

CLOSE FINISHES: History Repeats Itself At Robby Gordon Super Truck Series Inaugural Race

There was a certain familiarity to seeing Rob MacCachren and P.J. Jones battling for the lead in Saturday's inaugural Speed Energy Super Truck Series race held at University of Phoenix Stadium.

Familiar indeed.

Nearly 20 years ago, the pair competed at Mesa Marin Speedway in Bakersfield, CA to help showcase another new racing series – the NASCAR Super Trucks.

The Mesa Marin 20 – contested on July 30, 1994 – lasted just a few ticks more than seven minutes with Jones taking the win over four other drivers including MacCachren, who finished third.

It was the first of four 'exhibition' races held to spotlight the new series that we all know today as the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series.

On Saturday, an estimated 15,000 fans turned out in Phoenix to see MacCachren and Jones help launch another new racing series.

This one, spearheaded by NASCAR/Indy Car/Off-Road wunderkind Robby Gordon, isn't a new concept like the 'Supertrucks' were back in 1994. Instead, it's a revival of sorts of Mickey Thompson's Off-Road Stadium Series that was popular back in the 1980's and 1990's.

Thompson's racing divisions drew massive crowds to places like the Los Angeles Coliseum. Originating in 1983, the series received national television exposure on ESPN and TNN (The Nashville Network) and introduced a number of top off-road stars such as Ivan Stewart, Rod Millen, Walker Evans and Gordon to race fans everywhere.

It was also the career launching pad for several young drivers including five-time NASCAR Sprint Cup champion Jimmie Johnson.

Ironically, the Thompson series lasted through 1994 – the same year NASCAR launched its pavement oval track racing concept at Mesa Marin.

Now Gordon hopes to recapture the stadium racing magic of the old Thompson series.

Saturday's race featured 12 trucks (and two other divisions of racing) on the seven-turn, nine-jump course specially constructed inside the University of Phoenix Stadium floor – the same locale where the Arizona Cardinals play their National Football League games.

In addition to NASCAR Truck Series pioneers MacCachren and Jones, Saturday's 18-lap contest featured notable drivers Justin

Lofton, Arie Luyendyk, Jr., Jeff Ward, Mike Jenkins and – of course – Gordon.

In the end, it was MacCachren and Jones battling for the win. Unlike their NASCAR Supertruck debut two decades ago, it was MacCachren taking the checkered flag first with Jones – who flipped on the final lap – coming home third.

Talk about history repeating itself.

Gordon has 11 more Speed Energy Super Truck Series events planned for this season including races at Soldier Field in Chicago, the Los Angeles Coliseum and Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, TX.

Give it a look when it comes to a stadium near you.

Sour Taste

So what exactly happened to Dale Earnhardt, Jr. on Lap 181 of Sunday's NASCAR Sprint Cup event at Martinsville?

In case you missed it, Earnhardt's car suddenly slowed as the field raced off turn 2 after a restart. The tightly bunched field waddled up behind Earnhardt with seven cars receiving extensive damage. A subsequent accident on the front stretch when the yellow flag flew for Earnhardt's incident collected another five cars.

Easily the biggest wreck of the event, the announcers on the Fox telecast of the race speculated at length as to what may have happened to Earnhardt. Meanwhile, technical direction crew at Fox never showed any of the several in-car camera angles from his racer that may have shed light on the accident.

Did Earnhardt's car jump out of gear? Did he screw up, lose control, spin the tires?

Who knows?

Of course, there are those that will jump to the conclusion that Earnhardt did indeed screw up and Fox – which continually allows its NASCAR pom poms to block its view of what really happened – chose not to show Earnhardt's gaffe.

As stated above, nobody really knows what happened, so I won't speculate here what actually occurred.

What is clear, however, is that Fox had the ability to show the viewers a definitive look at what happened and for whatever reason chose not to. Frankly, that left a sour taste given Fox elected to show plenty of Diet Mountain Dew promos from those same camera angles prior to and after Earnhardt's wreck.

Check out more Close Finishes columns by John Close at www.closefinishes.com/.

Cap't Herb Emory Pit Row Report: Elliott Logs Top-Ten In Rookie Truck Race

It didn't take Georgia's newest member of the NASCAR Camping World Truck Series to mark his territory and put other truck drivers on notice that he's gonna be their new neighbor in Top-Ten Land. Chase Elliott picked Martinsville as the site for his first official run in the trucks and the Hendrick Racing equipment under him kept him in that category from start to finish.

The teenager collected sixth-place pay at the end of the 250-lap event and he is entered in the Rockingham and Dover Downs truck events this and next month. Elliott is running the No. 94 in the NASCAR truck, the same number his dad Bill Elliott used when he started his own NASCAR team in 1995.

Tucker's Ryan Sieg was just two spots behind Elliott at the Martinsville checkered flag. Sieg finished eighth and holds down sixth-place in the Camping World Truck point standings.

Two other Georgia drivers had problems and finished off the lead lap. Max Gresham finished 30th and John Wes Townley claimed 32nd-place pay at Martinsville. Gresham, Townley and Chis Cockrum are entered for the Rockingham truck race April 14th.

Sieg and Townley have also been running a limited Nationwide Series schedule. Cherokee County's Chase Miller has already started three Nationwide events this season as well.

Peachtree City's Reed Sorenson continues to fill in for the Michael Annett in the

Nationwide Series.

Unadilla's David Ragan has been the only Georgia driver running Sprint Cup events so far this year.

Here are some important events coming up. I'll have the Mayberry Patrol Car out April 27 for the 21st Annual Georgia Police Memorial Ride at Turner Field in Atlanta. The Georgia Blue Knights Chapter 7 has been holding the motorcycle ride to honor and salute Law Officers that have died in the line of duty for 21 years. Registration for the ride starts at 8:00 a.m. and the ride begins at 11:00 a.m. For more information telephone (770) 944-1340.

I'll have the patrol car out at another event May 4th in Union City. The Hope House Hustle for Hope will be held on Lester Road featuring a 5K Run / Walk, Senior Stroll, Tot Trot and Heroes of Hope race for special needs participants. To make a donation to Southwest Christian Care or get more information visit their website www.swchristiancare.org or telephone 770-969-8354.

NASCAR driver David Ragan will join me May 28th at Bald Ridge Lodge Golf Tournament to raise funds for another youth program. The event will be at the Polo Golf and Country Club in Cumming. Gene Felton normally brings along one of his race cars to display as well. Bald Ridge Lodge is a safe haven for children in need of protection, direction and supervision. More Info www.baldrigelodge.org or 770-887-1220



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