

Turning the corner in Pablo



Don Webster takes the checkered flag in the Hobby Stock trophy dash Saturday at the Mission Valley Super Oval in Pablo.

Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader



John Davisson takes a lap with an American Flag after the singing of the national anthem Saturday at the Mission Valley Super Oval in Pablo. It was Military and First

Responder Appreciation Night at the track.



Corey White Jr., who typically serves as pit boss on race night, took a turn in the booth announcing Saturday night.



A pit crew makes final adjustments to the No. 57 car, driven by Jason Robinson, prior to qualifying.



CleAnn Undem manages all concessions and runs the food booth on race nights.



Racetrack operator Tony Undem, right, mans the white board where qualifying and race times are displayed, along with race lineups, for drivers and crews in the pit. Undem served as pit boss Saturday.

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PABLO — When longtime contractor and stock car driver Tony Undem took on the challenge of operating a local racetrack a few years back, he had just the team in mind to help him make a go of it.

In fact, it wasn’t his decision alone.

“It was a family decision,” he said Saturday at the Mission Valley Super Oval in Pablo. “We took a look at it and decided it was something we wanted to try.”

That decision came two years ago at a time when the future of racing in Pablo was looking pretty grim. The track’s previous

operator had left town with a long trail of legal troubles, unpaid bills and unfulfilled promises.

“We’ve had a few sponsors who really stepped up and came through for us, but we haven’t asked too much because we know a lot of people got burned in the past.”

Tony’s wife CleAnn plays a key role in the revenue side as manager of concessions. You’ll find her slinging burgers and nachos at the food booth on most race nights. Out on the track you’ll find the Undem boys, JD and Derek, racing late-model stock cars.

The grandkids even help out. When it’s time for the national anthem, you’re most likely to hear 9-year-old Peyton Undam singing from the announcer’s tower.

Tony relies heavily on another family, primarily Corey White and Corey White Sr., who typically run the pit. Senior buzzes around the drivers’ area all day and night and serves as the tech official — ensuring cars meet all the spec requirements for the different classes. Corey Jr., a corporal with the Ronan Police Department, usually serves as pit boss, making sure cars and drivers are where they should be and that races start on time. Once in a while he has to break up a disagreement between racing teams.

“I go to work and break up fights, then I come here and break up fights,” he joked Saturday.

His sister Aubrey is married to Derek Undem, so the two families are bound in more ways than one.

Getting back on track

Tony admits last season, his first as operator, was a struggle.

“We lost a lot of money that first year. But we just keep doing what we can to make things better and eventually it will come around.”

The options for stock car fans and drivers have dwindled over at least the last decade. When the Montana Raceway Park in Kalispell announced a permanent closure last spring it left the Pablo track as the last remaining asphalt oval in the state. Only three Montana towns still have dirt ovals — Billings, Great Falls and Belgrade.

With the COVID-19 pandemic as a backdrop, the 2020 season in Pablo might have been the end of the road.

Instead, attendance surged for an abbreviated season that only lasted a few months.

“It’s been more than a pleasant surprise with the crowds we got this year,” Tony said. “I think there are just a limited amount of things to do and people want to get out.”

He said he’s seen crowds this year that rival anything they saw last season.

And he acknowledged it wouldn’t be possible if not for the drivers and crews who keep showing up.

“These guys do a great job putting on a good show, whether there are six cars in a class or 15.”

Another aspect of the in-progress turnaround has been improved accounting and a system for accepting debit cards at concession stands.

And the downfall of the Kalispell track hasn’t hurt either.

“I’ve gotten a lot of calls from Kalispell,” Tony said. “People over there miss racing.”

Thinking long-term

Though the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes play no role in the operation, the tribes do own the land, which they lease to the track operator. The Undems have secured one-year leases the past two seasons, but they’re hoping to get a longer lease in the next round of negotiations.

The tribes also had to sign off on the Undems’ COVID-19 plan before racing could resume.

While no masks are required, attendees are encouraged to maintain ample spacing and to wear masks while in the concession and bathroom areas.

Moving forward

Tony said his family expects to clear a profit this season and will put that sum toward additional track improvements. Those include replacing the track lights with LEDs; paving more of the pit area; creating a beer concession farther from the food booths to ease a bottleneck; installing portable toilets; and creating additional parking for spectators.

He also would like to add a new flag pole with a giant American flag “that you can see from the highway.”

The group is adding a lot of tech as well. They were able to purchase a transponder system from the Kalispell track for improved timing. There’s been some discussion of live streaming events, and they just installed a widescreen TV at the concession area that may one day display a feed from a drone hovering above the track.

“As we keep building this, I just really enjoy the appreciation we see from the crowds and the community,” Tony said. “That’s enough for me.”

Last call

The track wraps up its season Saturday with races in four classes: late models, hobby stocks, hornets and mod-4s. Admission is \$10 for adults or \$8 for seniors (55 and older) and kids ages 8-17. Kids age 7 and younger get in for free.

Qualifying begins at 6 p.m., and races begin at 7. For more information, visit