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Drag racing champ Connie Kalitta still feeling need for speed

David Goricki The Detroit News



Connie Kalitta, center, with team general manager Jim Oberhofer, left, and brother Jon Oberhofer, a co-crew leader. (Steve Perez / Detroit News)

Ypsilanti — Connie Kalitta stood in the middle of his mammoth, state-of-the-art, 50,000-square-foot race shop, looking at his multiple Top Fuel and Funny Cars as numerous employees were busy at work around him.

Kalitta, 76, is as passionate as ever for the sport of drag racing. Known as the Bounty Hunter during his racing days, Kalitta has enjoyed tremendous success and suffered the devastation of losing his son during his six decades in the sport.

Connie, who grew up in Mount Clemens, has accomplished everything there is in the sport, winning the U.S. Nationals — drag racing's version of the World Series or Super Bowl — 20 years ago as a driver and winning series championships as a crew chief and owner.

His team's last two series championships were won by his only son, Scott, in 1994 and 1995. On June 21, 2008, Scott was killed during the final round of qualifying in Englishtown, N.J., when his engine exploded near the finish line.

No one would have faulted Connie for getting out of the sport after the death of his son. Instead, he continued to make sure Scott's memory and spirit remained in the sport. He also demanded safety improvements which included the length of the track being shortened from a quarter-mile to 1,000 feet, along with improved shutdown areas to prevent a similar crash.

"When Scott had his accident, I told myself I don't even think I want to do this anymore and in the back of my mind I kind of hoped Connie would say, 'I'm done. I don't want to do this anymore,'" said Jim Oberhofer, the team's general manager. "But, when he came to me and said I want to run that Funny Car again, you need to find a driver for it, I was like, 'OK, I'm just going to follow his lead.' He said, 'That's what Scott would want us to do.'

"Scott's passion for drag racing was only rivaled by his Dad. We've kept Scott's spirit going by running that DHL funny car. We race that car for Scott and we've left his name on it. Del Worsham even says, I drive Scott's car. He's proud of it."

Kalitta Motorsports has a legitimate shot at winning the NHRA Top Fuel championship for the first time since 1995 with Doug Kalitta, Connie's nephew, piloting the MAC Tools dragster. Doug Kalitta is second in points after six races.

Alexis DeJoria — daughter of billionaire John Paul DeJoria — has two wins in the Patron Funny Car. And, Del Worsham has been competitive in Funny Car races in his DHL machine.

"It looks like all the hot rods are running good," said Connie, who is also crew chief for J.R. Todd's Top Fuel car.

Kalitta has no intention of slowing down. In fact, he would like to add another car to the operation if a sponsor comes around.

"I enjoy it and I'm having fun and probably one day when I'm not having fun I won't be there," Connie said. "I've been doing this, drag racing since I was 16 years old."

Yes, Kalitta has come a long way from drag racing around the streets of Detroit and operating his NHRA Kalitta Motorsports team out of an airplane hangar at Willow Run Airport. His Kalitta Air cargo transport business now employs 1,500 people and has 20 747 planes for cargo business.

So, how is he able to own multiple successful businesses?

"I guess it's very strong communication between everybody," he said. "I think that is the catalyst that makes it all happen and everybody has a lot of respect for each other and what each one of them does, and that lives in the team also."

Kalitta attitude 'priceless'

Jim Oberhofer came to Kalitta Motorsports more than a quarter-century ago as a gofer, doing whatever was needed while learning the business from Connie and his son, Scott.

Now, Oberhofer is the general manager of the organization which employs more than 60 people and has an operating budget of \$12-15 million for the four-car team that operates out of the shop in Ypsilanti.

"Connie works hard so he can go race," said Oberhofer, who is also crew chief of Doug's Top Fuel car. "He's just as excited showing up at the races as he was maybe 50 or 60 years ago.

"To see this guy who has been doing this almost continuously for 60 years, to see how excited he gets when a car runs good or we win a race is priceless."

Oberhofer, 48, has been with Kalitta Motorsports for 27 years. His younger brother, Jon — co-crew chief on Worsham's Funny Car — has been with the organization for more than 20 years.

Troy Fasching, assistant crew chief on Kalitta's Top Fuel car, and Mac Savage, the car chief and clutch specialist, have been part of the Kalitta racing family for 10 years. Nick Boninfante, who joins Jon as co-crew chief for Worsham, also has been on board for more than a decade.

'A serious business'

Doug Kalitta is going after that elusive championship after Top Fuel runner-up finishes in 2003 and 2004, then again in 2006 when he carried the lead into the last race only to lose to Tony Schumacher on the final run of the season.

Doug, 49, owns his own air cargo business, Kalitta Charter, which has 280 employees and operates 28 planes with a focus on government and air ambulance work.

Doug pilots a nine-seat Falcon 20 plane to travel to NHRA events with Connie and longtime sponsor Rick Fischer, owner of the local Fischer Honda dealership. Connie co-piloted the plane until recent years.

"I'm fortunate to be able to manage my time with the resources we have around here," Doug said. "This is not a hobby for me. It's a serious business.

"This is probably the best team I've had. Getting that win (March 16 in Gainesville, Fla.) was a big deal for us and it was big to get to the finals in a couple of other races, too, so we're close."

DeJoria brings new blood

And, Doug enjoys watching DeJoria's progress in her third full season.

"It's probably one of the most exciting things about our season this year, seeing her and what her car is doing," Doug said. "She's real passionate about this stuff and we've given her a good car that she can win in."

DeJoria, third in points, won her first career Funny Car race at Phoenix Feb. 23, and then two races later at Las Vegas, both final wins coming against points leader Robert Hight.

DeJoria joined the Kalitta organization in the summer of 2011, competing in several races during the end of the season after five years of Top Alcohol competition, drag racing's Triple A level.

Jim Oberhofer was DeJoria's crew chief during that short stint in '11 and knew she had high-end potential.

Well, DeJoria is filling that potential.

"Last year, we were hoping to win our first race and it just didn't happen," DeJoria said. "I felt I had gained a lot of experience from the past couple of years. At the beginning of this season our short term goals were to go rounds and get points, then I got that first win and it was such a great feeling. Then, the second win came and it was just unbelievable. I always knew we could do it, but two wins in three races ... that was really surprising. It's taken a huge weight off my shoulders."

DeJoria's relationship with the Kalitta crew took off after she crashed at Englishtown, N.J., in 2009, a year after Scott Kalitta was killed. Alexis feels she is alive today because of the safety improvements that took place after his death.

"It's such a family here," said DeJoria of Kalitta Motorsports. "Connie has such passion for the sport."

Another devotee

The Kalitta organization suffered another blow last year with the death of Tammy Oberhofer, Jim's wife, to cancer. They met while working at Kalitta Motorsports with Tammy starting out as the public relations director, then in charge of the organization's accounting.

Now, Jim's daughter Ashley is handling social media duties for the team. And, she plans on attending Frank Hawley's Driving School later this year. Who knows, she could end up driving one day for Connie.

“Tammy loved Kalitta Motorsports and Ashley’s following in her footsteps,” Oberhofer said. “She’s done a phenomenal job for us, working with the same intensity as her Mom did. She’s grown up around the sport and is passionate about it. We all love having her with us at the track.”