



Brilliant on the Speedway

KARL FREDRICKSON

"I don't have a problem cutting a car," James Brown said. "Those can be fixed or replaced. You only get one chance to do this right."

He still walks through the pits with the "winner's swagger" that he had when he was taking checkers in late model races. These days, however, while he still sports a fire-resistant suit, it is volumes bulkier and the only lettering besides his name is LEE FD.

James Brown serves as Fire Captain in Durham, New Hampshire and remains an honorary member of the fire department in nearby Lee, New Hampshire. On race days, instead of working his magic weaving through a roaring pack of cars on the third mile, other cars are at a standstill as he passes them. He no longer chases down the leader; instead he closes in on damaged cars, searching for a driver in danger. As Incident Commander at the speedway, Brown formulates a plan, establishes resources, and delegates responsibilities.

On a beautiful fall afternoon, Classic Lites racer Chris Sullivan and I rode in his pickup truck as I borrowed it to run back to our shop and grab a HANS device for our guest driver. We passed Brown as he walked through the pits.

Brown exchanged smiles and a wave with us, and we all said a quick hello. I mentioned to Sullivan how 15 years ago, Chris and I raced against Brown and he did most of the passing on us.

"I guess he just has a different calling to be here at the speedway," said Sullivan, who had no idea how deep of an understatement that would be in just a few hours.

Across the pits, Seth Stickney was running the final race of a dream season in 2013. A few weeks earlier, he was telling me how everything seemed to go his way and he'd end up at the front of the field, often in victory lane.

On this day, however, a driver dove into turn three under Stickney and contact sent his car into the outside wall.

Stickney remained conscious, but in incredible agony. The well-crafted, solidly welded car had a quality ISP seat, but the right-front 30° angle of impact, often the most lethal, snapped his neck. Without a legitimate head-and-neck restraint system, Stickney suffered a fracture of the C1 and C2 vertebrae—an injury that almost always results in paralysis.

Brown had no way of knowing this as he and his team of first responders—consisting of Mark Kustra, a racer and chassis builder; John Boody; Julie Heincelman; Warren Hatch; and Mike Owens—arrived at the mangled car. Although Stickney could move his fingers and toes, Brown took no chances. He ordered the car to be cut with the Hurst Jaws of Life that is part of this track's exemplarily well-equipped and manned safety crew.

"I don't have a problem cutting a car," Brown said later. "Those can be fixed or replaced. You only get one chance to do this right."

The rescue team had to slip a neck brace on Stickney and carefully weave him past the shoulder and head restraint components that are integral to full containment seats like the one Stickney had.

No doubt each member of the rescue squad knew Lesson Number One: First, Do No Harm. A patient with unknown injuries, but with the capability to move extremities may be cause to lower their guard and speed the process, but no member of this team did. Good thing, the results would have been catastrophic.

The team strapped Stickney to a backboard, lowered him onto a stretcher, and loaded him into the ambulance. Brown turned to his team and, like a pit crew after a completed stop, reviewed their own performance. A nearby photographer, who many times photographed him in victory lane said, "[Brown] wants the photos from the accident scene. He uses the images to review what they did, do better, and train new guys."

Meanwhile the severity of Stickney's injuries was just being revealed. Flown by helicopter to Boston, tests confirmed the C1 and C2 fractures. A specialist declared surgery, always incredibly risky with this type of injury, was unnecessary. Instead, they fitted Stickney with a custom neck brace and halo.

Had this crew been anything but an extraordinary team of professionals, Stickney may have been paralyzed.

Brown thrilled thousands over the years at the speedway, but he and his team have never been as impressive as on this October night. 🏁

Karl Fredrickson is the publisher of Dick Berggren's Speedway Illustrated and has raced since 1984.