

Performance Racing Industry

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Dirt Late Models

Powerful Market
Prospects



ELECTRIC & HYBRID RACING Take Charge Of New Sales Opportunities



The Pursuit Of Lasting Success In *Dirt Late*

Whether one's preference is weekly racing at the local dirt track or high-dollar, high-profile events with a national touring series, the market for dirt late model racing is brimming with enthusiasm in 2016.

Take racers in the Lucas Oil Late Model Dirt Series (LOLMDS), who this year have enjoyed a \$2000 purse increase for Saturday night feature events that now pay \$12,000 to win. Compensation to start was also bumped from \$800 to \$1000, and a points fund increase is underway, too.

"We've also doubled our television package for this year, and a lot of those events are live on LucasOilRacing.tv on the live streaming app," said Ritchie Lewis of the Waycross, Georgia-based series.

Meantime, Vicki Emig of RUSH Racing Series, a crate engine outfit based in Pulaski, Pennsylvania, said RUSH racers have embraced the series' numerous championship programs, including Touring, Weekly, Futures Cup and Summer Chase. The series will distribute over \$100,000 in 2016, along with thousands of dollars' worth of contingency products that will be awarded throughout the year. "Our Manufacturers Night (on August 14 at Tri-City Raceway Park in Franklin, Pennsylvania) alone will see over \$40,000 of product given to our racers at just one event," Emig said.

However, Emig added, "I believe that even though RUSH has experienced tremendous growth over the past few seasons, we are at a very critical time in preserving our niche of late model racing. The decisions we make over the next few years will certainly determine our future, and the overall health of crate racing throughout the Northeast."

Nonetheless, the popularity of crate engines in dirt late model racing has generated enough interest for a class debut by the Carnesville, Georgia-based FASTRAK Racing Series, which introduced a Battle of the Bluegrass Region as part of its Ultimate Super Late Model series in 2016.

"Looks like we will have no less than 20 events, and that's pretty incredible for a brand-new deal," said Stan Lester. "There is a new Colonial Clash with four tracks involved now, and that really has a lot of buzz going—plus it gives us several new venues to race at in June."

The Ultimate Super Late Model series' Colonial Clash includes events this month at Georgetown Speedway in Georgetown, Delaware; Potomac Speedway in Budds Creek, Maryland; Virginia Motor Speedway in Jamaica, Virginia; and Winchester Speedway in Winchester, Virginia.

Roby Helm of NeSmith Chevrolet Dirt Late Model Series in Cartersville, Georgia, said membership in his series' late model division topped 400 in 2015, with an additional 300-plus in street stocks; he expects those numbers to rise in 2016.

"The economy seems to be taking a turn for the better, so we're pretty optimistic about what's coming up for this year," he added.

For the Southern All Star Racing Series based in Fayetteville, Tennessee, a new event at Magnolia Motor Speedway in Columbus, Mississippi, on July 15–16, will pay \$10,000 to win and \$1000 to start. In all, the Southern All Star Racing Series will run a steady 22 events in 2016, Lynn Acklin told us.

And there's more positive news out of the Peach State, as Golden Isles Speedway (GIS) in Waynesville, Georgia, has



created a Super 5 Challenge for 2016 in which all five classes (Late Model, Limited, E-Mod, Hobby Stock and Enduro) compete in five races throughout the season, with most payouts per class ranging from \$1500 to \$3000 for each Challenge. "The drivers are very excited about this," said Darryl Courson, "and I think it will grow over time. If you build car count and a fan base, the track will thrive."

Read on for more about the latest rulebook additions and how technology is influencing the market (and how racers' buying habits are evolving because of it), as well as coverage of hot-button topics like equipment costs, and more.

Rulebook Additions

Perhaps the most pressing topic of the early 2016 dirt late model season has been the introduction of new suspension rules, first by the LOLMDS, and then by the World of Outlaws (WoO) in concert with a committee of series directors, chassis builders, engine builders and parts business owners from across the country.

Significant quantities of red ink can be found on pages in the

By Nick Gagala

Model Racing

Officials are employing cost-containment strategies and monitoring racers' buying habits to ensure a sustainable market for competitors and spectators alike.



From national touring series to weekly events at local short tracks, participants and businesspeople alike are bullish on the 2016 dirt late model racing season. Improved purses and enhanced media coverage are just two of the signs pointing to a promising future. Pictured here is the RUSH Racing Series.

Dirt Late Model Market



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2016 LOLMDS rulebook that cover shock absorbers—for example, any new chassis design or component design and/or technology pertaining to the suspension must now be submitted to the LOLMDS for approval before competition.

As Lewis explained, “Guys were beginning to play in areas that had the potential to cause a lot more testing, a lot more engineering help within the teams. It just had a lot of people scared—especially the drivers that can’t afford that sort of technology, to have an engineer in their group.

“A lot of people felt like there was a big disconnect between the haves and the have-nots,” he continued. “We just tried to create a box and say, ‘Go ahead and play all you want,’ because the beauty of dirt late model racing has been about laying under your car into the late hours of the night, early hours of the morning, trying to build a better mousetrap.”

