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Sunday, July 10, 2005

Sign master ready for

race: JOLIET - Fans come to the Chicagoland Speedway to witness the power of NASCAR engines. They buy their tickets to get a firsthand look at the drivers they used to watch only on TV. They wear the T-shirts and caps emblazoned with the names and numbers of their heroes. But each year, their eyes are drawn to the work of a 37-year-old Joliet man, who doesn't even have time to watch a race here. [MORE...](#)

Business briefcase: Dr.

Stephen Epner has been named medical director of the Silver Cross MedWorks Occupational Health Program. Epner previously practiced occupational medicine at Concentra Medical Center in Franklin Park. He received his medical degree from Boston University School of Medicine and completed his residency at the University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago. [MORE...](#)

Friday, July 8, 2005

Let the turf-painting begin: It's no Picasso, but painters will put the final touches on a work of art today at the Chicagoland Speedway. The "canvas" was specially prepared. The paint is unique. Four men worked three 12-hour days to complete the project. And it will disappear in two or three weeks. The experts from Missouri Turf Paint and Field Graphics are responsible for the race sponsor logos on the infield for this weekend's NASCAR events. [MORE...](#)

SPOTLIGHT STORY...

Sign master



Messaging system: Joliet man keeps fans up-to-date at race

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But each year, their eyes are drawn to the work of a 37-year-old Joliet man, who doesn't even have time to watch a race here. Over the course of the afternoon, just about every fan will have to go back to check this lone man's contribution to the racing scene.

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ABOVE: Eddie Hartsell of Express Signs in Shorewood is the master of the message board at Chicagoland Speedway. He operates a 150-foot tall electronic imaging sign in the cold garage area of the speedway. The sign runs on two computers that handle the digit and scoring functions, and electronic messaging center. The sign allows spectators not seated in the start or finish sections of the track to see who is in the lead. It also streams advertisements and alerts via the messaging center. The track sign is the most intricate sign serviced by the family-owned company.

MARINA MAKROPOULOS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

MONDAY
JULY 11, 2005

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Sign master ready for race

Messaging pylon: Joliet man keeps fans up-to-date at event

By Dennis Yohnka
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD NEWS

JOLIET — Fans come to the Chicagoland Speedway to witness the power of NASCAR engines. They buy their tickets to get a firsthand look at the drivers they used to watch only on TV. They wear the T-shirts and caps emblazoned with the names and numbers of their heroes.

But each year, their eyes are drawn to the work of a 37-year-old Joliet man, who doesn't even have time to watch a race here. Over the course of the afternoon, just about every fan will have to go back to check this lone man's contribution to the racing scene.

Eddie Hartsell of Express Signs in Shorewood is the master of the message board. He sits in a booth high above the start-finish line, focused on a keyboard and a display atop the 150-foot scoring pylon in the center of the infield.

Oh, he doesn't have to keep track of those top 15 cars listed vertically on the tower. He has worked out the direct feed from NASCAR to the computer that controls that feature. No, his focus is the bank of lights that present the commercial and informational messages — from the time the first fans walk in, until the last diehards file out.

"This is my specialty," he said with an air of confidence.

His father, Ed Hartsell Sr., founded the sign business. His brother, Brandon, competed in a midget racer at the Grundy County Speedway and has gone on to work in the motorsports industry. And Eddie has found his niche at a computer keyboard, orchestrating his part of the speedway's fan-focused symphony.



"We've done some of the main message board signs around town," Eddie said. "The new one at the Town and Country Bowling Center — that's one of ours. The Empress. Harrah's. We don't do the daily programming, but we set them up."



MARINA MAKROPOULOS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Eddie Hartsell of Express Signs in Shorewood is the master of the message board at Chicagoland Speedway. He operates a 150-foot tall electronic imaging sign in the cold garage area of the speedway. The sign runs on two computers that handle the digit and scoring functions, and electronic messaging center. The sign allows spectators not seated in the start or finish sections of the track to see who is in the lead.

MONDAY
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Express Signs was established in 1990 and now keeps 12 full-time employees busy designing, manufacturing and installing a wide variety of display boards. While they can point with pride to many of their products outside local establishments, the vast majority of the company's business comes from outside the immediate area — reaching to Trump's Casino in Gary, Ind., and as far south as Indianapolis.

Ed Hartsell Sr. said the firm has seen the business transformed from neon tube and lightbulb illumination to the dominance of LEDs and the low-cost 12- and 24-volt systems.

"You used to think of signs and neon as synonymous," he said. "Now, neon is almost extinct."

Speedway challenge

For Ed Hartsell, none of his local experience prepared him for the speedway challenge. He arrives around 7 a.m. on race days and goes through his files. He tries to get comfortable, because he's going to be on the job until five or six in the afternoon.

He has preloaded the information on driver names and numbers, so that during the introduction ceremonies he can press just one button and make sure all the fans are up to date. He has the ads (with carefully prepared logos) in another cue.

"They have a great sound system at the track, but a lot of those pre-, and post-race activities are visible only to the fans near the start finish line," he said. "I keep the rest of the folks in touch with what's going on — the people sitting near the turns, and the fans with the RVs on the infield or on the backstretch."

The scoring pylon features a four-sided revolving cap that includes what the sign pros call "tri-vision billboards."

Those are the boards with triangular-shaped slats that turn to provide three different billboards. With four sides, that means there are 12 major messages out there — messages artfully printed and installed by Express Signs.

"We did those (billboard changes) on Tuesday and Wednesday," Eddie added. "Those and the ads that run on my message board are all controlled by the track's marketing department. They know what logos have to go up and how many times those messages have to be (presented)."

Keeping in touch

The other function Eddie must perform is dictated through the headphones that stay firmly over his ears throughout the race. He's in touch with race officials and keeps the fans up to date on caution flags and other information that NASCAR wants to pass along.

"I really enjoy it, but it's an exhausting day," he said. "It's gotten easier over the years, but I still can't say that I've ever watched a race. To tell the truth: I find out what happened when I pick up my Herald News the next day. I'm too busy to watch."

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His wife, Sissy, and their five children will be in the stands, though. They buy tickets so that the family can watch the race and see dad's handiwork.

"My dad is usually here, too," he said. "He comes up and checks in on me. Then he goes down and enjoys the race."

For his part, Eddie doesn't really want to relax on race day. He noted that he is always thinking ahead, looking out for glitches that would disrupt his routine.

"It's gotten to the point where I watched the Daytona race on TV this year and found myself watching the scoring pylon. You know, that guy did a pretty good job."

On that particular day, race winner Tony Stewart did a pretty good job, too. But not everybody was watching.

7/10/05

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