

To SIR with love

track fulfils need for speed

By Jarrett Smith, Special to The StarPhoenix May 22, 2009

Full throttle racing resumes Sunday at Western Canada's longest-running quarter-mile drag racing facility, Saskatchewan International Raceway.

After a long winter that seemed like it was never going to loosen its grip, the provincial racers are ready to dust off the race cars and hit the track for the annual Erin Beck Memorial season opener. The opening race is always a mix of emotions as the excitement of the new racing season is overshadowed by the solemn remembrance of Beck, an RCMP officer and pro bike racer who tragically lost her life at SIR during the season opener May 26, 2002.

To commemorate Erin's passion for life and racing, which included promoting the Street Legal Racing Program, the season opener is named in her honour. The opening ceremonies include a run down the track by the RCMP, paying tribute to Erin and her family.

SIR has retained the same class structure from 2008, with super pro, pro, sportsman, sport compact, street legal and junior dragster divisions. In all classes, racers compete against cars of similar elapsed time, speed and equipment to provide the closest racing possible.

Bill Cawsey of Regina is back to defend his title in the super pro class. Super pro is highly competitive, featuring cars that have the ability to hit 260 km/h in only eight seconds. That leaves the drivers little room for error during a race.

Rick de Gues of Saskatoon finished second in the super pro standings last season and Travis McBain, also of Saskatoon, was third. They are back to challenge Cawsey again this year.

The pro category is arguably SIR's toughest class based on the number of competitors. In 2008, Dwight Twigge of Martensville piloted his 1974 Dodge Dart to the championship, leaving 49 other drivers in his wake. Ryan Doherty of Saskatoon was second and Brian Hebert of Regina finished third. Expect a large contingent of racers from throughout Saskatchewan.

In sportsman, Remi Weekes continued to be a dominant force in 2008. He reached the final round five times on his way to the series championship. More than 40 drivers regularly show up for a points race, making for a long day of racing for the winner. Most sportsman drivers will tell you that taking home the trophy requires a combination of luck and skill.

The sport compact category has been growing steadily since its introduction in 2003. Since its inception, the class has had only one repeat champion in Steven Koenders of Englefeld. Last season, Saskatoon's Ryan Gerstmar took home his first career series championship, driving a supercharged 1997 Honda Civic Del Sol.

Gerstmar faces a tough task retaining the title in a field that includes former champions Koenders, Chris Tarasoff and Todd Penn. Koenders is expected to debut his new rotary-powered Mazda RX-7 tube chassis car Sunday as well.

The street legal class continues to gain popularity thanks in part to the Friday Night Street Legal Program. Ryan Pearson of Saskatoon took the street legal crown in 2008 after a hotly-contested season with Dwane Park of Lucky Lake.

Last but not least, the junior dragster class provides SIR with racers of the future. Drivers run to the 1/8-mile marker and learn the fundamentals of drag racing. Some of the more experienced racers achieve speeds most of us don't dare go on the highway. Seventeen racers competed in 2008, with Teryn McBain taking the season title.

Racer gates open at 8 a.m. Sunday, spectator gates open at 10 a.m. and eliminations begin at 1 p.m.

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