

Like Father, Like Son

In racing, your challenges on the track can come from many areas: Other racers; broken or malfunctioning mechanical components; your own errors; and acts of God. You get the idea. Rarely, though, does your greatest challenge to winning come from your father.

The driver of the ACT and Thunder Road No. 85 Late Model was presented with the following scenario: You and the 86 are running one-two with one lap to go. You are in the lead. What is the likely outcome?

“The likely outcome,” said the driver, “is that Dad is going to push me out of the way to win the race!”

The No. 86 is Dennis Demers of Shelburne, Vt. His son, Trampas, drives the 85. Both are regular competitors on the ACT Tour and at Thunder Road International Speedbowl.

Dennis was a late arrival to racing, starting when he was 43 years old. “Racing had always been a lifelong dream of mine,” he said. Having already established himself as a successful businessman (he owns Shelburne Limestone Company, a successful crushed-stone company) he had the time and money to pursue his racing dream, starting at Airborne Speedway in Plattsburgh, N.Y., in the Flying Tiger division. Trampas was on his crew. That was July of 1991.

Success came quickly. “The fifth time I ever raced, I won the Triple Crown (heat, semi-feature and feature),” he says.

Other divisions, series and successes followed. There was the move up to Late Models, Hooters Pro Cup (North), Busch North and winter racing at New Smyrna and Orlando Speedworld. Wins came in most of those series and divisions.

Over the years Tramp’s role in his father’s racing grew from regular crewmember to crew chief starting in 1994. Listeners would hear Trampas encouraging his father on the radio and guiding him through the field, mixing equal parts father-son conversations with ongoing analysis of the car and the racing.

Dennis Demers got his first Busch North win at Stafford, Conn., in 1999. The win was a big one for the father-son team. After years of trying, numerous top-five finishes and lots of miles logged to, from and at the track, the win was validation for Dennis, Trampas and the crew. There had been a lot of close finishes and crashed cars on the way to the victory lane.

In 2001, Trampas decided he wanted to get behind the wheel. “Working on my dad's car gave me the knowledge I felt that I needed to become a competitive driver,” Trampas said. “When ACT went to the spec engine and current rules I felt the timing was right.”

During the next few years Dennis and Trampas both raced ACT and Thunder Road races, along with Dennis’s Busch North efforts and Tramp’s role as Busch North crew chief. Since Dennis’s win in 1999, his involvement in Busch North racing gradually decreased. Business commitments, changes in Busch North rules and increasing demands to travel so far to the races forced the 86 team to cut back their Busch

North schedule. By 2003 Trampas and Dennis were both racing exclusively at Thunder Road and ACT races.

In 2005 Trampas earned a Thursday night win at Thunder Road. The press release read, "Trampas Demers outlasted several rivals, including his father Dennis, and won a rough-and-tumble Late Model 50-lap main event Thursday at Thunder Road. It was the Shelburne driver's first win. Cooper MacRitchie finished second at Demers' bumper, after working underneath Dennis Demers on the final restart with three laps to go. Joey Laquerre, who had traded paint with the elder Demers often, got up for third. Dave Whitcomb was a car-length behind Demers to complete the top five. 'On that restart, I told my spotter that the 86 car (father Dennis) was just another number, no mercy was going to be shown,' Trampas said. 'It's very exciting for me to win one after four years of trying and coming close so many times.'"

Last season Dennis won on a night that Trampas wrecked his car. Coming around turn four and battling for the lead, Trampas was on the outside of his father when Phil Scott saw daylight under Dennis and went for the pass. Three-wide into Thunder Road's famous "Widowmaker" failed and Trampas bounced hard and high into the air off the turn four wall. His night was done, as was the anticipated father-son battle for the win.

"I saw what happened that caused Dad to hit my car," Trampas said. "I certainly was disappointed, because I thought it was our one opportunity to race against each other for the win. In all the years of racing together it has never happened. I was very proud to see Dad win at Thunder Road, though. Still, it took our guys all week to get my car back together again."

And therein lies what Dennis and Trampas both feel is the biggest challenge to a father and son race team. "If we both damage our cars, it makes it difficult to repair both cars on time and make it to the next race," Trampas stated.

The two-car team also presents a challenge to crewmembers Charlie Smith and Rich Palmer. "It would be beneficial if Dad and I liked the same type of feel in our cars. Unfortunately, we both have different setups. However, when we want to test a setup, we can do that twice as fast as a single-car team."

Dennis and Trampas not only work as a team at the racetrack, but they work together in the family business: Dennis is President and Trampas is Vice President. Both Demers men are pilots and enjoy flying together when not racing together.

The on-track statistics for both drivers are impressive: 13 combined wins at Thunder Road, including Tramp's 2005 Memorial Day win; Tramp's Milk Bowl pole in 2005; Dennis's Busch North win in 1999; and dozens of top-10 finishes between the two.

These days Dennis races infrequently. But he is no less of a threat when he is at the track. "Dennis Demers looks like a kindly grandfather, but that guy will race you hard, hard, hard," says an ACT and Thunder Road official. "If he is behind you he is going to do everything he can to get around you, and I

do mean everything. He is a very quiet guy off the track, but on the track he is a wicked fighter for that win.”

“(At 59) I am near the tail end of my racing career,” Dennis says. “Trampas is truly just maturing as a racecar driver. He has a lot more wins left in him.”

Look for Trampas to continue to challenge for the wins at ACT and especially Thunder Road events for years to come. When he is able to, Dennis will also be there and in the hunt for the checkers. With any luck, race fans might one day get to see the 85 and 86 fight to the finish for the win. That, more than anything, and no matter which Demers wins, would stand as their greatest racing memory in a long list of racing memories and accomplishments.