



Frank Kimmel's Street Stock Series - Steppin' Up

Frank Kimmel Is Working To Launch A Street Stock Series That Will Give Local Racers Across The Country A Chance To Perform On A Bigger Stage

Writer: Don Hamilton photographer: Kevin Thorne



A lot of people laughed when Frank Kimmel, an eight-time ARCA RE/MAX Series champion and part-time promoter, announced a Street Stock race at the mile-and-a-half Kentucky Speedway. The naysayers said that the cars would be crashing every lap, or there would be huge multi-car crashes that would decimate the field. Others said the cars would not stand up to the rigors of a superspeedway. They said wheels would break, engines would blow and there wouldn't be enough cars left at the end to even constitute a race. All of those folks were wrong-very wrong.

The Frank Kimmel Enduro Nationals was not only a technical success, with few wrecks and a tremendous finish, but also a commercial success. Now, after the running of that event in May, Kimmel is about to step up to the next level and create a series for Street Stock drivers.

"The Kentucky race showed us that we can race this type of car safely on a superspeedway and put on a good show for the fans," Kimmel says. "It just makes sense to me to go on and add a few more races to give these guys an opportunity to race at some of the places where they never dreamed they would get a chance to race."

"No more than four races at this point," says Kimmel. "When I retire from driving, and if this thing grows like I think it can, then we can think about expanding to six or even eight races. We want to spread out the races, separate them so guys can afford to go back home and get their stuff back together and get ready to come back to the next one ready to race. We want to keep at least a month between the races.

"Remember, these are still cars that they can go home and race with every Friday and Saturday night somewhere. That's important to not make a car that is so specialized for this series that they can't run it on their local tracks, although we might have to find a different name for the cars. In reality, the cars that came to Kentucky were much better than the normal Enduro or Street Stock car. We may come up with something like Sportsman Enduro car, or something like that.

"Right now we're waiting for the ARCA schedule to come out," Kimmel continues. "After I know what free dates I have, we can get with the tracks and match up the dates that they have available. We've talked with Mr. [Humpy] Wheeler about a race at Lowe's. He's currently looking over our rules and the things that were done with the Kentucky race but hasn't gotten back with us yet. Also, the folks down in Nashville asked for information about the series while we were down there for the ARCA race, so they are considering the idea also."

Wheeler's initial impression is that he likes Kimmel's concept.



"I'm for anything that will produce low-cost racing, and anything that will introduce people to superspeedway racing in a safe manner," Wheeler says. "I think it's a good idea. Frank obviously got a lot of input at Kentucky. He's a smart guy who has been around for a long time and understands the epidemic that we run under, the costs. The costs are closing down the short tracks, and the costs really limit what you can do with the big tracks. Really, there aren't a lot of things you can do at a track like Lowe's Motor Speedway.

"Maybe we have a new era on our hands. Right now, if a guy wants to get on a superspeedway, the cheapest thing he can do is ARCA, and really, when you look at it, it's a Cup car and still hugely expensive. I've asked guys like Foyt and Pearson what they would do if they were 19 years old and starting out. They just throw up their hands and shake their heads." The need for avenues to develop local talent is paramount to the health of the industry, according to Wheeler.

"Because of the costs of racing, there are a lot of really good race car drivers who will miss ever becoming a Cup driver," Wheeler says. "As a track operator, you want to make sure you have the best drivers from anywhere starting the race at your racetrack. That's what all of those people in the stands are paying to see.

"There are a lot of guys who can't afford to take that next step. They may be able to race a Legends Car, an IMCA car, or a Street Stock, and that's as far as they go because they don't have the money. So Frank's deal is something I would definitely look at. As I said, I'm for anything that will lower the costs of racing. If you go back and look at Cup racing in the '60s, that's all it was really, Street Stock racing.

"It wasn't until about 1964 that they got fast and less stock-like. That's when the factories came in, and the cars have become less stock year after year, until now where we have that twisted sister car running out there now. It can't die soon enough for me. I can't wait for next year."

Wheeler, through 600 Racing (producer of Legends, Bandoleros, and Thunder Roadsters), has a new race vehicle nearly ready to hit the marketplace.

"We have a new body coming out for the Thunder Roadsters," he says. "It looks like a cross between the Viper and the Corvette, and we are going to run some races for them on the superspeedway. We've tested them and they run about the same speeds as Frank's cars, so I could see taking an afternoon or an evening and maybe running them together as a doubleheader."

The Dynamics

Kimmel's series, for now, has a unique footprint in the industry and a huge upside.



"I think that there is a tremendous potential for this," Kimmel says. "We have some great ideas for the rules for next year. I've talked to the folks at the Salem Speedway and it looks like next year we will have a compatible package where you can run the same setup at Salem and at our races. We've also talked to Glenn Lockett from the CRA. They are interested and they are looking to get their rules together with ours.

