

Too Tough To Tame

VISITING DARLINGTON RACEWAY IS A JOURNEY INTO THE VERY HEART AND SOUL OF STOCK CAR RACING.

By Larry Chesney

To borrow a quote from the feature film *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it, they will come." The words inspired Kevin Costner's character to build a baseball field in the middle of an Iowa cornfield. But over 40 years before the making of the movie, Harold Brasington stood in an old South Carolina farm field and had the same sort of vision. Except this was to be a racetrack for automobiles. A stock car speedway that, unlike the dirt tracks scattered across the South, would be paved. Brasington had received his inspiration from a visit to the Indianapolis 500 in 1933, and he saw no reason why a super speedway couldn't make it in the pastoral Pee Dee region.

His friends thought the idea of turning little Darlington into a car-racing Mecca was a far-fetched idea. But believing that Bill France's fledgling NASCAR would eventually catch on, Brasington forged ahead. In the fall of 1949, he gathered a work crew and began building a 1 1/4-mile track on land that had once been used to grow peanuts and cotton. The landowner, Jack Ramsey, had just one request — don't disturb his fishing pond. Thus, Brasington was forced to change the design from a geometrically correct oval to more of an egg-shape. In doing so, he not only preserved the fishing hole, he made Darlington Raceway one of the most challenging tracks in the country.

On Labor Day 1950, Brasington held Darlington Raceway's inaugural race. He hoped that 10,000 fans would show up at the rural track. To his surprise, by the time the 75 engines revved up in preparation for the green flag, 25,000 people had crowded into the stands and along the retaining walls to see the action. Brasington built it, and they came. A half century later, they're still coming.

Over the years, Darlington Raceway has earned a reputation as "the track too tough to tame." The late Dale Earnhardt once said, "... there's no victory so sweet, so memorable, as whipping Darlington Raceway."

Today, the track is still as feisty as ever, even with the many dramatic improvements that have made her one of the most up-to-date facilities on the NASCAR circuit. Fans can watch the likes of Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jeff Gordon, Bill Elliott, the Wallaces, the Labontes and the Burtons squeeze through the narrow third and fourth turns (remember the pond?) from the comfort of updated grandstands and infield. It's obvious that, at Darlington Raceway, keeping race fans comfortable and entertained is a high priority.

According to Public Relations Director Cathy Mock, there's always something going on for fans at the Darlington track. "The Carolina Dodge Dealers 400 in the spring and the Mountain Dew Southern 500 on Labor Day are the big weekends," she said, "In fact, with 80,000 on hand for the

Southern 500, it's the largest one-day tourist attraction in the state."

But Cathy made it clear that there's plenty to do year-round. "The Darlington Raceway Stock Car Museum is open seven days a week as is the National Motorsports Press Association Hall of Fame," she explained, "Here you can view a priceless collection of historic race cars, including Johnny Mantz's No. 98 Plymouth that won the first race back in 1950." She went on to say that the museum and hall of fame contain a great deal of racing memorabilia, photos and history of various drivers.

"We have a lot of people who stop at the museum and gift shop, have lunch in our picnic area, then walk out on the track and just take in the ambiance of the place. It really is awesome, even when there isn't a single car running. Everybody with an interest in car racing should visit Darlington at least once."



Along with the two major race weekends, there are car shows, driving schools and other activities scheduled. Darlington Raceway is located two miles west of the city of Darlington on highway SC 151.

IF YOU GO:

Darlington Raceway
1301 Harry Byrd Hwy. • Darlington, SC 29540
843-395-8499 • www.darlingtonraceway.com