

TO KICK off the New Year, we're interviewing James G. Hanks Jr., who is a former sprint car owner and founded the successful and growing Must See Racing Xtreme Sprint Series. With offices based in Holly, Michigan, Hanks has woven a team of successful drivers, employees and media talent to arrive at one of today's impressive success stories...namely a winged, unlimited asphalt sprint car series thriving in a still dubious short track racing economy. He started Must See Racing in 2008 as a broadcast-only endeavor, providing coverage on the web of exciting short track action.

In 2009, following the success of the well-produced webcast races, Hanks delved further into his new business when he took over the reins of promoting the webcast races himself, and with cooperation of two winged asphalt groups (AVSS and HOSS), they co-sanctioned five races with Hanks' television production. Then, the area cable and satellite TV systems wanted the show, and this year the show will be available in over-150-million households.

Today, the respected promoter admits that he felt in his heart that race fans were waiting for a series that would provide very fast-paced action and something different. His series features winged 1450-lb. sprint cars with unlimited 900 to 1000 horsepower 410 engines. His few engine stipulations (explained in the interview) are very "hardcore aftermarket friendly," while his tire rule also goes "against the grain" compared to other oval series.

His still growing Must See Racing series competes at legendary tracks like

JIM HANKS JR.

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MUST SEE RACING XTREME SPRINT SERIES

Kicking off only its fourth season, the Must See Racing Xtreme Sprint Series continues to grow as both race teams and race fans alike are drawn to the pavement winged sprint car series with very few engine restrictions.

BY GREG ZYLA

Winchester, Bristol and Salem, to name but a few. The Xtreme Sprints also boasts a very impressive television households number. Specifically, the combined household penetration growth from the Comcast/NBC-Universal deal.

After seeing his first race in the mid-1950s with his dad at Motor City Speedway near Detroit, Hanks fell in love with racing and went on to carve a reputation as a competent winning car owner. He fielded both non-winged and winged pavement sprints for Kevin Feeney along with a dirt and pavement Silver Crown car for driver Aaron Pierce.

With Must See Racing presenting both long and shorter duration events at tracks of all sizes (see www.mustseeracing.com

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for complete info), Hanks now finds himself in the enviable position of trying to fill dates from numerous interested venues, although he explains why "more races" can sometimes not deliver the expected end result benefits. He'll also explain his theories on business, the importance of short track

told me he was thinking of doing some promotion for high school sports and he was going to call it Must See Sports. So, that's where I got the idea.

PRI: You've certainly gone against the grain of what the current sport of sprint car racing is, featuring an asphalt winged

"I'm proud to say our Xtreme Series start money exceeds a driver's tire bill."

racing on television and why the success for any series depends on every ingredient, from fan to racer to media.

Hanks is married to his wife of 42 years, Nancy, both of whom are proud of their family with three daughters, eight grandchildren and one great grandchild.

Sit back as we start the 2012 year with Jim Hanks talking fast racing (really fast), his hit new series and his outlook for the future.

PRI: Jim, for starters, how did you come up with the name Must See Racing?

Hanks: When I contemplated doing this venture, a friend of mine's daughter was a high school softball star, and he

unlimited 410 series. Anything else you'd like to mention as far as being different?

Hanks: Yes. I went completely against conventional standards when I implemented the American Racer tire (formerly McCreary) for our series. Politically, it was one of the toughest things I ever had to do, but I did so and it's saved the race teams money. Because we run asphalt, many of our drivers can compete on used tires as well as new tires, which really helps as we all know tires are the biggest expense year to year. I'm proud to say our Xtreme Series start money exceeds most drivers' tire bills.

PRI: I've done some background work and find that many teams can run and



What started out in 2008 as a broadcast-only endeavor of providing short track racing coverage on the Internet has evolved into the successful Must See Racing Xtreme Sprint Series. Series owner Jim Hanks Jr. has woven a team of successful drivers, employees and media talent that are featured in this winged, unlimited asphalt sprint car series.

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win on used tires. I also heard that Brian Gerster's world record feat at Bristol came on used tires. Is this true?

Hanks: Very true. The well-funded teams that buy four new tires are no more competitive than a team with a race already on their tires. Gerster, who won the race,

power. In your series, you're hooking all of the 900 horses. So, do you have any engine limitations at all?

