

June 20th 2009

Pro Challenge Series Lives Up To Hype at Varney

If you would have told me Saturday at noon that the green flag would drop at Varney Motor Speedway that same night, I would have thought you were off your rocker! With nothing but grey clouds in the sky, the rains that had drifted in and out of Southern Ontario had subsided. Mother Nature tried her hardest to deter track officials yet again but, she didn't know that the Ontario Pro Challenge Series was on hand for their first-ever night of racing at Varney and; sending them home packing without giving them a chance to electrify the fans at the fastest 1/4 mile in Ontario; was not an option.

A year in the making, the Pro Challenge Series was anxious to take to the high-banks. After a rain-cancelled event last season at Sauble Speedway, a few of the Pro Challenge cars stopped at Varney to turn some practice laps and get a feel for the track. The end result was a drive to bring the rest of the series' drivers to the track for a full-blown race event. Saturday night would be that night and the Challenge cars would not disappoint. The 3/4 scale NASCAR appearing cars are powered by 1000cc Kawasaki Ninja motors. The size of the car, the weight and low centre of gravity had these cars turning laps as quick Varney's Late Models.

The touring series is nearly twenty cars strong. Although not all cars in the series made it to Varney this night, the competition was fierce and after 50 laps, the margin of victory in the feature race was less than one car length.

As the field rolled onto the track for their first (and definitely not last) feature race at Varney, the 66 year old veteran; #85 Malcolm McMaster sat on the pole and, right along side him, the Pro Challenge points leader #04 Tim Forbes. When the green flag flew, Forbes jumped out to the early lead from outside the front row. He would hold the top spot unchallenged for the first dozen laps.

From back in the pack, the young gun, #66 Josh Nicholson was steadily picking cars off as he marched to the front. After dispatching his father, #99 Ken Nicholson, the younger of the two moved into the second position and set his sights on the leader. Also on the move, #02 Dennis Thomson followed the same path as J. Nicholson and found himself in the third position early on.

Lap 15 was the breaking point of the race when J. Nicholson dove to the inside of Forbes exiting turn two. Thomson hooked onto the back bumper of Nicholson and the pair blew by the leader heading into turn three. There would be no change up front then, on lap 47, McMaster and #14 Tim Shanahan spun battling for position in turn four bringing out the first caution of the race and, only three laps from the finish. What little lead Nicholson had over Thomson was now gone. Not only that, Forbes, K. Nicholson, #60 Scott Fletcher and #10 Bob Hopton; who were all gaining on the leaders; would now restart the race packed up with the leaders.

On the restart, something let go on Forbes' car and the series points leader spun to the infield in turn two bringing out the yellow flag once again. The field was realigned for another restart setting up a green-white-checker finish. The nearly packed house was on their feet as the young Nicholson brought the pack to the green. Thomson tried to get a run on the outside of Nicholson out of turn two but could not make the pass before they hit turn three. Out of turn four, Thomson tried the inside as Nicholson drove under the white flag. With less than a lap to go, Thomson looked to the inside line again out of turn two but could not get along side the leader. Turns three and four were the last ditch attempt for Thomson to steal the win and, once again, he dropped down underneath Nicholson out of turn four as the two drivers raced side-by-side to the checkered flag. By less than a car length, it was #66 Josh Nicholson edging Thomson for his first ever feature race win in the Pro Challenge series in eight years of competition. K. Nicholson held onto third with Fletcher and Hopton rounding out the top five. Qualifying heat races run earlier in the evening were won by Hopton and J. Nicholson.

The fans were thrilled by the performance and competition displayed by this touring series and talks are already underway to bring the full field back to Varney next season.