"So, hopefully, we can sit down and mesh it all together and make a real neat traveling deal. We're going to keep the gear rule like we had it at Kentucky, but we are considering a 450-lift hydraulic cam rule for next year. Some other things that we're considering is a weight penalty and a taller wickerbill for cars with big motors. We'll be using 93-octane pump gas for the cars and at least 20 gallons will have to be bought at the track, and also the tires you race on will have to be bought at the track.

"We'll, of course, keep the wickerbill. The wickerbill is going to be our signature deal. If you see a car going down the road, or coming into a racetrack, you are going to know that it is one of our cars. Plus, it's a great place to put the title sponsor's decals. Somebody joked that we should go after Gillette as a title sponsor so we could call the wickerbill 'The Gillette Blade.' I kind of like the idea.

"After the Kentucky race, out of the hundreds of phone calls and e-mails I've gotten, I only had two that weren't happy. One was from a disgruntled competitor who got beat and the other was from a guy [who] wasn't happy about some of the things we did in tech. It wasn't anything to do with the competition side, it was all safety stuff. I don't care because we are going to keep people safe even if we have to protect them from themselves. We are going to change how we do the starting lineup. I'm not doing this to put on a crashfest. I don't want that.

"I think that putting the fastest cars in the very back of the field is not a good situation. They come up through the pack so quickly that it's not fair to the guys they're overtaking and it's not fair to them, that they're having trouble getting through, and that normally causes an issue. To eliminate that, we're looking at setting aside a practice session where we

let the cars put their race tires on and go out for a five-lap run in groups of 10, 15, or 20, depending on the size of the racetrack. Whichever is the fastest of those five laps will be their qualifying laps. It's a lot like sports car qualifying or what NASCAR did in the Busch Series qualifying at Watkins Glen.

"We will be starting 99 cars for every race. What we are going to do is lock in the top 80 cars, and then we'll have a last-chance race to fill in the final 19 starting spots in the field. That way, every team that brings a car to the racetrack will have an opportunity to race on these tracks before they go home. I think that's important for the success of the series, but also for all of the short-track drivers out there. It's a big deal for these guys to race on a track like Lowe's Motor Speedway or Bristol. It even happens to me.

"When we went to Bristol to test, I'd be lying to you if I told you I didn't have goose bumps pulling down into that track for the first time. I had never been to Bristol, even as a spectator. It was a big thrill for me to drive around that place. Imagine what it would be to a guy who hasn't ever been on a Nextel Cup track. That's one of the big reasons we are doing all of this.

"It looks like we are going to restructure the purse also for next year," Kimmel adds. "We will still have the same amount overall, but we are going to pay a more fair purse. We probably won't be paying \$10,000 to win, like we did at Kentucky. We'll knock that down a bit and spread it out in the field so that we'll pay maybe \$150 from 50th place on down. That way the guys in the top 50 at least get their money back, and it helps them come back for the next race. I envision about 20 to 30 guys will travel with us to all of the races if we stay on top of the economics of it.

"All of the tracks that we are looking at are within 500 miles of each other, so there isn't a real big travel problem. But there are a lot of Street Stock drivers all over the area. If we are racing in North Carolina or Bristol, we'll draw drivers from North and South Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia. If we race in Nashville, we'll see guys from there, Kentucky, Georgia, and Alabama. Kentucky Speedway and Salem will pull more teams from the Midwest. I think it can be like a small ARCA for blue-collar guys."



Driver Feedback

You might remember Bryan Beckner from SCR's coverage of the Frank Kimmel Enduro Nationals in the October issue. We chronicled his adventure from his home in Anderson, South Carolina, to the race. So we decided to get his reaction to Kimmel's proposed four-race series.

"Wow! You know, when I first heard about the race at Kentucky, I wished that there was a series for us guys in Street Stocks where we could run on some of the bigger tracks and maybe get an opportunity for someone to notice us," says Beckner. "I can't afford to buy into an ARCA ride or Busch, or Truck. This might be my only chance to race at a place like Bristol or Lowe's Motor Speedway, and I'm going to take full advantage of it.

"Even though I got a late start and dropped out early at Kentucky, I felt like I had a chance at a Top 10 or Top 20. I did my homework there at the track after I dropped out. I watched the race very closely to see what the other guys were doing. I looked real close at the Top 10 cars to see what they did to their cars, and I've studied the pictures in the magazines. I know now what I have to do to be more competitive next year, and I'm starting work on it now.

"There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of Street Stock racers in the South and most of us race on Friday or Saturday nights and then watch the Nextel Cup races on Sundays. None of us ever really thought that we would ever race at Bristol or Lowe's Motor Speedway. The motivational factor is just through the roof. It gives me an opportunity to be recognized nationally, and that can really be great for getting some sponsorship, even on the local level.

"God bless Frank Kimmel for making something like this available to me and every other short-track driver in the country."

That sentiment may be repeated all across the country because guys like Beckner are getting the opportunity to turn it up a notch. These are the guys who most nights have to wait until all the other classes run their features to finally get on the track and race in front of an emptying grandstand. This series will be their chance to stand in the spotlight.