

When it comes to race car drivers, most people will confess to looking for “The Next Big Thing.” Yet when it came to two Northeast touring series championships in 2009, the surest way to the season-long points title turned out to be drivers who are tried and true.

2009 PASS North champion Johnny Clark and 2009 ACT champion Brian Hoar have a great deal in common. Both racers are in their thirties, multi-time champions and are at the top or near the top of every statistical category for their respective series. Both racers have also been with their series since the beginning. Despite their relative youth, both Hoar and Clark are proven winners and champions. They are considered “veterans” even though neither of them has yet cracked the four decade mark.

For Brian Hoar, 2009 marked a return to ACT racing after several years racing with the Busch North (now Camping World East) Series. Having ended his Camping World East racing at the end of 2007, and a year off from racing altogether in 2008, Hoar came back to the ACT scene in 2009 with a new car number, a different chassis maker and, for the first time in his career, a full-time ACT team not run by the Hoar family.

Hoar’s new team, however, was not new to ACT wins and championships. Car owner and crew chief Rick Paya guided Jean-Paul Cyr to 5 of his 7 championships. When Cyr left the ACT tour to successfully pursue a Thunder Road weekly racing championship, Paya looked not to a youngster with promise for his new driver but to a veteran with proven results.

Despite the new pairing of driver and team, this was the same driver who had won the ACT championship in 5 previous seasons. Twenty-three times in his career he had carried the checkers at the end of an ACT race. Hoar clearly did not need driving instruction in order to win, just quality equipment and a great team.

Like any great team racing for a championship, the 37 crew tried to win every race that they were in. When the cards didn’t fall their way for a win they strove for the best finish they could get. The first win of the season did not come until late July, but another win in August showed that the team was in championship form. With eight top 5’s and eleven top 10’s in thirteen races, and factoring in ACT’s “Drop 3” formula for determining championship points, Hoar and team rode a wave of consistency right through to the season-long honors.

For Johnny Clark, a PASS North champion in 2004, 2006 and 2008, success in 2009 was due to the same strategy that had worked so many times before. Unlike Hoar, Clark is both driver and team owner so there was not much that was new in 2009 that wasn’t also there in previous years.

With three wins, eight top 5’s and twelve top 10’s in thirteen races, Clark’s 2009 stats were an almost-identical version of the same championship numbers he had racked-up in 2008. The first win of the year for the 54 crew came in April at Speedway 95, with wins following at Unity and Lee later in the season.

For both Hoar and Clark, staying out of trouble and taking care of their equipment was a main goal. Any accident damage was kept to a minimum and their eyes were always on the greater prize of a points title.

When Clark wasn't winning he was finishing in the top 10 and getting the most points he could for that race. After several years with a "checkers or wreckers" approach to racing, Clark showed his maturity and dedication to the overall championship by minimizing his involvement in on-track skirmishes. In races that he could not win Clark at least brought the car home in a top-finishing position and relatively free of damage.

Hoar followed a similar approach. Despite several top finishes early in the season, and with the weight of not having won a race in several years, Hoar still kept his focus on racking up points toward the season-long title. While race wins are great, the goal for Hoar, Paya and the team was always to grab another title. Having won the title for so many years and then not doing so in 2008, the RPM team was hungry to get back to the head table at the ACT Banquet of Champions. Similarly, Hoar was driven by the fact that he was two championships behind rival and friend Jean-Paul Cyr in the ACT record books.

Neither driver has aspirations at this point to move much beyond their current racing series. Racing within a few hours of home, with schedules around a dozen races a year, works just fine for these two drivers with family commitments and full-time roles in their family-run companies. Racing, while an obvious passion for Hoar and Clark, falls in line behind working for a living and taking care of loved ones.

For 2010, both drivers look to continue more of the same. Hoar and his RPM team are already favorites for another championship while Clark will again run the PASS North schedule with a handful of PASS South starts thrown in for good measure.

No matter the accomplishments so far, there are always more accomplishments to strive for. Both drivers have statistical categories that they do not lead, including most championships in their series. Clark trails Ben Rowe in every major statistical category and is now tied with Clark for most PASS North championships. Hoar leads in ACT wins but is behind Jean-Paul Cyr in championships, needing one more to tie Cyr and two to pass him in the record books.

With wins and championships already under their belts, both Hoar and Clark have years ahead of them to add more wins and championship to their career totals. That should come as good news for fans and bad news for their fellow competitors.