Which is fine, he said, “up until the cost goes into no-man’s land.”

The series’ new suspension rules were adopted after officials had conducted surveys and conferred with about 25 teams and chassis builders, Lewis added.

The Outlaws’ new Unified Late Model Suspension Rules, released in late March, consist of a uniform rear suspension and shock package that resulted from a months-long development process by the newly formed committee. The three-page edict was designed to bring certainty and uniformity to dirt late model racing across the country while encouraging greater participation among competitors, according to Tim Christman of the Concord, North Carolina-based sanction. All dirt late model series and sanctioning bodies have been urged to adopt WoO’s latest rules, he said, adding, “One thing about late models is they have always been on the cutting edge of technology, and we’re just defining that box of what [race teams] can do.”

Bringing the no-frills Saturday night racer back to his regional series is a top priority, added Acklin, who pointed to instances in which Southern All Star Racing Series competitors were bringing numerous shocks to events. “There was

a race car at one of our races that had five shocks for the left rear last year. They don’t need to have all of that stuff. It’s just costing more money. That’s why I went to a six-shock package on dirt late models. That’s all they can run is six shocks.”

Cost-containment remains a focus at RUSH Racing Series, Emig told us, pointing to the series’ position on expensive oxygenated fuels, some of which had risen to \$750–\$800 per drum. As a result, the most significant rule change for 2016 was



Controlling costs is a common theme among today’s dirt late model ranks, with popular containment measures including the spread of crate engines across various series, as well as the adoption of stricter suspension rules.

the elimination of oxygenated fuels and spec’ing the RUSH 91 pump gas type product, along with the Sunoco Standard 110 racing gas, she said. “We believe the implementation of this rule alone will save racers throughout the RUSH region tens of thousands of dollars in 2016.”

In addition, RUSH continues to promote the RUSH \$135 Bilstein sealed/spec shock, which “has already proven to be a tremendous option to the more expensive shock packages,” Emig added. “We are also constantly monitoring the introduction of new products in general to determine whether they have a place in crate late model racing.”

On the track management side, Courson said Golden Isles Speedway and “at least four to five dirt tracks [are] moving in the

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direction of the same rules packages for all tracks. I started a challenge series at GIS, and now I have three to four tracks getting involved with us. This is giving our race teams and fans better racing and more tracks to visit."

Buying Habits

Whether it's digital dashes, data acquisition, new suspension technology or aerodynamics packages, the purchasing trends of dirt late model racers are typically driven by advanced technology.



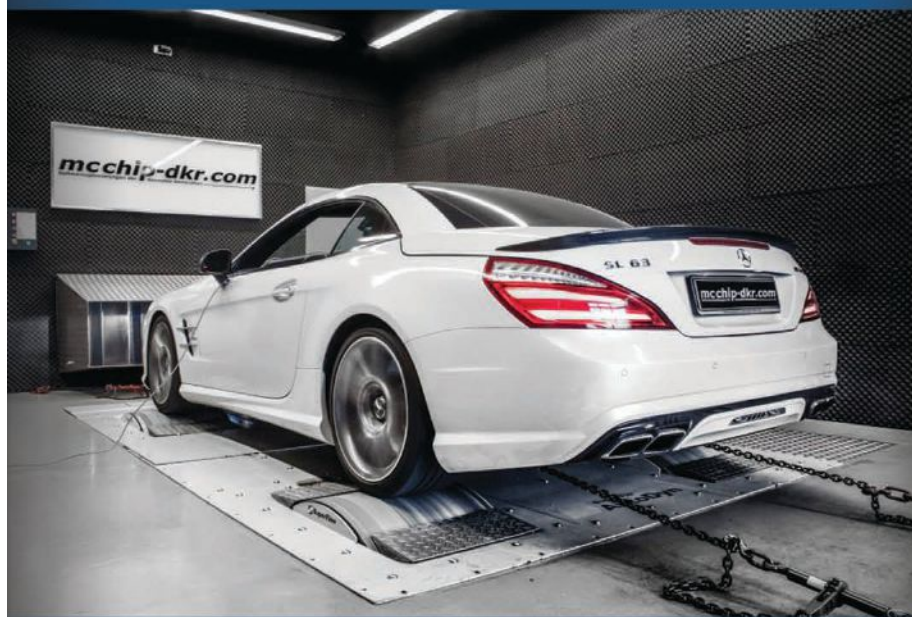
Dirt late model race teams are better able to compete at a wider variety of tracks due to area promoters working closer together to establish consistent rules packages. In addition to promoting better racing, the practice has resulted in spectators visiting more tracks to cheer on their favorite drivers, according to one of our sources.

FASTRAK's Lester confirmed, "indeed, technology has been the deciding factor behind most changes in the buying habits of racers. Shocks have become a big part of a racer's budget, along with other suspension components. Tires continue to change and increase in price, continuing to drive up the price of racing in general.

"I don't really understand it," he added, "as oil prices are the lowest they have been in years, but then again I don't know the expense of the other products involved. Aerodynamically, it's completely different now. More air, more horsepower, more speed, better shocks."

