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Ka-ching! The sound needed to revive track

Roar of engines could return to North Wilkesboro

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North Wilkesboro Speedway, a historic short track dormant for nearly a decade, does not quite yet have new life. But it apparently does now have a fighting chance - and some people who seem to be serious about giving it financial CPR.

In October 1949, Bob Flock won the eighth race ever held in NASCAR's "strictly stock" series at the five-eighths mile track in Wilkes County. The 93rd - and final - time that stock-car racing's top series ran there in September 1996, Jeff Gordon won.

A lot of racing history was made there. But the sport's growth seemed to make the track itself history when Bruton Smith and Bob Bahre bought it and harvested its Cup dates for Smith's track in Texas and Bahre's in New Hampshire.

In the years since, there has been an occasional stirring that someone was trying to bring the roar of engines back to North Wilkesboro once more. These always seemed to go away quietly, though, and time kept clutching tighter at the track's throat.

But now Robert Marsden, a 24-year-old computer specialist who lives just south of Buffalo, N.Y., believes with all of his young heart that cars will race at North Wilkesboro this year.

"I guess I am just determined by nature," Marsden says.

"A lot of people have said we're wasting our time, that it can't be done and blah, blah, blah. But I think we're about to make it happen."

Earlier this week, Marsden's group announced on its Web site (www.savethespeedway.net) a \$1 million commitment from an unnamed investor toward the purchase of the track. Marsden says that if he gets an additional \$6 million in financing within the next few weeks, he's already got enough racing series interested that he's sure there could be racing at the track by May.

This May.

Raising \$6 million, of course, is no small trick. But Marsden quickly convinces you that he is, at the very least, going to try like the dickens to raise it.

His story sounds made up. Marsden is a lifelong race fan who, in 2002, spent his honeymoon going to Daytona for the Pepsi 400. On the way south from New York, he made a side trip to Bristol. On his way home through North Carolina he decided to go by North Wilkesboro.

"Seeing it in person struck a nerve with me," he said. "I decided that something needed to be done."

Last April he started the Web site and got more than 4,500 signatures on an online petition urging Smith and Bahre to agree to sell if a legitimate offer could be formulated. Smith and Bahre each own 50 percent of North Wilkesboro and for years, neither seemed willing to sell.

Smith says that's changed. Now they'll sell for \$12 million - \$6 million apiece.

"I think these people are absolutely legitimate," Smith said. "They seem to have the background and the know-how to get the financing done and bring it to the table. We're just waiting to hear from them."

It'll take another \$1 million, maybe more, to repave and renovate the track before it can be reopened. Marsden insists that if he can raise the additional \$6 million he'll have what's needed to purchase and repair it.

Jerry Sink, 33, lives in North Wilkesboro and has the title of director of speedway operations. Of course, there are no speedway operations to direct just yet.

"I feel like I carry the torch for the 58,000 citizens in this community," Sink said.

Sink ran across Marsden's efforts on the Internet, and now he's up to his elbows in the effort to revive his town's track.

"Without question, I believe there will be racing at North Wilkesboro this year," Sink said. "If these plans were just a haphazard business plan that lacked either vision or a sense of reality about what needs to be done, it'd be different. But we're not just sitting around listening to everybody who has said we can't do it."

Marsden said that if the money can't be raised this year, he'll go to work on making it happen for 2007.

"We've had skeptics since we started," he said. "Some people thought we were another one of those groups that would come in and then fade away. ... But we've put too much time, money and effort into

bringing it this far. We're not going to fade away."

And, if Marsden has his way, neither will North Wilkesboro.