Hanks: Our basic limits are you can't exceed 410 inches and we require mufflers, but after that, anything goes. It's similar to what you run with your 410s at

"Our basic limits are you can't exceed 410 inches and we require mufflers, but after that, anything goes."

too, ran on used tires, as did second place and third place. Gerster set a world record in qualifying at Bristol with a lap of 12.742 seconds at 150.585 mph on those used tires. (He collected \$10,000 for his win.) At Winchester, we run laps of 13.4 and at Salem, 14.2, thanks to the tremendous downforce from the wing.

PRI: Coming from the central Pennsylvania Posse area of racing where we run winged unlimited 410 sprints, the downforce you speak of is utilized on dirt tracks, so on a dusty night, you can only do so much and many times you have to run higher gear ratios to get around as the tires can't hook up with all that horse-

Williams Grove. It's the same fuel-injected engine fueled by methanol/alcohol.

PRI: And the cylinder heads?

Hanks: We do not restrict cylinder heads, or any restriction on the size of the injection. In fact, we have several teams that just built new motors that are putting out 1000 horsepower.

PRI: I know many of the hardcore aftermarket cylinder head manufacturers are happy with your rule on unlimited cylinder head selection, as the R&D that goes into the heads is an ongoing, probably day-to-day evolving science.

Hanks: No question about it. The heads on a sprint car motor are ever-changing.



Hanks described his series' business formula "is to take a partnership approach to all the stakeholders in racing, including the race tracks, the race teams, the sponsors, the fans and the media to make sure that we're all pulling the business wagon in the same direction—at the same time." He understands the importance of keeping short track racing on television. The broadcast team for the Must See Racing Xtreme Sprint Series features familiar faces to countless race enthusiasts. Seen here from left to right is lead announcer Rick Benjamin, color commentator Tom Bigelow, and pit reporter Dave Argabright.

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PRI: How have the fans responded when it comes to your type of asphalt unlimited racing and why did you start this series?

Hanks: The objective answer to the fan response is phenomenal. As for why I started the series, I have a history as a sprint car owner, but that history isn't what caused me to introduce this type of series. Paved sprint cars have run in obscurity through the years, and they were racing under a club format atmosphere. They had some good racers and good races, too. But there was a big lack of awareness in the marketplace. So, to answer your question,

“We have several teams that just built new motors that are putting out 1000 horsepower.”

because of the sprint car's speed, the passing, excitement, etc. Because of this obscurity, I felt it would be something new on the market with a winged 410 pavement series.

PRI: How about today's race fans? How do they differ?

Hanks: Today's marketplace and race fans I break down like this: One third of our population is less than 30 years old, and they're all about their own life's experience. It's a 'right now, fast, fast, fast' pace. So, because these cars are so fast with a lot of passing, we felt we could attract both the older demographic as well as the younger, potential fans. It's worked out terrific.

PRI: Which leads me to your television series, which many in the racing world know is very, very successful.

Hanks: When we started out, I felt the race fan is to racing what the Moral Majority is to politics.

PRI: Please explain.

Hanks: What I mean by that is if you look at some of the television venues, they all started out with the big events like NASCAR races on the weekends

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while during the week we had short track racing on TV. With the current popularity of reality TV, short track racing started to disappear on TV and you saw more and more reality TV shows. I felt if we had good racing, and stayed away from the reality TV approach and let the racing do the talking, the good racing would be the entertainment for the viewers.

PRI: I understand you've only been in the TV business for just three years?

Hanks: That is correct. Our first year was three years ago in 2009, when we did five events and visited five states in the Midwest through Comcast Sports Net Chicago.

PRI: How many homes did you reach that first year?

Hanks: Approximately 9,000,000. It was so popular that first year, our second year, 2010, we assembled a distribution system that finds us now going to 90-million homes nationwide.

PRI: Is it true that the household number will increase substantially when the 2012 season starts?

Hanks: Yes. Thanks to the Comcast/NBC-Universal merger, and starting with the Bristol Motor Speedway's 2011 race, Must See Racing will be on the new



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NBC Sports Network, previously known as Versus. This merger will add another 76-million homes and grow our numbers to well over 150-million households. As a benchmark, right now I believe NASCAR goes to 113-million homes, and the IRL goes to 76-million plus.

