

Lap 38: I Learn a Lesson

It was too late to unload the car when we got home. It had been a rough night! My back and shoulders were really hurting and the pain was now right up the back of my head. When I turned my neck there was a sharp pain at the base of my skull. All I wanted to do was to go home and lay down. Not only was my body hurting but my ears were ringing so loud that I couldn't stand it! I kept looking around to see if there is an Ice Cream truck coming! It sounded like a high pitched ringing bell, the type a tiny fairy would wear! I backed the car hauler up to the front of the garage and shut it off. We tried to be quiet as I didn't want to wake up my mom and dad. They could view the carnage in the morning! We agreed to meet at 7:00 am and we all headed home.



I was at the garage at 7am. Just as I was turning in the driveway, I could see Joe coming down the road in his old Chevy pick-up. My dad was already out there inspecting the car. He said, "See you didn't win last night!" I said, "Nope!" As Joe walked up to the car I hollered to him (because I couldn't hear myself talking) "How's your ears you dumb ass?" Putting his right hand up to his right ear he laughed and said, "Ringin' like hell! Let's get this pile of junk unloaded." As we walked around the car hauler (the car was still on the truck) checking the car for damage, we decided, since we had to pull the rear end out, we would jack the rear of the car up right on the hauler. The day was beautiful so we would work outside. It would be easier. After all, it took a wrecker to get the car on the hauler and I would need one to get it off. Kirk Williams showed up and we started to work. I got the rear end jig out as I had to build a complete rear axle housing! Remember Bill Meehan, the machinist? Well, Bill kept me supplied with spare parts, such as the spindle adapters that I will need today for the new rear end housing. It was so nice to be able to just walk over to bench and from the shelf underneath, pick out the new adapters! I even had a spare Olds Rear End Housing! I started cutting the new spare rear end housing. I got the spare housing from a junkyard, just past the race track on County Route 16 just a few miles S. West of Townsend. It was called Morrow's Junkyard!

This place was way out in the boonies, between the little village of Townsend (population

of about 200) and Pappie's (now Monterey Jacks) bar, which was located on the North side of Monterey (population of 200). Morrow's Junkyard was located on County Route 16 which runs right past Watkins Glen International Raceway. Driving past the Raceway, you come to the small village of Townsend. It has a Town Grange and a little grocery store on the corner and a small church (which is now converted to a house). There are three Stop signs! Continuing out of the village the road suddenly turns from a fairly straight road to a winding, twisting, undulating narrow country road. It goes past some of the oldest, run down houses you can imagine. Some don't have electricity and use wood for heat in the winter. Stacks of cut wood are piled high along the sides of some of these houses. Continuing down the road for a mile and just over the next rise, there it is! Morrow's Junkyard! You come up on it fairly quickly but you can't miss it. There was junk all over the place! The junk was on both sides of the road, piled right up to the edge of the road. As you drove by, it was actually like you were driving right through the junkyard itself!

I remember when I went out there to get the spare rear end housing that there was nothing but junk as far as you can see. A lot of the old vehicles have been there so long that they were almost entirely covered with brush, vines and rust. Some cars had large trees growing out of the open hoods! On the right side of the road there were three, old yellow school busses. All the windows were broken out. Looking closer, I spotted the tiny holes all around the windows indicating the windows were shot out with a shotgun! The three busses were sitting in 3 foot high Golden Rod side by side and facing the road. They had no hoods as the engines had been removed. The side doors were open, sort of an evil invitation for you to anyone who dared to come in! All I could think of that the inside was full of snakes and bees! On the left side of the road was an old, rusted pay loader. The huge, dry-rotted tires were sunk at least a foot into the dirt. The huge, rusted arms were still holding drooping bucket high in the air. They were so rusted that they were stuck in that position. I looked again and there was no motor in that also. Must have had a run on engines!

