

## NewsFlash from The Joie of Seating ~ Custom Race Seats – Concord, NC

### LaJoie preaches; Will they follow?

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Nobody died Saturday at Atlanta Motor Speedway. That's why most seats were empty in the room where Randy LaJoie was talking about the new focus in his career, a "[Safer Racer Tour](#)" in which he'll go to short tracks around the country preaching the value of safety to competitors and track operators.

Safety is something people don't think about until tragedy forces them. That's a dangerous thing, and it worries LaJoie.

"I think the industry needs to be taught some of the things that I've been taught," said LaJoie, a two-time Busch Series champion. "We have a lot of work to do."

LaJoie started his company, The Joie of Seating, in 1996. He builds seats designed to contain a racer's body during crashes, seats that cost \$1,500 and up.



That's not cheap, especially for the weekend racer at any of the hundreds of short tracks that will be starting their seasons over the next few weeks. But, it's a pittance compared to the potential price -- according to data compiled by \*this newspaper, at least 138 people have died at short tracks since 2001, when Dale Earnhardt became the most recent driver in any of NASCAR's top three series to be killed.

"We have killed too many people," LaJoie said. "It's terrible we had to kill Dale Earnhardt before we said, 'That's enough.' "

Before Earnhardt's death, resistance to safety innovations was far too often taken for a racer's bravado. People who worked toward or even talked about making cars safer were labeled weaklings or cowards. But, when the sport's Superman died on the final lap of the Daytona 500 in February 2001, a switch was thrown.

From NASCAR right down through the sport's elite, safety became something nobody had to be embarrassed to be concerned about.

As a result, tracks hosting big-time events now have steel and foam energy absorbing barriers in front of concrete walls. Drivers can't race without wearing some approved head-and-neck support device, and seats have been reshaped and reformed to turn the cockpit into more of a cocoon designed to protect what LaJoie called the "Jell-o," that's what a driver amounts to when something goes wrong.

"Dale Earnhardt's legacy won't be seven championships," LaJoie said. "It will be the dozens of lives he has saved because of what has happened since his death."

But, he fears, the safety advances aren't filtering into racing's grass-root levels.

"You go to places in Short Track USA and there are 100 cars there," LaJoie said. "I walk around and look at every car, and maybe 15 or 20 of them are safe."

LaJoie estimated that no more than 30 percent of the cars that race at tracks around the country are as safe as they ought to be. He sees ill-fitting or improperly mounted seats or seat belts as well as what he sees as an alarmingly low level of drivers using head-and-neck restraint systems.

"There are enough products on the market today that we should never have another basilar skull fracture," LaJoie said, speaking of the injury that took Earnhardt, Kenny Irwin, Adam Petty and Tony Roper in a horrible stretch of less than a year beginning in early 2000.

LaJoie's company will do well if he sells more seats, of course. But, he has two young sons who're racers, and LaJoie refuses to allow them to race without head-and-neck restraints or properly mounted seats and belts.

A competing seat-builder once told LaJoie he loved selling seats to kids who were racing, since they grew so fast their parents had to keep buying seats to keep them in the car. LaJoie thought about that and started a lease program, so young racers can send seats back and get larger ones.

In an ideal world, track promoters and racing sanctioning bodies would require participants to have adequate safety equipment on their cars. But, many short tracks are desperate to increase their car counts, and it's tough to expect them to send 60 percent or 70 percent of potential entrants home to take such a stand.

Drivers, LaJoie said, often mount their seats and belts as best they can, or at least the best they know how. Some drivers still believe it's better to be able to move in their seats, or to have long seat belts. Safety experts consider that

thinking wrong-headed, but changing such long-held notions is easier said than done.

"They're putting square pegs into round holes," LaJoie said. "They just don't know."

So he's going to try to tell them.

"I am going to go to these tracks and I am going to talk about this stuff," LaJoie said. "I am going to stand there as these cars go through inspection. Some of these guys might not like me too much. But, I'm going."

Why? That's a simple question for LaJoie.

"When I read about somebody getting killed," he said, "it makes me sick."

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\* Charlotte Observer Newspaper -- IN MY OPINION section – article by David Poole