

An Open Letter to Upright “Mini-Sprint” Promoters and Drivers

Written by: Darren Pallen (President: Northern Lightning Sprint Association, Winnipeg, Canada)

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Darren Pallen. I have been involved in the sport of auto racing for over 20 years. In the early 1990s, I raced Mini-Sprints (a 750 c.c. Bishop Racing Components car) before moving on to full-size Sprint Cars for three seasons. Since retiring from racing in 1997, I have spent the last eleven years performing motorsports announcing duties including events like Monster Jam, the IHRA, and several local stock car and motocross tracks.

When I made the decision to return to driving a race car early in 2008, I quickly realized that building a full-size Sprint Car program would not be an option due to soaring costs. I then looked at several different stock car divisions, and the results were exactly the same. Most surprising, however, was what I found with the Mini-Sprint class. It is this discovery that prompted me to write this commentary.

Following several months of research, I concluded that very little has changed in the Mini-Sprint world in terms of the way these cars are being marketed throughout North America. Further, I discovered that Mini-Sprint rules (especially engine rules) have not yet fallen in line with what these cars were originally intended to be (affordable). In summary, I found that many of the same things that were hurting the growth of Mini-Sprint racing back in the 1990s are still prevalent today.

Let's begin with marketing. In short, the term “Mini-Sprint” is a very poor representation of a modern day upright, midget-based, motorcycle engine powered Sprint Car. Without a doubt, these are full-blown, legitimate race cars. In the exact words of Pat Mooney, a broadcasting friend of mine here in Canada, there is nothing “mini” about these cars. They are built to the same specifications as a full-size Sprint Car, and in my opinion carry engines that are far more technically advanced than anything else found at a dirt track. In fact, they may be the most technically advanced production engines on the planet. Yet, we continue to call these cars “Mini-Sprints”. If you were a sports fan, would you be eager to go watch a “Mini-Football” game? A “Mini-Baseball” game? Or how about a “Mini-Hockey” game? Likely not.

I ask that all upright 750 c.c./1000 c.c. “Mini-Sprint” organizations consider removing all evidence of the word “Mini-Sprint” in your advertising and other correspondence and replace it with the more professional term “Lightning Sprint”. I believe this will help our organizations gain better credibility with fans and promoters and help to achieve better payouts through a more professional image. Today, success is achieved through a sound marketing program, no matter what your business may be. The term “Lightning Sprint” is much more marketable than “Mini-Sprint”. The use of “Lightning Sprint” will also help distinguish our upright cars from that of the smaller cars in the Micro-Sprint division. In my estimation, it is quite easy for the casual fan to mix up “Mini” and “Micro”. Changing to the term “Lightning Sprints” will help eliminate this confusion.

In all forms of racing, creating a “universal” rule book has always been a huge challenge. There is no doubt that a “universal” North American Lightning Sprint rule book would be great for everyone, but it

would certainly not be easy to execute. However, imagine for a moment the opportunity to be able to travel amongst all upright Lightning Sprint organizations, knowing that you have the same equipment as everyone else. The benefits are simply endless.

My idea of a sustainable rules package for Lightning Sprint racing is based around the use of completely stock motorcycle engines burning pump gasoline only (the same way they left the factory). Back in the 1990s, I was disappointed to find many Mini-Sprint organizations that promoted unreasonably expensive engine rules. This problem has not changed with many organizations to this day. Why do we need highly-modified, expensive motorcycle engines in these cars? If Joe Racer wants to spend that kind of money building an engine that is far less reliable than when it left the factory, then my thought is that Joe Racer might want to consider racing full-size Sprint Cars.

The opportunity to “re-brand” and “re-market” Lightning Sprint racing has never been better than it is right now. Rising costs in stock car racing (Street Stocks, Super Stocks, Modifieds, etc.) are making it tough, if not impossible for these drivers to continue. If we collectively market and create truly affordable rules packages for Lightning Sprints in the correct fashion, we can attract many drivers from these other classes, as well as provide an affordable racing opportunity for younger drivers who wish to graduate from their starter classes. Collectively, let’s see what we can do to make this sport more attainable for everyone. Our ultimate success or failure, in my opinion, will be directly linked to our rule books.

When we created the Northern Lightning Sprint Association (www.nlsprints.com), our goal was to make certain this class ended up in the position that it was originally intended to be: fun, fast and affordable. Using a democratic voting process and the long-term vision of many excited new drivers, we created a rule book that will serve to keep this sport growing in Canada for many years to come. It is important to note that the NLSA has only been in existence since October of 2008. And although we have yet to turn a wheel as an organization, I am proud to announce that the NLSA already has 14 cars ready to race in 2009. My guess is that we will have several more very soon.

Your comments and observations are welcome at dpallen@darrenpallen.com

Regards,

Darren Pallen

www.nlsprints.com