Then, just past the old Pay Loader, right in the middle of all this junk, was Jerry's House Trailer. There was so much junk piled around it that a person just driving by might have thought that it was part of the Junk Yard. In front of the trailer and off to the left side was an old and battered wooden Dog Coupe. The unpainted wood was a silver gray as it was so old. The roof was faded yellow tin. It was a section of one those old School Bus roofs. A large black, short haired skinny dog was on a chain. You could tell the length of the chain as the dog had a half circle worn around the old wooden dog coupe about 8" deep in the bare, dusty ground. The door was crudely cut from the front of the Coupe. It had an old, torn burlap sack nailed to the top of the opening. It hung down about $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of the door opening. The bottom of the burlap was worn into long strands of strings. That dog was running back and forth barking like crazy. I had to laugh at the water dish. It looked like an old air cleaner cover off of an old car engine! The house trailer had dents all over it as if it had been in a stock car race at some point! There were rips in the aluminum siding and sticking out of them was the pinkish insulation that resembled cotton candy. A hole had been cut in the front wall of the trailer. Out of the hole was a 6", rusty steel stovepipe. It stuck out about a foot, then took a 90 and went straight up for 4 feet. Two old, rusty chains were wrapped around it and bolted to the side on the trailer. They hung in a long, low arc. A little triangular cap was on top of the pipe. This meant a wood stove in a House Trailer.....not really a good idea.

In front of the old green and white faded trailer was a large, dusty dirt area. It was the only clear space around the entire junk yard and there wasn't a blade of grass on it! There was just hard, dusty dirt! This must have been the "designated" work area. Surrounding the open area were old transmissions, brake drums, engines and old rims and tires. Off to the right of the house trailer and in the clear dirt area was an old dark green pickup truck. It was a four wheel drive

WWII Army Surplus type truck (1940 era). The truck was possibly a Dodge one ton pick-up. It had those huge, heavy treaded "Army" type tires on it. You could tell they were the original tires as they were all cracked and weather checked to the point you could see cords in the cracks. Mounted inside the box right behind the cab, were two 12 foot long, 3" diameter pipes. You could see the pipes were rusted badly at one time as the old black paint, now worn thin and faded, failed to hide the pits. These pipes stuck up from behind the cab at a 45 degree angle. They hung out well over the back of the truck. Behind the cab, the pipes were about 4 feet apart. At the other end the pipes came together and there was a pulley mounted between the pipes with a single, large bolt that ran through the pipes and the pulley. I noticed the large flat washers on the bolt, but what caught my eye was the nut! It was huge! Being way too big for the bolt, Jerry had welded the nut to the bolt! A rusted and frayed 3/4" steel cable ran from the top of the boom, where it was wrapped around the bolt that held the pulley and it was actually tied with a large single knot! The cable then ran to the back of the cab of the truck where an old Military Surplus winch was mounted just behind the 3" pipes. It wrapped around a bracket on top of the winch twice and then was clamped with what looked like 2 old muffler clamps. This single cable held the boom up at the 45 degree angle.

The old winch, mounted in the bed of the truck was hand operated! This thing was old! Maybe World War One era! It had a big crank that was attached to a massive gear (no cover) on the side of the winch. The shaft stuck out a hole that was torched in the side of the box of the truck. It was a jagged hole and where the green paint had burned away from the torch flame, there was now solid rust. The shaft stuck outside the truck bed about a foot. A metal bar had been crudely welded to the shaft at a 90 degree angle. At the end of the 2 foot long bar was an 8" long 3/4" bolt that ran through a piece of 1" pipe. The bolt was welded to the bar allowing the pipe to spin on the bolt. This handle that operated the winch was clean and shinny, indicating this piece of high tech machinery was used a lot! From the pulley an overly large hook hung down from another 1/2 inch cable. The hook was huge! It looked so out of place it was like what you would see on a cartoon drawing of a Tow Truck.

Now comes the scary part!

On the end of the hook, hanging from a chain wrapped around the rear chrome bumper, hung a red '57 Buick LaSabre! The front of the car was hanging from the huge hook about 4 feet off the ground. The back bumper of the Buick was touching the ground as it had no rear wheels! I looked back to the truck and the front wheels were barely touching the ground. There were no blocks under the tires of the truck to keep it from rolling.....nothing! That's not the good part! There were no jack stands or any other support under the car! All that was holding it up was the chain wrapped around the front bumper!

There, under the car, lying on his back was Jerry! Jerry was about 40 years old, 5'-6" and 230 lbs. He had salt & pepper beard and long, scraggly hair. He was good guy! I liked Jerry. It was a hot that day, around 90 and very humid! Jerry was dressed in a pair of the grungiest pair of jeans I had ever seen. He was wearing an old, ripped and sleeveless, white (it used to be white, now it was a brownish color) STP Oil Treatment T-shirt. His stomach stuck out so far that his shirt didn't cover his stomach! He had the Red Wing style boots on that had been worn to inches of their lives. Transmission fluid was leaking all over the ground and there was a large, 3 foot diameter, reddish brown puddle of it under the transmission that Jerry was trying to remove from the Buick. I bent down and looked closer and saw that Jerry's head was lying right in the pool of transmission fluid! I stood there for a minute trying to digest what is going through my eyes and into my brain! Finally he saw me and crawled out from under the car. He kicked up some dust as he got up.

