



Joliet's heart races



MARINA MAKROPOULOS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Elias Godinez, 10, of Joliet tries his skills at a 20-lap race game at FanFest on Thursday in downtown Joliet. Tens of thousands of people flocked to the event preceding a weekend of NASCAR racing at Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet.

■ Downtown FanFest: Up to estimated 30,000 people at pre-race event

By Ted Slowik
STAFF WRITER

JOLIET — Tens of thousands of people flocked to downtown Joliet on Thursday evening, drawn to an ever-expanding FanFest on the eve of the fifth year of NASCAR racing at Chicagoland Speedway.

The downtown crowd, which organizers estimated at up to 30,000, came in search of racing-related fun, merchandise, live music, food and beverages.

"I like how it gets you close to other fans, and to have a one on one with drivers," said Sarah Glog of Naples, Fla. Glog had just obtained an autograph from driver David Stremme, who will make his Nextel Cup debut behind the wheel of No. 14 during Sunday's Sheetrock 400.

Glog, a Joliet native, brought her 4-year-old son, Tyler, to FanFest.

"He's been looking forward to it all week," she said.

Henry Martin and his children joined the throng gathered downtown. Martin, 35, remembers growing up in Joliet and coming downtown for a summer festival that later was moved to Joliet Memorial Stadium.

"I think it's excellent that people come downtown," Martin said.

Last year's FanFest drew between 20,000 and 25,000 people, and organizers were prepared for more this year. Attendance swelled around 7:30 p.m. when 7,000 fans poured out of Silver Cross Field, where NASCAR drivers and

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other celebrities played a charity softball game.

"This is so much bigger than last year," said Tom Mahalik, who handles marketing for the City Center Partnership booster group. "FanFest appeals to a broader area. We're bringing in people from 25, 30 miles away. It's talked about in the NASCAR community, and we're getting national recognition."

Erin McCann, 30, and Robert Chatman, 28, both of Carol Stream, traveled from the northwest suburb to take in the sights.

They raced in a simulator that is a full-sized NASCAR vehicle with computer screens in place of a windshield. Spectators get to experience what it's like to spin four laps around a track at high speeds.

Chatman averaged 204 mph during his simulated laps.

"I'd have been faster if I didn't go over the line on that first lap," he said.

Youngsters at the Kid Zone could race NASCAR models, scale a climbing wall and bounce through an inflatable obstacle course. Live performances included Jake and Elwood and the Big Fun Band, a Blues Brothers tribute revue. And Chicago, Van Buren and Cass



MARINA MAKROPOULOS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Dale Erickson of Joliet checks out the interior of a restored 1934 Ford with a skull gear shifter during Thursday's FanFest in Joliet. Hot rods and NASCAR qualifying cars were parked along Chicago Street for the event.

streets were filled with vintage Corvettes, Camaros, Mustangs and other classic vehicles that regularly appear at local cruise nights.

This year's event featured more activities, more entertainment and more driver appearances than previous FanFests, Mahalik said. It also featured more corporate sponsors, headed by FedEx and including Great Clips, Office Depot, Chevrolet, the Army National Guard, Consort For Men stylists and Beneficial financial services.

FanFest also gives local groups the opportunity to raise money by selling concessions.

Volunteers from the Joliet West High School Band worked the Kid Zone, and parents and coaches from JTHS baseball manned a beer tent.

"You can't beat that, how local organizations can benefit from a national event," said Don Fisher, planner for the city of Joliet.

Ten stylists from Great Clips offered to cut hair at no cost, but they gladly accepted donations on behalf of the Ronald McDonald House.

"All the stylists donate their time and tips for a good cause," said Great Clips' Sandy Prohammer.

2005 FanFest secures most support in history

■ **Tonight's festivities:**
Begin at 5 p.m in
downtown Joliet

USG
SHEETROCK
400

kick off NASCAR weekend. The presenting sponsor, FedEx, leads a list of corporate

sponsors that includes Great Clips, Comcast, Office Depot, the National Guard, Consort for Men Hair Products, Beneficial Financial, AAA, Budweiser and Chevy. NASCAR drivers appearing at FanFest include Kasey Kahne, Carl Edwards and Kerry Earnhardt, among others.

"The City of Joliet has become the motor sports capitol of the Midwest

and FanFest is a great example of that," said Arthur Schultz, the Joliet mayor. "Joliet welcomes the thousands of spectators that will attend this year's event and thanks all of the sponsors for their support."

Part of Chevy's sponsorship includes supporting the event with its state-of-the-art, mobile band stage, which highlights the Chevy ChicagoReveloution.com Tour. The Big Fun Band featuring Jake and Elwood, genuine Blues Brothers impersonators, will take the stage and entertain FanFest attendees.

Jake and Elwood have entertained hundreds of thousands of people all over the world for the last 17 years.

"The national and local sponsorship support, the participation of the drivers and Chicagoland Speedway, and the support of our radio partner Next Media has been tremendous," said Tom Mahalik, vice president of Joliet City Center Partnership. "These great entities work so hard with us to bring the best FanFest event to downtown Joliet and allow us to offer this event free of charge to our

visitors. We cannot wait until Thursday night."

Fans in attendance will also have the opportunity to meet some of the biggest names in NASCAR and experience NASCAR showcars, exhibits and driving simulators. Kahne, Carl Edwards, David Stremme and Earnhardt lead an all-star cast of drivers who will be announced on the entertainment stage for a question-and-answer session.

For a complete schedule of drivers and entertainment please visit www.jolietfanfest.com.

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD NEWS

JOLIET — The Downtown Joliet City Center Partnership announced Wednesday tonight's 2005 Joliet FanFest presented by FedEx has secured the most driver and sponsor support in its five-year history.

FanFest is an outdoor festival beginning at 5 p.m. and running until 11 p.m. in downtown Joliet to