead of racing full-time, he went to college and has obtained a great, high paying job with an excellent future.

"We as a family pushed him to get a good education," said his dad. "I knew how tough it is to make a living racing. When he was 14, I told him to buy a set of golf clubs."

Yet Jimmy IV wanted to follow in his dad's footsteps. In recent years he's competed with older equipment owned by his grandfather, Jim Jr. Last year Jimmy IV spent a considerable amount of his own money to field the 358-Modified for Grandview.

"His job takes a toll on him and it's hard to get a lot of good help working on race cars," said his dad of why his son is quitting.

"All his friends in racing either have their own race car or help someone else. All his friends in work play golf."

So after a year of getting home from work at 7 or 8 p.m. and working in the garage with his grandfather until 12 or 1 a.m., he's decided it's time to do something else.

"I give him credit," said his dad. "He stuck it out with a little help on his own this year. He worked his butt off to run a full season."

After taking golf lessons about a year ago, you'll now see him more on those courses than race tracks.

"His boss might come out and say, 'let's take the afternoon off and go play golf,'" said his dad. "They don't give you the time off to go work on your race car."

Horton said he might help get his son's car ready over the winter just in case he changes his mind and wants to run a special or two.

WILL BRIDGEPORT OPEN? It was just a year ago that I penned an article regarding the dropping of the big-block Modifieds at Bridgeport Speedway. In their place, track owner Jay James advanced his Crate Modified division, to be known as Bridgeport Modifieds, as the headliner. James upped the purse for this division and announced he would still pay his champion \$10,000.

The story, published on December 7, 2010 ended with the statement: "At this time next year we'll be either talking about Bridgeport's success or failure. Let's just hope we're still talking about Bridgeport the speedway and its on-going future."

Well the time has come, and we're not talking about the track's success. The program started off strong with enough Bridgeport Modifieds in the pits to fit James' budget, but as the season moved along the car count dropped below the number needed.

Fans never warmed up to the restricted Modifieds as the headliner, and crowds were often very slim. The season has ended and nothing about 2012 has been released. The long-time track phone number and the speedway hotline have been both disconnected, sending warning signs. The promoter's number in his homestate of Delaware, however, has remained available to those that have that number.

James and his family left for a ten day vacation in Florida late last week. Reportedly they'll make their decision regarding Bridgeport during the vacation and then make an announcement upon their return.

Weekly racers and the traveling series that stop at Bridgeport (URC and TSRS) are both in limbo regarding 2012 until a decision is made.

One racer was told recently when calling the Delaware phone number that the track would indeed be open next year for operation. Details, however, would be announced at a later point.

James has struggled to find a way to make money at Bridgeport since he and partner Brian Ramey purchased the facility. They've done wonders improving the facility, but the racing hasn't attracted fans in the grandstands.

The cost of racing on the big 5/8-mile has been an issue. James tried racing the Modifieds on the Micro-Sprint 1/4-mile late this season. Many, including this writer, have always felt a smaller Bridgeport would be successful, but the current 1/4 mile is too small or too narrow. Many feel opening it up and adding banking would work. A small 1/2 or 3/8-mile would be perfect while keeping the big track intact for one or two "special" events each year.

The track has been offered for sale or lease and there are interested parties. While the word of the sale of a race track often leads to the fear of housing or commercial use - at Bridgeport it doesn't seem to be heading in that direction. From what I'm told the value of the land is much greater as a race track than anything else since much of the acreage is wetlands.

One name that continues to surface at Bridgeport is that of former Modified driving champion Doug Hoffman. In recent years Hoffman and his wife Gena have successfully promoted Mahoning Valley Speedway in Lehigh, Pa. During 2011, Hoffman was a noted visitor at Bridgeport setting off speculation that he might be the next promoter. Hoffman told Mahoning Valley racers at the start of the season that 2011 would be his last at that 1/3-mile paved track. Just this past Saturday it was made official that Floyd Santee was the new Mahoning lease holder.

While the Hoffmans did a great job at Mahoning, you'd have to think they might be event better prepared for Bridgeport. It was on dirt tracks such as Bridgeport that Hoffman spent most of his successful driving career. He's not only a Hall of Fame dirt driver but also operated a speed shop. He's been on both sides of the fence in racing and has excelled each time.

Two phone calls to James produced no answers to the question regarding Bridgeport's future, but the waiting for Hoffman's Mahoning announcement might be the reason for the delay.

Will Bridgeport open next season? I say yes. Soon we'll know.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS EVERYONE!