

Next Time, Stop the Freaking Race

Rick Reilly

There's a man buried in your kitchen.

He's right in that stack of newspapers there, about three weeks down, a headline one day, a one-graph follow-up the next, a nobody since.

His name is Ken Fox. He went to a race at Michigan Speedway on July 26 and was torn in half by a tire that flew into the stands, and they didn't even stop the freaking race. Now he's just part of a stat that sportswriters will fish out the next time a racing fan dies because he sat in the wrong seat—four fan deaths in the last 11 years, they can write now. So the CART circuit moved on to the all-important Miller Lite 200 in Lexington, Ohio, last week, where....

But wait just a second.

Ken Fox deserves one minute before we forget him. Ken Fox was somebody. He was 38, with a seven-year-old son, Christopher, who walked by his casket and left a little note with big sloppy letters. I love you, Daddy.

Ken Fox had a best friend, Steve Dawson, who can't eat now and can't sleep and can't forget about the day he went to a car race and everybody sitting around him left in body bags. Ken and Steve, from Lansing, Mich., worked together as drill instructors at a boot camp for first-time felons. They commuted to work together, bowled together, hashed out their divorces together. And they went to car races together. Steve had four tickets to the U.S. 500, and Steve's dad was too tired from working all night and Ken's brother had to study and Steve's fiance couldn't go, either, and thank god. But Steve and Ken went, and they were damn good seats, too, ninth row, fourth turn. Damn good seats.

They were having a blast. Ken was whooping for Michael Andretti to win, and it was a gorgeous day. Then, on Lap 175, Steve thought he saw something black out of the corner of his eye, and he ducked. When he turned back around, he saw that Ken was dead, and the woman just in front of Steve, Sheryl Laster, was dead, and, within the minute, the friend she was with, Mike Tautkus, was dead. "I don't know why I'm alive," Steve says. "I don't know if it was luck or fate or what. I've thought, Did Ken save my life? And I don't know that either. I don't know anything."

They build these race cars to explode on impact because it takes G forces away from the driver, makes it safer for him. But how many engineers are worrying about making guys like Ken Fox safer?

And they didn't even stop the freaking race. Race officials yellow-flagged it as a safety crew cleared the fourth-turn stands, but they left Ken and Sheryl and Mike lying there, covered by blankets, as the cheers started up again and the drivers went flying by again at 200 mph. Congratulations, Greg Moore, you just won the world's fastest funeral procession.

Steve hasn't been able to go back to work, and he's in crisis therapy, and there's a replay in his head that won't shut off. But he's figured out one thing. "Everybody wants to ask me about the blood and how the bodies were twisted, but all I want to do is tell them about Ken," he says. "I just want people to know that Ken was a great guy, a fun-loving, moral, stand-up guy. Everybody seems to be going on like none of this makes a difference. Well, I think it should."

You wonder if it does for Adrian Fernandez. The CART publicity sheets say he's having the best year of his life, ranked fourth in the points standings. But the sheets don't mention how he lost control of his car on the fourth turn that day and smashed the wall, sending his right front tire spinning up and over the 15-foot-high fence and through Christopher Fox's dad.

Three people are dead, and all Fernandez has done is send flowers. He hasn't visited or spoken with the victims' families, and all he has said since the day of the race is, "No comment." The CART people say he was a brave guy to climb back behind the wheel and win on Sunday in Ohio, but he hasn't had the guts yet to look into the eyes of the mothers and the kids.

Yeah, racing and sports and the world spin on at 9,000 rpm. Someday maybe Adrian Fernandez will figure he owes somebody a call. And someday maybe Steve Dawson will be fine, except for an empty seat next to him in the car and a chill that won't go away and the memory of the number of the seat Ken Fox took just ahead of him that gorgeous summer day.

Thirteen.

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