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Racing death has become a source of help for others

BY DUANE FRAZIER
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Danny King wanted to walk away from racing.

Who could blame him?

Sell everything. The cars, the car hauler, the memories.

Get rid of it all.

On Aug. 11, 2006, Danny's son, Steve, died from injuries suffered in a sprint car racing accident in Knoxville, Iowa.

Steve King, 33, was Danny's only son. The two were partners in business on their farm in Jetmore, and they were partners in racing.

Nearly inseparable.

"We worked together, ate together and played together," Danny King said. "We were really more like brothers than a father and son."

Steve's death was devastating to the King family. They farmed more than 3,000 acres of farmland and they had a feedlot with nearly 2,000 cattle.

Racing, meanwhile, was part of every spare moment. Danny King had been a successful car owner for more than 40 years.

Steve grew up around the high-powered dirt track cars, and he was racing by the time he was a teenager.

He won numerous races and track championships as a driver. He also won a pair of National Championship Racing Association Sprint titles.

Nearly everywhere the Kings went, Steve was a threat to win.

One accident changed it all.

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Steve King suffered a fatal head injury when a broken suspension part sent his winged, open-wheel car slamming into a retaining wall.

The accident ended a life, and it forever changed the lives of the remaining King family members.

"I tried to get rid of everything," Danny said. "I didn't want any reminders."

Then cards and letters began arriving at the Kings' home northwest of Jetmore. Some cards had words of support. Others were filled with money.

And the cards kept coming. Steve's racing Web site was loaded with supportive e-mails from as far away as Australia.

Steve was gone, but no one was ready to forget him.

"We were overwhelmed," said Naomi King, Steve's mother. "We found out just how generous the racing community really is."

The Kings considered taking the donated money and establishing a memorial to honor Steve. Instead, they decided to create the Steve King Foundation.

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A Web site, stevekingfoundation.org, helps support racing families in need. When a driver, crew member, track

official or an immediate family member is killed or injured while participating in a dirt track racing event, the foundation will provide some financial assistance.

"It's really an outgrowth of our tragedy," said Steve's sister, Danette Amstein. "Our family has been overwhelmed by the support."

Danny King said the foundation already has provided assistance to nearly a dozen people.

"It's not a lot of money," he said. "It may be \$500 that we send to someone. But after the loss we suffered, it's good to be able to do something that honors Steve."

One foundation recipient, Colorado racer Kelly Boen, found the perfect way to thank the Kings for their support. He gave the money back.

Boen was injured in a racing accident last month and received \$500 from the foundation. Boen returned the money along with an additional \$500 check.

"They didn't even know who I was, and they were willing to help me out," said Boen, who broke his back and left shoulder in the accident. "I was so moved by the whole thing, I know I had to do something."

Boen said he is fortunate. He has a successful business and financial backing to pay his hospital bills. That's why he decided to contribute to the foundation.

"What they are doing is just awesome," Boen said. "I applaud their efforts, and I hope they are able to help a lot more people."

Danny King admits the foundation hasn't helped him completely overcome his grief.

At times, he said, the foundation is a painful reminder that his son is gone.

"I'm still devastated," he said. "I'm just ruined, and I don't know how I'll ever get over it. I just have to keep moving on."

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Danny King first got involved with racing in the early 1960s. He was car owner to one of the most successful teams in Kansas. Over the years, some of his winning drivers included Dave Frusher, Jon Johnson, Arnold Horner, Roy Bryant and Doug Wolfgang.

And as Steve grew up around the business, Danny knew it was only a matter of time before his son would want to get behind the wheel.

"I kept telling him, 'No, no, you just work on it,' " Danny said. "But Steve said, 'Dad, I'll go to K-State and get my degree if you let me drive it.' "

The Kings agreed, and Steve fulfilled his promise by getting a degree in animal science.

Soon, the Kings were working together on the farm and winning races all over the Midwest.

"Everything in our family's world was planned around racing," said Danette, who shares the same birthday with her younger brother. "Racing was always a big deal with our family."

On the night Steve died, however, the rest of the King family wasn't at the track. Danette was in North Carolina, her home for the past nine years. Danny and Naomi had remained in Jetmore because Danny's mother was hospitalized with a broken leg.

All of them were listening to the event on the Internet. The Knoxville Nationals are sprint car racing's biggest event, and Steve already had set a track record on the first night of qualifying.

He was leading when he suffered a hard crash on the final lap of a preliminary race.

Within minutes, the Kings got the call from Iowa. Steve was critically injured and headed for the hospital.

"I flew up that night," Danny King said. "I was completely stunned."

Steve died the following afternoon.

"We had everything money could buy. He had the HANS (Head and Neck Support) device," Danny King said. "He had the best equipment you could have. And he was gone."

After the accident, Danny King never expected to be around racing again. It was just too painful.

But Danny King never expected the support he received, either.

Today, he's working with some friends again on a sprint car. It's driven by Derek Drown, one of Steve's best friends.

The car will compete tonight in an NCRA Sprint race at 81 Speedway. The event starts at 7 p.m.

Along with racing, the event also is a fundraiser for the Steve King Foundation. Among the events planned is a 110-mile motorcycle fun run.

Danny King remains overwhelmed by the support of the racing community.

"People are just so great," he said. "I get out there and see the racing community, and that's been a big help for me.

"Steve wouldn't want me sitting at home."

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