Not brushing himself off at all he turned around to look at the Buick that was behind him and said, "What the hell do you want today?" I didn't say anything as I was watching the reddish brown transmission fluid drip from his long, matted down hair, off the back of his head. His uncombed, scraggly, salt and pepper hair was matted with transmission fluid mixed with dust! The fluid was now dripping down the back of his dusty T-shirt and making reddish, brown, muddy streaks down his back! My God! Its 90 degrees out! Doesn't he notice? I finally snapped out of it and said, "Hi Jerry! I need an Olds Rear End. Got one?" He turned and at the same time pointed towards the woods and said, "Go down that path over there, stay left and about 10 cars in, right by that big oak tree. See it? There is a blue '67 Bonneville right by that damned tree." I'll be down to lift it for ya soon as I let this one down." All this in 90 degree heat and the Transmission fluid and dirt didn't seem to faze him! I wish I had pictures of this junkyard. It definitely was Movie Material! Jerry's gone now and the yard is cleaned up, well almost. Oh! I forgot! When I got the rear end out, I went to pay Jerry. He was in the Trailer. I went in and there was Jerry sitting in an old, dirty and ripped easy chair. It was pretty dark in there but not dark enough to notice Jerry still had the dust on him andthe transmission fluid! I miss that old Junk Yard! It was a piece of history!

As I was cutting the new housing to the right width, I thought back to where it came from. The rest of the guys (Kirk and Eddy) were straightening the frame and sheet metal (the body). This took most of the morning. Joe had the bent rear end out and was disassembling it on the ground next to the car. That was a job as he had to remove the hubs, brake drums and all the brake parts and spindles. Then the axles came out and then the differential. Kirk was banging away with a three pound hammer straightening out the sheet metal on the body. I was sweating as I welded the new spindle adapters to the housing. Damned! Was it is HOT today! Too hot to wear a long sleeved shirt, so I had all these little red burn spots on my arms from the weld spatter. We worked right through lunch while my Dad supervised the operation. We were forced to stop when Mom brought out sandwiches!

The rest of the day we worked and we worked hard! I figured that we did 3 days work in 10 hours! The trouble was, it was 4:30 and we didn't even have the new rear axle bolted back in the car! "That's it boys! It's 4:30. That was the deal! Remember? I told you guys last night that at 4:30 we were done! Well, it's 4:30 and guess what? We're done! It's time for a beer!" I hollered with a discussed tone of voice. I really wanted to race tonight. We just ran out of time. I went to the refrigerator in the back of the shop, yeah, got a fridge now and got a couple of cold Genny Cream Ales and a Pepsi for Joe. I walked outside and handed Kirk one. He popped the tab and tossed it into the old rear end housing lying by the garage. I did the same. I took a big swallow! "AAAHhhhhhhh! That tastes so damned good!" I hollered.

Joe, who was still under the car, bolting the rear end in place, crawled out and sat up on the side of the ramp on the back of the truck. He leaned back against the car in the shade. His hands and arms are covered with oil. In a very angry voice, which actually startled Kirk and me as Joe never raises his voice, said, "What the fuck is the matter with you? I thought you were a fuckin' racer! Racers don't quit you dumb shit! What the hell's the matter with you two idiots? Don't drink another sip! Dump that damned beer and get the hell back to work! You wanted to race tonight? Well, you're gonna race tonight!" With that outburst, Joe climbed back under the car and we heard wrenches spinning so fast, it sounded like he was using an air wrench! Kirk and I didn't dare say a word! We looked at each other with our eyes wide open! We shrugged our shoulders as we dumped our beers on the dirt driveway. It was so dry that the beer dumping on the dirt actually kicked up dust as the puddle ran down towards the road! We went back to work without as much as a whisper! I hollered, "5:30.....that's it Joe! We got a 90-minute drive and we

will not make the qualifying race! It's 5:30!! WE.....ARE.....DONE! Do you hear me Joe? We're done! God damned it! Is anybody listening?" Apparently not!

Joe and Kirk didn't answer and they didn't stop working! Kirk and I plugged away as we didn't want to get another ass chewing from Joe. 5:30 came and left. A while later I hollered again, "Alright! 6:00 is the end. You got it Joe? You hear me?" As I think back on it now, maybe Joe didn't hear me. He was still deaf from the night before.