In fact, aerodynamic packages pose a growing concern, according to Lester: "If we don't all get together as far as series go and really get a hold on the aero stuff, we are going to be in big trouble, and soon. There is not one legal dirt car out there today if we really follow the rulebook in relation to aero. Stand behind a dirt late model of today. It's leaning to the right and all the body components are adjusted to

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that. Left front fender flare (elephant ear) is higher than the right front now. Roof leans to the right. Edges are on the roof for air. Roofs are flat now. Interiors are being adjusted for air. The front valance is sealing off just like in NASCAR.

"Right now it's a pretty simple fix," he continued, "but if we keep it up, racing will have a tendency to become 'follow the leader.' The more air you can utilize, the larger engine you need. That raises the cost of racing, and we need to avoid that if at all possible.... The faster you can go and the more air you can use, the better you need your shocks to be, and there are \$25,000 shocks on the market now. We sure need to stay away from that."

Courson noted another recent change in racers' purchasing habits. "The racers are buying [fewer] experimental parts and only buying what they know will work for their needs," he said. "Controlled buying is more of what they do now, and I think this is in part due to the economy scare. I feel like that has made the racers make better decisions on buying things that are most helpful for their team."

"Local businesses are getting involved at a lower level at tracks, and this is helping tracks stay afloat," he added.

Perfecting the Product

In the realm of dirt late model racing, opinions are forthcoming—and deeply held—over how to enhance the on-track product for participants and spectators.

According to engine builder Bill Schlieper of Pro Power Racing in Sullivan, Wisconsin, "Late models are hybrid race cars; they accelerate and sound better than most any racing on the planet. They are constantly evolving and have virtually no limitations on chassis or engine innovations. With that being said, racers are getting frustrated by the new spec or crate rules that make their existing engine assets illegal and now worthless to sell."

Above all else, Schlieper noted a desire for common rules and common-sense solutions among participants.

"People don't mind upgrading if they can sell their old [equipment]," he explained. "Imagine if you couldn't sell your last car and you ended up with every



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car you ever bought: What a disaster.... Local drivers must be able to use the products that have been the backbone of the PRI Trade Show."

Referencing the dramatic rise in engine and chassis costs, Terry Voeltz of the WISSOTA Promoters Association in Dassel, Minnesota, told us, "It is my honest opinion that the engine and chassis builders need to curb the cost of their products or our sport is going to continue to decline. People cannot simply continue to pay these prices to go racing. Obviously, I am talking about the rank and file here."

"Sure, there will always be the elite and small percentage that can afford all these changes," he continued, "but we still need numbers to put on a show, and those numbers are not what they used to be; and the trend is certainly not increasing. There are other factors involved in this, but dollars and cents are at the core, in my opinion, and those of us in the industry are not doing ourselves or the sport any favors if we do not grab the bull by the horns and start controlling the costs better."

Proposing a solution that could boost participation, Acklin of the Southern All Star Racing Series offered: "We need to look at what sprint cars did and start looking at the size of the motors in these cars, too. I propose we run a 410-cubic-inch motor, and let motor builders continue building them—just check the cubic inches after the races. As long as they are 410 cubic inches, they're fine."

"Sprint cars tackled this problem 20 years ago," he added. "The best sprint car drivers in the world run 410-cubic-inch motors, and I've got guys showing up with me running 430s, 440s, 450s, 460s—they just keep getting bigger and bigger. The race tracks that are racing them were built in the '50s, '60s and '70s, and they are not equipped to handle this kind of speed."

Acklin suggested re-examining the car bodies: "I think the nose pieces are too long and the quarter panels are too long in the back. When they get to the back of the field, it's hard for them to pass."

Officials at the NeSmith Chevrolet Dirt Late Model Series have achieved a measure of success through one of their

two traveling series whose backbone is the Chevrolet Performance 604 sealed engine.

The steel block, aluminum head, 350 Chevrolet sealed motors cost \$5795, and "if somebody does have a problem with an engine, we have a network of certified engine rebuilders that can repair the engines and reseal them with our seals," Helm said, adding that the 602—a steel head, steel block engine—provides yet another option.



Whether it's digital dashes, data acquisition, new suspension solutions or aerodynamics packages, the purchasing trends of dirt late model racers are typically driven by advanced technology. However, these competitors often choose products and brands with proven track records as opposed to taking a chance on experimental parts, cited one source. Pictured here is the NeSmith Chevrolet Dirt Late Model Series.

The Chevrolet Performance Super Late Model Series uses a CT525 engine, which is based on the production LS3. The all-aluminum engine costs \$7195 for long block assembly, and a start-up kit is available for first-time buyers. Race ready at right around \$10,000, "this CT525, with the right track conditions—you can take that thing and put it up against those \$60,000–\$70,000 engines and it will be competitive with them," Helm told us.

More importantly, it's allowed countless racers who otherwise might have been priced out of the late model business to remain on-track, he noted, adding, "We've also opened the door of opportunity for a lot of younger drivers to come on board."

In fact, the series has teamed with Sunoco race fuels to sanction the Sunoco Young Gun Challenge Series for drivers 18 and under. There, drivers compete for a separate points fund—both weekly and touring—that pays \$1000 to the top competitor at season's end.