“ESPN’s ‘Thursday Night Thunder’ to this day is the gold standard for short track racing on television.”

PRI: Tell us about your TV talent.

Hanks: Rick Benjamin is our lead announcer, and has a show on Sirius, too. (See Sirius, “Tradin’ Paint” with Rick Benjamin and Chocolate Myers at www.siriusxm.com). Rick is a polished pro and a true gentleman. Then we have Tom Bigelow (former USAC champ) as color and Dave Argabright (motorsports writer) as pit reporter, and again, true gentlemen and outstanding talents.

PRI: What’s your business theory on attracting more sponsors, especially with all this good news?

Hanks: I’ve heard for decades about how short track racing needs corporate America, but even today it is still a difficult match for many different reasons. Our simple (business) formula is to take a partnership approach to all the stakeholders in racing, including the race tracks, the race teams, the sponsors, the fans and the media to make sure that we’re all pulling the business wagon in the same direction—at the same time. We’ll focus on the fact that the last thing we’re about is reality TV. So, when I began and thought we might have a niche market with our winged asphalt series, it’s turned into a very, very strong national market. We’ll sell these numbers to corporate marketing partners as best we can.

PRI: Well, many race fans remember “Thursday Night Thunder” with Bob Jenkins and the late Larry Rice, and we all really looked forward to that show.

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Perhaps you will be the catalyst now to bring this all back.

Hanks: You bring up a very good point, because ESPN's "Thursday Night Thunder" to this day is the gold standard for short track racing on television. I had my own cars race in it. I watched it. I loved it. What happened was, and this is my opinion, ESPN wanted to gain access back then to the largest single demographic, which was the auto racing fan. Even today, race fans are the most loyal product and services consumer in the marketplace. So it was a business decision that worked out terrific for everyone. Bob (Jenkins) even did a cameo at our last show at Winchester Speedway. As "Thursday Night Thunder" progressed, ESPN then decided it would "charge" USAC X-amount of dollars. Because the show was so successful, it got underwrit-

"We have a good marketing and business plan, but the real key to success to me is having good people."

ten and the bill was paid. This continued year to year down the road of success, until ESPN costs weren't underwritten, and that was the end.

PRI: Do you feel this was strictly a business decision or something more? As I remember, the ratings were good.

Hanks: In my opinion, and I stress, my opinion, what ESPN replaced "Thursday Night Thunder" with was the new-to-TV "Xtreme Games," which leads me to believe it wasn't just a business decision that no longer worked. The "Xtreme Games" had no attraction to me, but this was a very important commercial move for ESPN because it was focused again on the youngest demographic, keeping in mind a third of the people are under 30. This was the very beginning of reality TV in my opinion.

PRI: What about the Internet?

Hanks: We own our own channel on "Race Fans TV," which is an Internet-

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based program that is built for video on demand. The older-than-40-year-old group can lock into our TV program, which is on Comcast in Michigan 7 p.m. every Thursday night pretty much year-round. The 40 and older is locked into that program and they don't care what race is on. Then the group from age 30 to 40 are different. What they do is a video-on-demand segment, in which they want to see it but their life is moving so fast they can't be on the couch at 7 p.m. every Thursday night. And we're strong in that segment, too, with our video on demand. The 30 and under, however, is the 'now, now, now' and they want to watch it on their iPhone from the infield when it's happening. They call it social media.

PRI: Are you involved in all three of the age groups?

Hanks: We're very strong in television and video on demand, but haven't done anything yet with the social media part of this. Now, that's not saying we won't, because the race we had at Bristol was on YouTube before I got out of the parking lot. We have a good marketing and business plan, but the real key to success to me is having good people.

PRI: What about your 2012 schedule?

Hanks: I'm doing the 2012 schedule right now, and am overwhelmed by the number of big venues that want us. We're talking the Carolinas, New York, Washington state, Iowa and so on. It's a nice spot to be in.

PRI: How about a closing comment on your success?

Hanks: Greg, this thing took off like a rocket. We're different by design. We're somewhat unique in that every decision I make is based on "right and wrong," not racing politics, which I feel the good Lord above wants me to do. It makes you (think) different.

PRI: Thanks, Jim. I enjoyed our talk.

Hanks: Me, too, Greg. The continued best to you and everyone at PRI. You guys are very special to our industry in getting our business and marketing messages across.

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