

DAN SHIRLEY TAKES IT BY A HAIR

Saskatoon racer earns inaugural W.E.S.T. title by the narrowest of margins

By Robert K. Rooney

With the scheduled third round in Calgary rained out, the Siemens Transportation Group Western Elite StockCar Tour became a Saskatoon-only series for 2007. Two races in, Todd Nichol of Edmonton and local hero Dan Shirley had established themselves as the men to beat with each boasting a WEST victory.

On Sept. 1, 18 WEST teams assembled at Auto Clearing Motor Speedway. Shirley scored first blood, dropping the track record under 15 seconds for the first time with a lap of 14.984. Nichol was a couple of ticks of the watch behind in second. This qualifying result placed the two in different heat races, which they duly won without too much trouble.

At the start, Shirley seized the point from his pole position while Nichol dropped in right behind. "My plan is always the same," Nichol explained. "Stalk the leader. Get him to burn off his tires and, with 20 to go, move him out of the way and win the race."

The two maintained their positions throughout the first half of the race. Things got dramatic in the second half when a number of cars at the back of the field stacked up on a restart, bringing out the red flag. When the yellow came back out, Nichol's Canada Toseki Chevrolet team made a decision.

"I wasn't getting around Dan at that point," he recalled. "I had to try a bit of strategy." Nichol came in for a right rear tire, rejoining the field at the tail of the lead lap with three other cars between his #6 and Shirley's Co-Op Pontiac.

Two laps after the green flag, Nichol was second with Shirley's #46 about 8 lengths ahead. Five laps later the two were doing battle. Time after time, Nichol pulled alongside Shirley but was never quite able to clear his rival's blue Grand Prix.

"We battled side by side for many laps," Shirley said. "My respect for him as a driver multiplied 10-fold. He raced clean. He raced aggressively and it was all fair."

"It was clean as hell," Nichol agreed. "I didn't have a scratch on my car. It surprised me. It surprised Dan, too." Crashing the local favourite to win wasn't exactly an option Nichol felt he had.

"I'm sure if I would have wrecked Dan Shirley I would have had a riot in the grandstands," he laughed. "I would have got Dan if it hadn't been for lapped traffic. At the end, we had the car to beat. He used

a lapped car as a pick on the last lap and that relegated me to second place."

"I was giving him the inside – I couldn't go down there anyway," Shirley recalled. "I was surprised how well the car stuck. It was one of our top races."

Nick Allen of Asquith, SK was third. Chris Dennis of Edmonton took fourth and Devon Brown finished fifth.

September 15, 2007

The first season of the Western Elite StockCar Tour ended on Sept. 15 at ACMS. Entering the finale, contenders Dan Shirley and Todd Nichols both knew what they had to do – and they did it. Nichols won the race, but Shirley finished just well enough to win the title.

Nichols out-qualified Shirley, although Paul Savoie was the quickest of all with a 15.097 for his Auto Clearing Chrysler Superstore-backed Charger. Shirley won his heat race while Nichols ran second to a moonlighting Trent Seidel in the other.

"I had to run Paul hard right out of the gate," Nichols said. Savoie managed to hold off Nichol's Chevy for six laps but the next time around the Alberta driver had the point.

Behind him, Shirley was dicing it up with Savoie, Kevin Dowler and Seidel, who was driving the Lonestar Parts Pontiac for Prince Albert driver Ben Busch.

"Trent was all over me," Shirley said. "I wasn't worrying about him because I was working the guy in front of me." Midway through the race, Seidel ducked under Shirley's Co-Op Grand Prix. After a considerable battle, Shirley managed to get back around the #49 only to have a caution flag come out, resetting the order and forcing another duel between the two. Eventually, Seidel dropped out of the lead pack, eventually being credited with 12th.

Dowler, who timed-in sixth in what may well be his last race, had his EMCO Ford Fusion running strong. Soon after he made a fairly assertive pass on Shirley, Dowler had to check up in the middle of



W.E.S.T. series champ Dan Shirley (l) with top rookie Scott Dennis (r).

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a corner. Shirley admitted that he intended to tap the #35's tail to remonstrate a little but instead ended up turning Dowler's car. "I thought, 'Whoops! That's a lot harder than I meant'," Shirley recounted.

Dowler was forced out of the race with head gasket problems and finished 16th.

Once in second, Shirley began making a determined effort to run Nichol down. With over 100 laps on the scoreboard, things started to go wrong for the former CASCAR West champion. Contact with a lapped car got Shirley sideways, but another competitor tapped his Pontiac and straightened him out.

The big deal came within sight of the end of the race when Shirley again ran afoul of traffic. This time the #46 went completely around and, although Shirley managed to keep the engine running, he was now sixth; last of the lead lap cars.

Had he finished there, Nichol would have won the title. Bad luck for Fred Whiteman and Chris Dennis on the restart was good luck for Shirley, as he passed both cars when they collided, climbing to fourth. At the finish, Shirley was nosed out by Nathan Weenk's #3 for third.

Savoie finished second to Nichol, who said he "was just cruising. I wasn't running the car hard at all." Whiteman and Dennis were credited with fifth and sixth behind Shirley.

In the final standings, Shirley was the first Siemens Transportation Group WEST champion by four points – less than one spot on the racetrack. ♦