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## Petition drive tries to get racing back at North Wilkesboro track

By Monte Mitchell  
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### NORTH WILKESBORO

Upstate New York is a long way from North Wilkesboro, but the latest plea to bring racing back to the North Wilkesboro Speedway started there.

An Internet petition started by Robert Marsden, who lives near Buffalo, N.Y., has attracted signatures from about 2,000 visitors to his Web site, [www.savethespeedway.net](http://www.savethespeedway.net).

Marsden started the site in April. He says he grew up watching North Wilkesboro races on television and says he got goose bumps the first time he saw the speedway in person, when he stopped by in 2002 while coming back from the Pepsi 400 in Daytona on his honeymoon.

That kind of devotion is typical of people who have signed the petition so far, many leaving comments about mourning the loss of history and roots, and decrying the new "cookie-cutter" tracks.

"Let's bring back racing to one of the finest and most historic short tracks," wrote Don Baker of Rio Rico, Ariz. "What memories are locked away in that old track. Let's go racing, boys!"

"Save this great track!" wrote Tiffany Horton of Medora, Ind.

"...it would surely be sad to lose the track forever!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" wrote Karen Coleman of King George, Va.

Marsden said he hopes that strength in numbers will persuade the owners to do something with the track.

"All we're looking for out of this is to get it transferred to somebody who will bring racing back," he said. "It's a place that's rich in history, and it should be used for something."

Bob Bahre, who owns 50 percent of North Wilkesboro Speedway, said he understands that people want racing there, but it boils down to economics. "I think it would be a tough place today to make money," he said Saturday. "It wasn't making much money even when we bought it."

Bahre and Bruton Smith, the owner of Speedway Motorsports, each bought half of the North Wilkesboro

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North Wilkesboro Speedway closed in 1996, and its two NASCAR races were moved to other tracks. (File photo)

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track in 1996 to move its two NASCAR dates to their other tracks.

Smith wanted to buy the whole track. He later said he had a plan to continue racing there, but it wouldn't work as long as he only has half interest. Bahre bought his half from a seller who asked him to never sell to Smith, for reasons Bahre still doesn't know.

Bahre says he always keeps his word and won't sell his half to Smith. That doesn't mean they can't work together or can't each sell their parts to another owner. He also said that the tension caused by the initial ownership fight is now gone.

"We've gotten to be friends and we talk once in a while," Bahre said. "Time can heal most anything.... If (Smith) came along and wanted to run a race there, I'd be all for it. I've got no grudge against Bruton. He's done a lot for racing. I've kind of liked him over the years."

A spokesman for Smith did not return a phone call.

In a 2002 interview in The Charlotte Observer, Smith said he wasn't going to waste money and effort at North Wilkesboro as long as he owned only 50 percent of the track.

Hundreds of fans turned out at the track in October 2004, clinging to fences and sitting on metal bleachers to watch truck-driver tryouts for Roush Racing. It was the first time racers had roared around the track since it closed in 1996.

Weeds had grown up through the track's surface, but weed killer took care of that. Workers scooped up track debris and wound up with a three-foot high pile of gravel and concrete chips.

But trucks ran fine on the .625-mile low-banked oval, uphill on one straightaway and downhill on the other, the track's signature design.

The whole place had a deep feel of nostalgia, with signs for things that go by different names now, such as Holly Farms, which was acquired by Tyson Foods Inc.; First Union (now Wachovia Corp.); and Winston Cup, now the Nextel Cup.

The hulking, empty track on U.S. 421 remains a place for the big dreams of community developers. In May, two Wilkes County officials made a belated pitch to get the NASCAR Hall of Fame at the speedway. The effort went nowhere.

Wilkes County has included finding a use for the speedway on a list of ideas for promoting the 25-county Blue Ridge National Heritage Area.

Linda Cheek, the president of the Wilkes County Chamber of Commerce, remembers watching the Roush Racing tryouts. She has also heard about the recent petition effort, and says that people are going to have to prove that there is a potential to make money at the track. "There's a huge interest," she said. "I think if they were to have some kind of activity there, people would come." If Charlotte gets the NASCAR Hall of Fame, she sees potential for a satellite museum or a heritage trail. Maybe concerts would make a go there, she said.

Few expect NASCAR to return, but they talk about hopes for Busch races or trucks.

Bahre says that North Wilkesboro would never get a Nextel Cup date now and doesn't know whether Busch races or truck racing could make it at the 40,000-seat stadium. He doesn't think concerts would.

The petition is the latest try at an effort that has pretty much been spinning its wheels. In 2003, organizers presented a different petition with 3,300 names to county commissioners. They asked the county to condemn the speedway and take it over. Commissioners said they would love to see the speedway open, but it wasn't financially feasible for the county to buy it.

Marsden started up the new petition after a mutual friend introduced him to Bruce Christian, a North Wilkesboro man involved in the first petition drive.

Marsden, Christian and other speedway supporters meet online in the Web site's chat room at 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays as they kick around ideas to get the track open.

Bahre says that it is up to Smith.

"Bruton's a decent man; I get along with him, but it's his call," said Bahre. "If anything happens, it would have to happen on his end. I don't know what the devil would come of it."

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