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## Drag-racing legend Connie Kalitta perseveres after son's death

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You lose your only child in an accident, in a sport that made you a legend.

Should you walk away, or should you stay the course?

Should you feel guilt, anger or sadness? Or all three?

Connie Kalitta, the man drag racing knows respectfully as The Bounty Hunter for his hard-nosed racing days as a young man in and around the Mt. Clemens area, is robust and active at age 71. But you can see the pain in his eyes and sense of heartache left by the death of Scott Kalitta in a racing accident June 21, 2008, in Englishtown, N.J.

Those who know Connie (real name Conrad) have watched him navigate a gamut of emotions since Scott, who was 46 and a graduate of Belleville High School, died in a fiery crash at Old Bridge Township Raceway Park during qualifying for the NHRA Lucas Oil SuperNationals.

They think Connie -- who lives on Belleville Lake and was ranked No. 21 among the NHRA's Top 50 drivers of all time -- has conquered the worst of it, that is, if a parent ever can overcome watching his or her child die.

"He's been through the whole spectrum," one associate said. "But Connie is from the old school, and he's a very tough man."

Connie Kalitta, owner of Kalitta Motorsports and CEO of Kalitta Air at Willow Run Airport, said he is headed in the right direction as a new NHRA Full Throttle Drag Racing season roars to life.

You don't second-guess a man who strapped himself into a Top Fuel car in the 1960s, with only a roll bar for protection, and hurtled down a quarter-mile strip to race victories and championships; someone who has built a global cargo enterprise that hauls military and commercial goods across America and to Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

"It's been very difficult at times, it really has, since Scott's death," said Kalitta from the head of the table in his meeting room at Kalitta Motorsports in Ypsilanti. "Something happened to the engine and the fuel, and we are very close to finding out what exactly. Nitro-methanol -- it's like Jekyll and Hyde. Given the right conditions, it will explode. It can go off by itself. Anything that could go wrong went wrong. It was an ugly environment at the racetrack. It's a shame someone had to pay the ultimate."

### **A traumatic experience**

Scott Kalitta's yellow Toyota Solara Funny Car was traveling at 300 m.p.h. when the engine detonated in flames. The Funny Car's parachute was damaged and failed to slow the vehicle. Kalitta

ped through the sand trap at the end of the track and crashed into a concrete-filled post that supported the safety net. He was transported to the Old Bridge division of Raritan Bay Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead.

Almost immediately, the NHRA shortened Top Fuel and Funny Car races to 1,000 feet in an effort to reduce speeds and provide more runoff area at tracks.

Asking a man how he feels following such a traumatic event -- Connie viewed Scott's crash from the starting line -- wasn't made easier by the months that have passed since the accident. But in his first interview since the fateful day, Connie leaned back in his chair, his eyes reddening, and replied:

"Scott knew what he wanted to do, and that was race. We raced together, against one another. When Scott was young and going to Belleville High, he got himself into his share of trouble. I told him, if you finish school, there will be a car there for you (to race). He did, and I got him a blown-alcohol dragster. My bribe worked."

In his 50th year in drag racing, Kalitta is off to a good start in 2009. In the opening NHRA event of the season, Doug Kalitta -- Connie's nephew and business partner -- drove the Kalitta Motorsports Top Fuel dragster to victory in February at the Kragen O'Reilly Winternationals at Auto Club Raceway in Pomona, Calif. It was the first time the team visited the winner's circle since Scott's death.

At the time, Doug, 44, of Ann Arbor, said: "I've always wanted to win here at Pomona, more so than a lot of other tracks. Pomona is a legendary and historic track, and it means so much to me that now Connie, Scott and I have won all the Winternationals."

## 'I'd do it all over again'

Scott Kalitta won the NHRA Top Fuel title twice and was the first driver in the class to win four consecutive races. He was married to Kathy and raised two boys, Colin, 8, and Corey, 14. He lived on Snead Island in Florida and came out of retirement several times to do what he loved most -- race Funny Cars and Top Fuel machines.

"The kids are fine -- I was down there with them a couple of weeks ago," Connie said of his grandsons. "Kathy and the kids are hanging in there. Kathy's whole world crumbled when Scott was killed."

Doug Kalitta grew up close to Connie and Scott. The three spent their time flying, working on dragsters and racing them. Connie watched as the two forged their identities in drag racing -- the cousins forming a strong bond, much like a big brother and his proud younger sibling.

Scott tried his hand at operating his own airline, while Doug continued racing, finishing runner-up in Top Fuel points three times.

"Scotty sold his airline and moved to Grand Cayman Island for a while," Connie said. "He moved back to Florida and bought a marina in Palmetto. But he wanted to go racing again. His passion was always racing."

Connie is proud of his race shop in Ypsilanti, just off I-94. It houses Scott's backup Funny Car and a transporter with more workshop space than any NASCAR hauler.

Co-crew chief Jon Oberhofer, a longtime employee and friend of Connie, Doug and Scott, works on the DHL Kalitta Motorsports Funny Car, which is being driven by Jeff Arend this year.

"We have our up and down days," he said when asked about Scott. "Scotty was like a friend ... an older brother. Knowing the family, the kids -- his death struck home hard. We just hope when we

return to Englishtown in June, they've taken care of a lot of things at the track. Connie and us -- we don't want Scott to have died in vain. We always thought Scott was made of steel."

Connie Kalitta has a good sense of humor and likes to smile.

"You know, I'd do it all over again," he said of his life as The Bounty Hunter. "I've got no regrets, and I know Scott wouldn't have either."

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## Additional Facts

The Bounty Hunter

**Who:** Connie (The Bounty Hunter) Kalitta, 71.

**Hometown:** Belleville (born in New Baltimore, raised in Mt. Clemens).

**Founder:** Kalitta Motorsports, Kalitta Air.

**Driver record:** Twenty-two NHRA national event final rounds; 10 wins as a driver; first driver to break 290 m.p.h. in an NHRA-sanctioned event; inducted into the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 1992; ranked No. 21 on the 2001 NHRA Top 50 Drivers from 1951-2000; retired in 1994.

**Owner record:** Three NHRA Top Fuel championships.

**Notable:** Helped Shirley Muldowney (winner of the 1977, 1980 and 1982 NHRA Top Fuel championships) become the first woman to receive an NHRA Top fuel license; Kalitta was played by Beau Bridges in the 1983 movie "Heart Like a Wheel," the biography of Muldowney.

**Quote:** "You know, I'd do it all over again. I've got no regrets, and I know Scott wouldn't have either." Kalitta's son, Scott, died in a racing accident June 21, 2008.

**Inside:** On drag strip or airstrip, Kalitta masters the controls. Page 4C.

**Online:** See a Kalitta photo gallery at [freep.com/sports](http://freep.com/sports).

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