



Shattered Dreams, One Year Later

Chris Russell remembers the good times as he struggles to cope with the loss of brother Darrell

By Matthew Brammer

Photos by Roger Richards, Brian Wood, James Drew, Dave Kommel (<http://www.autoimagery.com/>) and courtesy of <http://www.darrellrussell.com/>

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An advertisement for TORCO RACING FUELS. At the top, the TORCO RACING FUELS logo is displayed. Below it, the headline reads "Tired of DIE[] Gasoline?". The text describes the "Torco Race Fuels Mach Series Accelerator" as a race fuel concentrate that can take no-lead 93-octane pump gas into the 104 range. It features an image of two women sitting on a purple TORCO fuel can. The ad also includes the text "OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE WITHOUT CARRYING A LARGE AMOUNT OF FUEL!", the phone number "1-800-67-TORCO", and the website "www.torcoragefuels.com".

Brother. The word means so many different things – everything from a man who shares the same parents or the word used to address a close friend, to a word used to express surprise, annoyance or disappointment.

For the four Russell brothers, however, it meant so much more than words. After tragically losing two of his brothers, Chris, the youngest of the clan, is searching for direction for his life when things used to be so clear.

Burnell and Gwen Russell raised their family with two very distinct values: the importance of family and a passion for racing. "Mom and dad definitely

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taught us a deep spiritual faith as a family, but for us, Sunday was race day. We spent our time together as a family at race tracks,” Chris Russell recalled.



The older Russell brothers, Mickey and Ronnie, passed down their love of motorsports and racing to their younger siblings. With only 16 months separating Darrell and Chris, the pair were inseparable – practically twins.

Chris said, “Darrell and I shared a room when we were younger, and he was always a gearhead. He had drag racing calendars and pictures of Joe Amato’s old Valvoline car and Dick La Haie’s Miller Light car all over our room, but we weren’t doing anything in drag racing. He just loved it.”

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As a family, they shared life, laughter, and even tragedy. When Chris was only 17, his oldest brother, Mickey, passed away due to a blockage in the main artery leading into this heart. "It was a freak thing," said Chris. "He had no idea that there was any problem at all, but it just bit him."



"Darrell and I shared a room when we were younger, and he was always a gearhead," recalled Chris. "He had drag racing calendars and pictures all over our room."

me go to work."

"I never had an interest in driving," he said. "I just focused on learning what it took to make the car go down the track." As the boys progressed in the sport, success soon followed. Darrell began to win races and Chris was honored as the Division Four Crew Chief of the year in 1996.

"It took a lot to get through that, but we all went on with our lives eventually, always missing him, but going on," he said.

Still teenagers when losing their brother, Chris and Darrell started drag racing and building their boyhood dreams.

"When we made the move to drag racing from motocross, there was never a question about who was going to drive the car. He was the driver and I grabbed a wrench and said, 'let

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Chris recalled, "When Darrell and I started racing together in the alcohol class, we didn't even think about Top Fuel. We didn't look to see who No.1 was, we didn't care who won, and we didn't care if they were running. We were living a dream and having a ball."

"There was a turning point, though," he said. "In 1997, ironically in St. Louis, [NHRA track announcer] Alan Reinhart approached our trailer and said, 'Hey, Bob Vandergriff wants to meet y'all.'"

“We were working on the car, so Reinhart said, ‘When you get a chance, I’ll bring him by and you’ll have a chance to talk with him.’

“We got all excited, thinking [Vandergriff] was going to add an alcohol car and sponsor our deal. We didn’t even think about Top Fuel back then. He and Reinhart stopped by and Vandergriff said, ‘When you’re done working on your car, come down and talk to me.’

“We finished our stuff and walked down to his pit, and he said to Darrell, ‘Have you ever thought about driving a Top Fuel car?’ And, of course, Darrell smiled from ear to ear, and I was thinking, ‘Oh, shit.’



“When we made the move to drag racing from motocross, there was never a question about who was going to drive the car,” said Chris. “He was the driver and I grabbed a wrench and said, ‘let me go to work.’”

“From that day, all we wanted to do was go Top Fuel racing. We won that St. Louis race in ’97, and Bob Vandergriff watched every one of our runs – all from the starting line. We were thinking, ‘Man, this is it. We’re finally going to do it.’



