

*Dover International Speedway is celebrating its 50th Anniversary season in 2019. Since hosting its first NASCAR Cup Series race on July 6, 1969, more than 400 NASCAR Cup Series drivers have tackled the high-banked turns of the world's fastest one-mile oval. The track is banked at 9 degrees in the frontstretch and backstretch and 24 degrees in the turns, leading to speeds that top 170 miles per hour.*



# 50 YEARS OF HIGH SPEED ENTERTAINMENT

Dover International Speedway hits golden milestone

BY LARRY NAGENGAST | PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOVER INTERNATIONAL SPEEDWAY





JUST OVER A HALF-CENTURY AGO, a mile-long oval began to rise on 200 acres of farmland on the east side of DuPont Highway in Dover. Unlike the epic film “Field of Dreams,” it was hardly a Delaware example of “if you build it, we will come.”

“We had 22,000 seats and we struggled to fill them,” recalls Denis McGlynn, hired in 1972 to handle publicity for Dover Downs, then a 3-year-old horse and auto racing track, and now president and CEO of Dover Motorsports Inc., celebrating

its golden anniversary this year.

At the time, harness racing, not stock cars, was the main driver, as auto racing had barely begun to make inroads north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The horses running on the 5/8-mile track inside the larger oval now known as the Monster Mile would draw busloads of fans from places as distant as New York, even in winter, and especially on Sundays, since many states then did not permit racing on the sabbath.

Ironically, McGlynn says, it was a Sunday snowstorm in 1979 that paralyzed Delaware and most of the Northeast that prompted sports fans to tune their televisions to a classic Daytona 500 finish, capped by a final-lap crash and a post-race fight on the infield, that turned northerners on to NASCAR. “It was a perfect storm for us, in a good way,” he says

Thoroughbred racing at Dover would prove short-lived and harness

racing would drop to second-class status, thanks to the growth of off-track betting and the development of larger tracks in more densely populated areas. But NASCAR zoomed forward at a 100 mph pace. Year after year, Dover International Speedway kept adding seats – and filling them – with crowds estimated at 135,000 packing the grandstands on spring and fall race weekends in 2001 and 2002.

The fall races in 2001 were particularly memorable for McGlynn, coming just a week and a half after the September 11 terrorist attacks and making Dover, of all places, the site of the nation’s largest sporting event as the country tried to return to normal. “It was tension-filled, emotion-filled,” with plenty of pre-race and race-day security collaboration with the FBI, the Secret Service and other government agencies, he recalls. Race sponsor MBNA and Dover International Speedway partnered to buy 135,000 American flags and hand them out to fans as they entered the track.

Dover continued to prosper through most of the decade, buoyed by strong Delaware corporate sponsors like the DuPont Co. and MBNA

*Dover International Speedway regularly hosted crowds that topped 100,000 fans in the 1990s and early 2000s, making it the mid-Atlantic’s largest sports venue. The Monster Mile will host the 100th NASCAR Cup Series race in track history on Sunday, Oct. 6, 2019, and become just the 10th track in the United States to have hosted 100 or more NASCAR Cup Series events.*



# Restaurant, Meeting & Banquet Guide



(followed by its successor, Bank of America). Then came the devastating recession of 2008, an economic disaster that sucked away valuable corporate sponsorships and drove a good portion of the sport's blue-collar fan base from the finish line to the unemployment line.

While the glory days have not returned – and McGlynn isn't certain that they ever will, the track, now known as Dover International Speedway, marks its 50th anniversary of racing this year and the Sunday playoff race on Oct. 6 will be the 100th NASCAR cup race in its storied history.

Officially, the Dover track traces its beginnings to the mid-1960s, when David P. Buckson, a horse-racing enthusiast and powerful Kent County politician, convinced two successful Sussex County entrepreneurs, auto dealer John Rollins and construction magnate and auto racing fan Mel Joseph, to partner with him on his plan for a dual-purpose track in Dover. Buckson handled the real estate deal, Joseph handled the construction and Rollins provided the financial expertise. The first horse races were held at the track in March 1969. Auto racing would follow four months later.



