



Paul Kaiser – 2011 FFR National Champion

Lexington, OH – September 8-11, 2011

Weather and mechanical issues kept the Challenge Series racers busy at the 2011 NASA National Championships. Fifteen Challenge Series racers started rolling into the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course as early as Monday morning for a week's worth of testing and racing. In attendance were Paul Arnold (TN), Greg Wellinghoff Jr. (OH), Gregg Wellinghoff Sr. (OH), Lyle Rikken (IL), Peter LaRose (MI), Brian Sanders (OH), Paul Kaiser (VA), John George (NH), TC McNett (CA), Carl Thompson (DE), Scott McKay (FL), Andrew Switlyk (FL), Wayne Patterson (PA), Tom Lavelle, and Scott Lear. Jim Schenk (MA) was also in attendance with his Challenge Car, running in the Super Unlimited class, with the proposed new spec set-up.

Monday and Tuesday were Mid-Ohio test days. McKay and Switlyk took advantage of these days to reacquaint themselves with the track. Tuesday afternoon saw the arrival of a majority of the racers to set up for the Wednesday test-n-tune. Wednesday was wet but a few racers took to the track while others opted to sit out and guarantee their cars would be in one piece at the end of the day. While most cars survived the day, two did not. George was towed in after the first session with a busted radiator and nose damage after spinning off into a tire wall. In the next session Wellinghoff Sr. got a ride back to the paddock on the piggy-back after hitting the pit straight wall hard. This took out the complete right front corner of the car. After several trips for parts and borrowing from others, both cars were put back together and ready for Thursday.

Thursday brought the first true day of the championships and more rain with it. In the morning warm-up session, McNett found himself off the track and into the wall. His damage was almost identical to that of Wellinghoff Sr. Ten of the fifteen racers went out for qualifying and Arnold was able to grab the pole for the first qualifying race. With Wellinghoff Sr.'s car repaired in time for the race, eleven racers made their way to the grid. Four racers did not, McNett damage, Sanders and Rikken opted to sit out of the wet race, and Lear did not have a car yet. Scott Lear is a writer for Grassroots Motorsports and was using Mark Dougherty's Challenge Car for a first person point of view article on the Challenge Series and Nationals. Look for this article in a future issue of GRM.

Thursday Qualifying Grid

Paul Arnold, Scott McKay, John George, Paul Kaiser, Carl Thompson, Andrew Switlyk, Peter LaRose, Greg Wellinghoff Jr., Tom Lavell, Wayne Patterson, Gregg Wellinghoff Sr.



The qualifying races are very short, true sprint races. McKay jumped to the lead and stayed there until the last corner when Arnold got a run and beat him to the line for the win. Kaiser got the jump on George but couldn't hang on to it. Wellinghoff Jr was the big gainer, moving up three positions to finish fourth.

Thursday Qualifying Race Finish

Paul Arnold, Scott McKay, John George, Greg Wellinghoff Jr., Paul Kaiser, Carl Thompson, Andrew Switlyk, Peter LaRose, Gregg Wellinghoff Sr., Tom Lavell, Wayne Patterson

Thursday evening many of the racers went to a banquet and tour at the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield where the Shawshank Redemption was filmed. There's hardly anything better than a good meal with good friends!

Friday morning the racers woke up to a beautiful dry day. Mark Dougherty made it to the track after with his car for Scott Lear to drive. This was no small feat for Mark. The decision to make this happen was only decided two weeks prior to the start of Nationals. So Mark had thirteen days to take a very non-spec legal car and bring it up to spec. At the same time he had to battle the torrential rain the northeast was seeing. But he did it and the car ran well in its first outing. TC McNett also had his car back together and was ready for a great day of competition. All fifteen drivers took to the track for qualifying.

Friday Qualifying Grid

Paul Kaiser, John George, Scott McKay, Paul Arnold, Greg Wellinghoff Jr., Brian Sanders, Gregg Wellinghoff Sr., Lyle Rikken, Andrew Switlyk, Carl Thompson, TC McNett, Scott Lear, Tom Lavell, Peter LaRose, Wayne Patterson

Kaiser led Friday's qualifying race from start to finish giving us a hint of what was to come. On the second lap, the lower radiator hose separated on George's car dumping water on the track in turn one causing him, Arnold, and McKay to spin. The next four cars got by them slip-sliding through turn one.

Friday Qualifying Race Finish

Paul Kaiser, Greg Wellinghoff Jr., Scott McKay, Gregg Wellinghoff Sr., Lyle Rikken, Brian Sanders, TC McNett, Paul Arnold, Andrew Switlyk, Carl Thompson, Tom Lavell, Scott Lear, Peter LaRose, Wayne Patterson, John George

After the race on Friday, everyone started looking their cars over and preparing them for Saturday's Championship race. George had the most work, fearing damage to the engine after losing all the water. After pulling the heads and replacing gaskets, he got it back together and ready to go for Saturday.



Saturday started as another nice dry day but rain was threatened to come in the early afternoon. All hoped to get the race in before the rain came and we did. The grid for the Championship race is set based on the points awarded for finishing position in the two qualifying races. Kaiser and McKay tied on points for the pole. The tiebreaker looked to the fastest lap from any session. That gave the pole to McKay.

Championship Race Grid

Scott McKay, Paul Kaiser, Greg Wellinghoff Jr., Paul Arnold, Gregg Wellinghoff Sr., John George, Carl Thompson, Andrew Switlyk, Peter LaRose, Tom Lavell, Wayne Patterson, Lyle Rigger, Brian Sanders, TC McNett, Scott Lear

At the drop of the green flag the race was on. As usual, for starts, some drivers got away clean and others found themselves bottled up. McKay grabbed the lead but it was short lived as Kaiser took the lead on lap two at the end of the back straight and never looked back. On lap four, Switlyk pulled to the side of the back straight when his engine let go. George and Arnold battled for the first 6 laps, trading position back and forth until George's engine gave up again and he retired. Wellinghoff Jr. was having a strong showing until his power steering blew on lap four. Then on lap eight he was shown the meatball and reported to pit lane. Having decided that all the fluid was gone from the power steering, he returned to the race having lost four positions. Late in the race, Wellinghoff Sr. tried an inside pass on McNett entering the keyhole. He locked up the right front, popped the tire, and ended up in the tire wall. This allowed Rigger to take advantage of McNett and steal a spot.

Championship Race Finish

CHAMPION Paul Kaiser
2nd Scott McKay
3rd Paul Arnold
4 Lyle Rigger
5 TC McNett
6 Brian Sanders
7 Greg Wellinghoff Jr.
8 Scott Lear
9 Carl Thompson
10 Peter LaRose
11 Wayne Patterson
12 Tom Lavell
13 Gregg Wellinghoff Sr.
14 John George
15 Andrew Switlyk



After the race, all cars were impounded while the trophy presentation was made and the racers could recall tales of the race and congratulate each other. The top cars were sent on to tech inspection while the others were released to the paddock. Over the next several hours, drivers packed up, said their good-byes, and hit the road.

As with all racing, this Nationals had its ups and downs for many but overall was a huge success. Paul Kaiser has been on the podium several times but always missed that top step. His domination of this race proved he deserved it. Congratulations Paul and all the other drivers. Each one of you tasted a victory in some way. The camaraderie in the paddock as everyone helped in the repairs of other racers cars, once again proves why FFR is the best Series.

You can watch video of the race at SpeedcastTV.com. The race starts around the 45 minute mark. Also keep an eye on the forums for video and picture links as they become available.

Is it too early to start thinking and planning for next year's Nationals?

Brian Sanders
Great Lakes/Midwest FFR Series Director