

Tony Stewart, John Andretti brighten day for Riley Hospital patients

NASCAR drivers praise young patients for their positive attitudes.



By Curt Cavin
Posted: July 24, 2008
(317) 444-6409

NEW CASTLE, Ind. -- Two-time NASCAR champion Tony Stewart was the featured guest at Wednesday's Kroger Race for Riley, a fundraiser benefiting Riley Hospital for Children. Or was he?

Stewart insisted that honor belonged to Cameron Holt, an 8-year-old Riley patient from Plainfield, who suffers from terminal brain cancer. Holt was one of the primary reasons Stewart flew in his private plane -- at his expense -- to New Castle Motorsports Park for a meet-and-greet with Riley supporters.

Stewart called stricken children like Holt "the best role models," insisting they don't complain about the situation they face.

"They're always convinced they're going to beat it," Stewart said.

Wednesday's event at the track owned by former Indy-car driver Mark Dismore was part of a three-day celebration of the work done at the Indianapolis hospital. Now in its 12th year, the event has raised more than \$1 million, with a single-year record \$200,000 expected this year when money is tallied later in the week.

Individual donations still can be made by buying Riley's paper balloons at Kroger locations in Indiana.

Stewart has become the marquee name at the event, but the effort continues to be driven by fellow driver John Andretti and Indianapolis radio talk show host Dave Wilson of WIBC-93.1 FM.

The event grew from friendly on-air banter between Wilson's producer, Matt Hibbeln, and Andretti, who seemed to always have problems in his NASCAR races. A match race between Hibbeln and Andretti has grown into several classes of go-kart races, including one for media members, and a host of sponsors lending support.

Chad Leakey, representing the Knightstown (Ind.) Banner, won Wednesday's media race.

Andretti said unlike most foundations, all donations from the event go to the hospital. Expenses are covered by individuals.

Andretti praised Stewart's generosity, but he said there's been a reward for Stewart, too.

"He's been here the past three years and he's won the Brickyard twice," Andretti said. "We feel we're helping him, too."

Stewart told organizers the event is a fixture on his schedule. "I wouldn't miss this for the world," he said.

Stewart spent 15 minutes with Holt, signing every piece of memorabilia in his tote bag, but Stewart refused to provide details of his new NASCAR team. Those will come in a Friday news conference, he said.

Instead, Stewart steered the discussion toward fishing, Holt's pet snake and how Holt told Andretti that Stewart was his favorite race driver.

"Did he take it OK?" Stewart asked of Andretti.

Holt said yes.

Andretti understood why.

"Tony shows up here, signs (autographs) for everybody and four hours later he's out in the weeds watching go-karts (run)," he said. "He's here because he wants to be here. That's what's great about him."