Believe it or not! We pulled out of my driveway and we were on the road to 5-Mile Point at 6:30pm! That was really stupid! I drove like crazy and an hour and 12 minutes later we pulled into the pits. It felt like I had been in a race and wasn't even at the track yet! The guy at the Pit Sign-In Booth wasn't there. The window was covered with a gray piece of plywood. It was closed! The Pit Gate was open so I drove into the pit area and parked on the end of the line of cars that were already there. You could hear the roar of the cars on the track and see the dust swirling up and over the safety fence and into the bright lights. This is not good! I didn't care for dusty tracks. Joe and Don Romeo were unloading the car when I finally found an official. I told him my story and without any expression he said, "Sorry buddy! The qualifying races are over and you missed the line up! See ya next week!" He started to turn away when I started to beg my ass off! After getting another official involved they came up with a deal. After asking a few of the local drivers if it would be ok, they said that I could start the Consolation race DEAD LAST if I wanted to try to get in the feature race. Knowing my chances of qualifying from this spot were "0", they figured they had a safe solution. I would have to finish third or better as only the first three cars qualify to make it into the feature race. This would be next to impossible! I said, "Sure! I'll do that!" The Official looked at me with a smirk on his face, like he was thinking, "You dumb shit! You're in for an ass bustin'!" I thought, "At least I'll get to race in one event"! It took too much to get here to just turn and go home! It was going to be tough as I had only been to this race track once before. Besides, it will be a good test for the car to make sure we got everything back together right as I wanted to race at Weedsport the following night.

The Consolation race is the last chance race for everyone who didn't qualify in the heat races. They are known to be the most brutal of any of the races! When you mention the Consi to any racer, they get goose bumps! If there is one thing you don't want to do in racing it is being in the Consi! Generally, in a Consi, you have the less skillful drivers that didn't qualify and they are crazy to get one of the top three spots! Not only is it not good to be in a Consi, but being dead last in a 16 car field on a tight 1/3 mile track is insane! Well, all I kept thinking was, third, I've got to get to third! The chance of getting third from last place was about a 100 to 1! One problem was that you only have 10 laps to do it! You wouldn't want these odds at Vegas! As I drove out of Turn 2 on the Pace Lap, I was flooring the car, spinning the tires and working the steering wheel back and forth to see if all the work we did was right! There was no vibration. A good sign. Some probably thought I was showing off. Not the case. After such a wreck the night before and without any warm up laps, it was a little intimidating to actually go into a corner with no testing! On the Pace Lap I was coming out of Turn 2 and the cars on the pole were already going into Turn 4! Right then reality struck! I felt kind of sad because reality set in and I realized there was NO WAY I could make it to third!

Five Mile Point is a very tight 1/3 mile oval. It is so short that when the Green flag waves, the leaders can catch the back of field in the first lap! The Green flag waved! The race was a blur! On a 1/3-mile track with 16 cars, you don't have time to breathe! It's was like being trapped inside a friggin tornado! 5 Mile Point Speedway is a fast, tight track! Cars were all over the place and if that wasn't bad enough.....tonight there was tremendous dust! Have you ever seen a movie where there is a dust storm blowing in the desert? Well I was in one! Maybe it was

better that I couldn't see! I might have pulled out if I could have seen where the Pit road was! This was a Full Contact race!! There wasn't a second when you were not banging someone or someone wasn't banging on you! Sometimes you were banged on all four sides at the same time! Going through a corner, right outside my driver's side window and not a foot from my shoulder was the right front tire from another car rubbing on my door! I could smell the rubber burning and hear his engine screaming! At the same time, my right front tire was rubbing on someone else's door on the right side of me! My head bounced off the head rest as the guy behind me rammed the rear bumper! The only reason I didn't spin out was because I had two cars on either side of me holding me straight!

When the tornado finally stopped and all the dust cleared, I didn't get third! I did the impossible! I WON the race! I won the dreaded Consi from last place! I don't know how! It was too dusty to see but I won! The car, after such a wreck the night before, handled perfect! We must have done a good job on the repairs! We picked the right stagger in the rear tires and the right setup. We made the feature race! Maybe the car was bent just right!

