



## Fear of fires ranks high with drivers

BY DAVID CARAVIELLO  
Of The Post and Courier Staff

HAMPTON, GA.--Jimmy Spencer knows how devastating fire in a race car can be. In 1964, a car driven by his father, Ed, was struck by another vehicle after it lost power during a dirt-track race. The fuel tank erupted, and the elder Spencer was burned so badly that he spent 21 days in intensive care. Now in his 70s, he still carries the physical scars from that incident.

Ed Spencer used an aluminum quarter-keg as a fuel tank. He didn't have the benefit of a fuel cell, fire extinguishing system, or any of the other measures that protect Winston Cup drivers today. But as a recent spate of fiery crashes prove, fire is still perhaps the greatest safety concern for competitors in NASCAR's top divisions.

"Fire is the worst thing that can happen to the driver. If he gets knocked out and stuff, he knows the rescue crew is coming as fast as they can," said the younger Spencer, who will start fifth in today's Bass Pro Shops/MBNA 500 at Atlanta Motor Speedway. "But with a fire, if you're knocked out or pinned in the car, you're going to get burned. That is scary. A fire is very scary."

The first three weeks of this NASCAR season have seen more than a half-dozen cars left burning after hard crashes. Busch driver Jason Keller had to be extricated from his smoke-filled Ford by rescue personnel after being involved in a wreck in the closing laps at Daytona. In the same race, Stacy Compton's Chevrolet burst into flames after it hit the wall, and the driver hopped out of the car before it had even stopped rolling.

Perhaps the scariest incident came last weekend at Las Vegas, where the cars of Jamie McMurray and Michael Waltrip caught fire after they collided during practice for a Busch race. Both drivers escaped unharmed, but the fuel-fed blaze left McMurray's Dodge a smoking, charred hulk.

"The fire was on me," McMurray said. "I could see it wrapped around my left arm, but I couldn't feel it. ... I was used to a different type of latch, and I got a little confused trying to get out. I was really worried about if it started to burn, how bad it was going to burn."

McMurray's was a gas fire, the kind that most concern officials at NASCAR's research and development center in Concord, N.C. According to Gary Nelson, NASCAR's managing director of competition, McMurray's Dodge hit the wall so hard that it bent the rear of the car down to where it was dragging along the race track. The resulting friction wore through the fuel tank and the protective fuel cell, igniting the 110-octane gasoline inside.

"The fuel cell did its job, and held up in the collision," Nelson said. "But it was scraping along the track so much that it just wore through. We

understand what happened and how it happened. It's a little more difficult to figure out how to prevent that from happening."

According to Nelson, the other fires this year have come from oil -- not damaged fuel pumps or fuel lines, as several drivers and television commentators have speculated. The Keller and Compton incidents, Nelson said, were the result of broken oil lines that allowed the lubricant to splash onto red-hot exhaust pipes or other heated elements until the car was finally stopped.

"The problem with Keller and the two others at Daytona," Nelson said, including a truck race fire, "was that the engine was still turning as the car was rolling to a stop. They're such high-volume pumps. It will pump 2 to 3 gallons of oil out in that period of time, and that can make quite a fire. It extinguishes easily, and it will go out on its own in a matter of a few minutes. But it's still alarming to us that that happened, and we're trying to figure out how to keep that from happening."

Nelson admits that oil fires may not be totally preventable, "because you've got to have oil pumping into your engine to make it run," he said. But they're less dangerous than fuel fires, he added, because they normally extinguish themselves quickly after the car stops and there's less air movement to fan the flames.

By rule, drivers in NASCAR's top divisions must wear fireproof suits and have an extinguishing system in their cars similar to a sprinkler system in a building. Nelson said the driver's compartment is sealed off from the most fire-prone parts of the car. But in an accident, those seals can be broken, allowing toxic smoke -- and sometimes the fire itself -- into the cockpit.

Winston Cup driver Mike Skinner suffered burns to his face after the fuel cell in his car ignited during a test crash at Kansas Speedway last year. Brett Bodine was holding his breath after his car erupted in flame after a hard hit in last season's July race at Daytona.

"I was making sure that I didn't take a breath, which I basically had to do anyway, because I had three busted ribs," said Bodine, whose car was a total loss in what was one of the worst fires of last season.

"I was hurting pretty bad after I came off the wall. It was one of those occasions where I was thinking to myself, don't pass out, because you've got to get out of this thing when it stops."

Getting out is all a driver thinks about once he realizes there's a fire in the car. Concern over escaping a burning race car was one reason so many drivers were hesitant to use head-and-neck restraining devices when they first became available. Although NASCAR responded to those fears by increasing the size of the window opening, quickly unhooking a multitude of safety devices and squeezing out of a burning car is never an easy task.

"Certainly, you're worried about that," Bodine said. "You're worried about whether you have any major injuries, because you hurt real bad from an impact like that, but also the fire concerns you. You've got to be able to get out of this thing. It certainly is a concern."

"Some of the things we've got to look at in the future are some of the situations we've had with fires," added Michael McSwain, crew chief for Bobby Labonte. "We've got to do a better job of figuring out how to eliminate that stuff, and try to do a better job of figuring out what we can do for that driver to have a fast escape from that car. ... I think we've got to explore that and not wait until we have a situation that none of us wants to see."

NASCAR's research and development center is working on an "alternative exit" -- a roof hatch -- that would help in accidents like Keller's, where the driver's side is pinned against a wall. But in most cases, Nelson said, the window will still be the first option.

"When you look at the alternative exit that we're working on, it does not have a downside in that situation," Nelson said. "But at the same time, I think the drivers would probably opt to go out the window in most cases, unless they were stopped against the wall like Jason Keller. It's the shortest way out."

Click here to return to story:

[http://www.charleston.net/stories/030903/spo\\_09atlantadv.shtml](http://www.charleston.net/stories/030903/spo_09atlantadv.shtml)