*Above: Fast pit stops can often make the difference between a win and a loss at Dover International Speedway, with teams working all year long to squeeze extra time out of their tire changes and fuel stops. Left: Dale Earnhardt Jr. won his only Dover NASCAR Cup Series race in front of 135,000 fans on Sept. 23, 2001, the first NASCAR Cup Series race held after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and one of the Monster Mile's most memorable moments.*

To mark the anniversary, for the May and October race weekends, the track has been bringing back NASCAR icons like Jimmie Johnson, Richard Petty and Bobby Allison, who combined for 25 first-place finishes at Dover in their careers. The food menu has been expanded, with Rehoboth-based SoDel Concepts creating a range of specialty selections, and Dover's Fordham & Dominion Brewing Co. releasing a special Splash & Go Lager

to honor the Monster Mile.

While celebrating its past, Dover is also looking towards its future.

In the past decade, seating capacity has been decreased – from 135,000 to 85,000 – primarily because a sport that increasingly relies on valuable



media contracts can't afford even a quick glimpse of vacant seats on television screens as cars roar around the track. With attendance declining, Dover has renewed its focus on customer service, doing all it can to make its venue more fan-friendly.

Venues with smaller seating capacities are the trend across the sports and entertainment world, notes Mike Tatoian, president and CEO of Dover International Speedway. "They're becoming more intimate. Everyone is 'right-sizing.'" He believes the days of building facilities with 100,000 to 150,000 seats may well be a thing of the past, but acknowledges that "nobody knows what will happen in 50 years."

While removing seats, Dover has added amenities, including a Fan Zone that features an array of activities – interactive displays, games, music, and exhibits by racing sponsors. Special events at the spring race weekend included country music concerts, a barbecue, fireworks, an outdoor movie showing and appearances by the Harlem Globetrotters. Expect more of the same for October.

It has also expanded its offerings, venturing into the world of music in 2012 to become the host of the Firefly Music Festival. Held in late June, the concert program has proven so successful that it has been drawing 50,000 plus fans each year.

Seeing Firefly attendance overtake NASCAR crowds doesn't faze McGlynn. Rather, it gives him a sense of comfort – at least for as long as NASCAR continues to secure strong contracts from the broadcast media.

"If we could do better, I'd be very happy, but that's the way the industry is trending," he says. "We're not better, no worse. The stragglers have been falling off since 2008. Everybody seems to be down to a core audience."

"Everybody knows it's not like it was 10 years ago," says John Rollins' son, Jeff Rollins, who serves on the Dover Motorsports board of directors. "But if you compare it to 20 years ago, this is still a pretty nice business." ■

## Dover Downs Horse Racing

At the same time engines were firing on the motorsports track, the stables were filling up with some of the top race horses in the region. Dover Downs hosted its first harness racing card on Nov. 19, 1969. Thoroughbreds also raced at Dover from 1969-1974, with the first card taking place on March 8, 1969.

Today, Dover Downs' harness racing meet typically runs from November to April and attracts some of the best horses, trainers and drivers on the East Coast.

On Feb. 4, 1973, an all-time record is set for attendance (5,971 fans) and on-track handle (\$515,177) for one harness racing card.

Legislation allowing slot machines at Delaware pari-mutuel horse racing facilities led to the opening of Dover Downs Slots with 500 slot (video lottery) machines on Dec. 29, 1995. Today, the casino features more than 2,300 slot machines.



## Technically UD.

### A new meeting space for launching new ideas.

University of Delaware's Conference Services Team can help you host your meeting in one of the most compelling new venues around — The Audion and Atrium on our STAR Campus. The oval-shaped Audion is a flexible tech space that's great for incubator sessions, start-up venture capital sprints, innovation design conferences, or any meeting looking to gain momentum. Just beyond its doors lies a living wall in the Atrium — improving air quality while complimenting the open environment ideally designed for cultivating collaboration. This is the place to be.



UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE  
CONFERENCE SERVICES

Conferencing  
unique  
venues

conferences.udel.edu | 800-831-2214 | f t