

closerlook: Christensen leads group of happy young returners ... by Jim Carson

Any short-track driver hopes to improve from one race to the next, one year to the next and so on. That's especially true for competitors without a lot of experience in a top level, and also quite poignant for the first event of each season.

For young Late Model racers at this year's SpeedFest, their mission isn't as much like "Protect Your Melon" - the slogan set by law enforcement agencies urging highway drivers and passengers to buckle their seat belts - as it is "Improve on Last Year." A couple of relative newcomers to pounding the pavement in full-sized cars accomplished that goal of bettering their results from the 2023 event, which was their first time competing at the annual January show at Crisp Motorsports Park.

Seth Christensen debuted in a Pro Late Model in last winter's lidlifter at the .4-mile oval also called Watermelon Capital Speedway. He was one of the pleasant surprises of the 2023 show, qualifying third for the soon-to-be-new team force called Fr8 Racing and finishing eighth. This time Christensen, from Pendergrass, Ga., bumped up that result by four spots, despite missing the top-eight qualifying lottery by one position and .007 second.

"Our goal was to improve and get a decent finish. I feel like that was accomplished," he said. "We started to reel in the #55 (George Phillips). Man, that one spot would've meant the world to me. We made a mistake early; on one of the first restarts we got stuck on the outside, and I quickly learned that's not the place for me. Then we got the toe knocked in early after some contact with somebody else, and it could've



Penny Christensen

Seth Christensen (45) races with Josh Hicks (62) at SpeedFest presented by the Protect Your Melon/ Buckle Up seat belt campaign. Christensen finished fourth and Hicks sixth in the Jegs CRA All-Stars Tour race; both scored steady improvements over their 2023 results in this event.

ruined my race, but we ended up pretty decent."

This #45 was one of two cars tuned by Ricky Turner. The other Fury chassis influence was driven by Jake Garcia in the Super Late Model headliner; Garcia brought out his Super again before his NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series commitments begin. Christensen, sponsored by Fr8 Auctions, Statewide Wrecker Service, Speed U and CB Partners, enjoyed the better day.

Two positions behind Christensen at the finish line was Josh Hicks, who was 21st in his SpeedFest debut last winter. Hicks, from Hampton, Ga., lasted only 41 laps in the 2023 event before his engine let go. This time, after once again qualifying inside the draw, he stayed at speed for the entire distance and ran as high as third. He wound up sixth, but that was one of the

better pavement outings for Hicks with Ty King Motorsports, a team known more for dirt racing until 2023.

"Finishing the race was our first goal, since we didn't finish last year," said Hicks, from Senoia, Ga. "The only problem we had was that it got super-tight in long runs. The first few cautions, up to halfway, kinda helped me out, but on the last long run definitely sucked."

Hicks, whose Fury car is sponsored by GELM, Papa Turf, Fall Line Construction, Full Throttle Graphix, Dirt Car Lift and K-3 Fencing & Outdoor Services, would love for this result to springboard his season as Christensen's debut did a year ago. Less than two months after SpeedFest, Christensen pulled off an upset victory in the Alabama 200 at Montgomery Motor Speedway. Hicks peaked with a fourth-place finish at the same track later in the spring, but much of his 2023 campaign was riddled with engine problems that lingered after SpeedFest.

"The other thing that sucks is that when we want to go test somewhere, it doesn't do much good. The track's green and has no rubber," he said. "We had done a little testing at Cordele since it's only an hour and a half from home, and we were decent. Then we show up for race week and they put all that rubber down, and everything changes."

Everyone's pretty much in the same boat when it comes to testing conditions, so racers often show up for a race with many unknowns. Younger racers primarily want to improve,

whether or not they race more regularly like Christensen and Hicks or if they've cut back their schedules a bit.

Harrison Halder fits in the latter category, as he pursues his education at Georgia Southern University. Although he has raced many in-season points races at "the Melon," this was his first SpeedFest since 2020, and he finished ninth.

"I can't remember why we didn't go the last two years," Halder said about SpeedFest, which was cancelled in 2021. "This one was by far the best one for us. We practiced the week before and got really dialed in. I'm really familiar with this track, ever since I raced legends cars on it."

The biggest boost for the Halder family - including his younger brother Hudson who's racing Super Late Models now. Peach State superstar Bubba Pollard is advising the Halders now. Harrison's Senneker chassis, sponsored by H-3 Tree and Ice Depot, was acquired from Floridian Michael Atwell, while Hudson's car was formerly driven by Pollard himself.

There was a 10-position gain from the 2023 to 2024 editions of SpeedFest on the Super Late Model side, with seventh-place finisher Jett Noland. This native of Clermont, Fla., does have a solid record at Cordele, for both his own team and Anthony Campi Racing: in five Southern Super Series starts here from 2018-22, he placed second once and was never out of the top 10 or off the lead lap.



Tyler Sontag/SpeedRacer Photos

Harrison Halder finished ninth in his first SpeedFest start since 2020 and third overall.