“When Darrell and I started racing together in the alcohol dragster class, we didn’t even think about Top Fuel. We were living a dream and having a ball.”

Chris and Darrell were bitten by the nitro bug and expanded their racing dreams to joining the professional ranks.

“It just hit us like a ton of bricks,” Chris said. “That day, we started to do whatever we could to get a Top Fuel deal. We wanted to stick with the family thing and have our own deal, but, of course, it’s expensive to do, and we didn’t have any money. We couldn’t raise the money. In ’98 we didn’t race the alcohol car, and sold it, and the guy who bought it, Brian McWilliams, hired us to

run it for him, so we did that in ’99.”

After a year of racing as hired driver and crew, the Russell brothers completely focused on finding a sponsor and getting Darrell into a Top Fuel car. Their efforts took them through the pits, and the affable pair quickly made friends with several of the drivers they had knew from the sportsman ranks, including Gary Scelzi and Ron Capps.

“Near the end of 2000, Scelzi called and told us that Joe [Amato] was going to retire,” he said. “We sent Joe a driver profile – before he’d even announced that he was going to retire. After he officially made the announcement in Pomona at the end of the year, Joe called Darrell from Hawaii and offered him the seat. Interestingly, at the same time, Don Prudhome had called and offered Darrell the job driving the Skoal car that Tommy Johnson is driving. So, we went from having nothing to two offers. Darrell took the job with Amato – a man he’d never met in person.



After selling their alcohol car in 1999, the Russell brothers focused on finding a sponsor and getting Darrell into a Top Fuel car. When friend Gary Scelzi told them that Joe Amato was going to retire, they sent him a driver profile. Amato later called Darrell and offered him the seat.

“They didn’t need a crew guy, they just needed a driver, so I kept going on about my business, trying to find something to start my own team,” Chris added.

As Darrell’s successes increased, the brothers relished their position. Chris continued to work on funding the dream by searching for sponsors for the family team that Darrell would hopefully some day drive. Circumstances brought him to a close friendship with Texas developer David Powers – the sponsor and owner of the team Chris works with today.



The dreams were crushed in the blink of an eye during the second round of eliminations on June 27, 2004, when Darrell Russell’s Top Fuel dragster blew a tire and crashed heavily just after crossing the finish line at Gateway International Raceway in Madison, Illinois. The official report was that Darrell succumbed to injuries he received in the crash.

At the one-year anniversary of his brother’s death, the pain for Chris is still evident by his cracking voice and long pauses to gain his composure as he tells the story.

After Darrell started driving for Amato, Chris continued to work on funding the family team that Darrell would hopefully some day drive. Tragically, those dreams were crushed in the blink of an eye on June 27, 2004, when Darrell died as the result of a crash at Gateway International Raceway in Madison, Illinois.

“When Darrell died, I was actually in Massachusetts at a BMX race with my son Alex,” he recalled.

“We were done for the day, and my son and I went to the movies with friends. I started to turn my phone off because I’d told my mom to just call me and leave a message about how Darrell did. For some reason, I thought,

‘You know what – I’ll leave it on just silent ring.’ I called my mom back and

told her that I was going to leave the phone on vibrate while I was in the theater, so when I answered the phone, I wasn't going to say hello and just asked her to tell me what happened.

"The movie had just started when I saw the phone start flashing. I picked it up and held it to my ear and I could hear her crying," he said. "I went outside and said, 'what happened?' and she said, 'The tire blew. The tire blew. I asked if he hit anything, and she said 'I don't think so, they said he didn't.'"

Chris tried to console his mother, saying: "He's OK. The tire blew – we've seen this a thousand times. He's going to be OK."

Russell dialed telephone numbers feverishly from the hall of the movie theater, trying to get information about Darrell's condition. Knowing things were very serious, he gathered his party and headed for his hotel. Still waiting for information, he commented to his friend while riding the elevator, "This is going to be a long night."



Since Darrell's death, Chris has gone to work for the Top Fuel team fielded by long-time friend David Powers. He readily admits to being wracked by indecision regarding his future in the sport, however.

"As soon as we got out of the elevator, the phone rang, and it was my mom. And she told me." Russell said, with the pain of that moment burning through his mind. After a pause to clear his throat, he choked out, "It was pretty devastating."

From that point, things were an emotional blur for the entire Russell family. Although the outpouring of love and support from fans greatly helped the Chris and the Russells, nothing could replace the one they loved.

Chris said, "This whole thing has torn me up. I miss my brother. I wanted to race with him, and now I know I'll never get to.

"His death just ripped the passion right out of my heart. It's gone," he said.



Facing the emotional return to the scene of the accident, Chris hesitated to project his feelings about the upcoming race.

"It happened in St. Louis. And when I go back and look at a picture, our dream of racing Top Fuel racing started in St. Louis in '97. Seven years later, it died in St. Louis," Chris said

Chris is determined to fulfill his commitment to

Powers and the team, but is honest about his feelings and emotions when it comes to racing. "When I'm out there racing, doing what I know he'd want me to do, I struggle with the fact that I have no more passion to race. It's gone. That makes it hard for me to go out there and makes me question what's next for me," he said.

with a deep sigh.

"I tell people that I feel like I'm walking through a long, dark tunnel with no lights. I'm sure that's how it will be in St. Louis - I don't know which way to go, I don't know which way is up or which way is down. I'm just

going to fight to get through it.

"None of us are looking forward to St. Louis, but it's just one thing on a long list of things that we just have to get through. It almost feels like the last giant hurdle we have to get over – and then we can move on," he said.

"For our entire family, not a day goes by that we don't think about Darrell and the loss we have suffered. For friends and fans, however, I hope that, now that a year has passed, they can move on and bring the grieving process to a close. I know that none of us will never forget him, but I hope people can go on now, having learned and been blessed by knowing him," Chris said.

Chris' plans for the future are yet to be made. With a strong sense of the need to be a leader and father in his family for his wife and children, his outlook is hazy.

"I think I'm a little better now than I was right after Darrell died. I understand how important my family is, and I do everything I can to try to take care of them first.

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"When I'm out there racing, doing what I know he'd want me to do, I struggle with the fact that I have no more passion to race. It's gone. That makes it hard for me to go out there and makes me question what's next for me," he said.

While undecided about his future in racing, Chris was certain to comment about rumors regarding possible legal actions regarding his brother's death.

"As far as any lawsuits or legal actions, the Russell family isn't involved and we don't support anything like that at all," he said firmly. "Darrell was a racer. He understood the risks. He didn't want to die in a car, but he understood that it was a possibility. He would never have wanted anyone associated with racing to be sued over an accident. He would not want to be known as the guy who dragged the sport into the dirt."

Chris plans to honor his commitment to David Powers and Valvoline for the rest of the year, in spite of his feelings and indecision. He said the fans that approach him at races to talk about Darrell keep him going from day to day.

“I told David when we started this team that I don’t know if I want to do this again, but I’m going to try. I’m going to at least let myself decide that this is what I want to keep on doing,” Chris explained.

With a bright note in his voice, he said, “I do love talking with Darrell’s fans. At the races they come by and they want to talk to me and tell me what big fans they are of Darrell’s. They probably think I’m crazy, but I just give them a big hug – and you know, it makes me feel better.

“It doesn’t make everything worth it, but it makes what I’m doing now that much more worth it. That helps me, my mom, my dad – it helps all of us get through it.

Every day, the sun rises and sets, and for Chris Russell, that provides comfort. He and his parents commissioned a website to honor his brother, <http://www.darrellrussell.com/>.

While initial proceeds from the site went to help support Darrell’s widow, Julie, all proceeds from January 2005 are being donated to Racers For Christ. “Larry Smiley was such a comfort to me and my parents during that entire time. They do such a good thing at all of the races and help so many people, we just wanted to give back,” he said.

Trying to understand and bring order to his life since last June 27 is difficult. His dream of racing with his brother is gone, and he’s questioning whether to stay involved in the very thing he’s dedicated so much of his life to for years.

And most of all, he misses his brother. 



“For our entire family, not a day goes by that we don’t think about Darrell and the loss we have suffered. For friends and fans, however, I hope that, now that a year has passed, they can move on and bring the grieving process to a close. I know that none of us will never forget him, but I hope people can go on now, having learned and been blessed by knowing him.” *Chris Russell*

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