I started the Feature in 20th place. Don Romeo and Joe were jumping up and down when I pulled into the pits from the Consi. My ex-wife Kathy was also here, although she was in the grandstands. I wanted to win the night before (at Rolling Wheels) so bad and now I just won the Consi from dead last! I was sure the Feature was going to be a lot different! These are not the cars that didn't qualify as they were in the Consi. These would be the best and I was 20th in a 20 Lap Feature Race. Joe said, "Give it your best damned it!" and banged his fist on the hood as I went out to line up for the Feature Event. Don, who was on crutches, stood there, hunched over a little with the crutches pushing his shoulders up. He looked like a sad beagle as he had to hobble around instead of his normal brisk stride. He lifted his hand off of the crutch handle and gave a halfhearted wave.

It was his own fault he was on crutches. Well! In a way it could have been my fault. A month ago, we were at Rolling Wheels raceway. There was a huge wreck coming out of Turn 4. Oh yeah! I was in it. Everyone was out of their cars and standing around watching the wreckers hook up all the cars. I noticed an ambulance leaving the track. It had the red lights on but it was not in too much of a hurry. I said to an official near me, "Hey! Who got hurt?" He said, "I don't know who it was but one of the crew guys jumped over the rail after the wreck and snapped his Achilles tendon". I said, "Wow!" Minutes later I found out that it was Don!

Tonight was only the second time I had ever raced at Five Mile Point. At the start of the race, the leaders were right behind me on the first lap! An early caution saved me from being lapped. That's when I figured I'd better get my ass movin' as soon as the Green dropped again! Bangin' is the name of the game down here.....I'd better start BANGIN'! The first half of the race was full of wrecks and spins! Nothing serious. Mostly spins. I managed to miss them all. There was a lot of bumping and banging, just as there was in the Consi but so far there was no real damage to my car. The second half of the race went green flag all the way! This stirred up another tornado! It was so dusty that you basically had to trust the guy ahead of you! It was all you could see! Try to stay right on the bottom of the track and not back off at all. Push the guy ahead of you! Keep pushing! They call these tough short tracks Bull Rings. From green to checker it is indescribable action! You are bumping the car ahead of you. The guy behind you, bumping you! Cars bouncing off the inside of you! You slam the car on the outside of you. The noise! The engines just scream! The engines of the other cars are very close to you. At times you could reach out and touch a car as they run that close together. The heat from the engine is almost overpowering! The racing fuel and hot oil smells, mixed with dust, fill your nose. The most noticeable smell is the Wolfs Head Gear Oil. It has the most unique smell! It isn't good!

The dust was so heavy tonight that you could feel it in your mouth. You can feel the grit grinding between your teeth as you clamp your teeth together! Your eyes are watering as they are full of dust and it is really hard to see. Sweat is starting drip down the center of your forehead and down the sides of your nose. It itches! You can't rub the sweat or your eyes as you cannot open the shield! There is no time to do so and the stones and dust would surely blind you! You taste the salty sweat as you subconsciously swipe your tongue across your lips. The only thing you can do is forget about it and drive as hard and fast as you can possibly go! If you can't take it, you lose! Sometimes when you are racing, it's almost like you are possessed by an ugly demon! At times you want to get away from him but you can't! He makes you do things you thought you couldn't do or didn't want to do! Without your consent, your body and mind is taken over! A Mere Mortal could never do this! They are too smart!

On lap 17 of the 20 Lap Feature race we were in Turn 3. The car ahead of me bobbed and left room for exactly one half of my car to fit under him! Well, I, or should I say, the Demon put my whole car in the space! When an opportunity presents itself, you have only a split second to react! That's what I've been doing all night! Why stop now! I didn't know what lap it was but it had to be nearly over. "Please be over soon! Please!" I was thinking! The car that I wiggled under in Turn 3 rubbed and bounced off of me down the front straight. There was that rubber smell again! "Hope my tire stays up!" I thought. In Turn 1 I was finally ahead of him. I probably wouldn't have pulled that risky, slam bang move under him but I had to get every position that I could. We were lapping cars at an amazing pace! The track is so short so you are in traffic all the time lapping slower cars. There is not a second to relax! I passed more cars down the back straight. Must be lap cars! They were too slow to be leading. As I came out of Turn 4, through the dust, I could barely see the starter! He was waving the white flag and with his other hand he was pointing at me! That means I was leading! That can't be! One more lap and I looked at the Starter again! Sure enough, there was the Checkered Flag



Me, Kathy, Don Romeo & Joe Matwejew at 5-Mile Point Speedway (Feature Win)

That slam bang move in Turn 3 got me the WIN! It was an incredible race! I was so proud! Not only of myself, but of Joe, Kirk and Don. I parked on the front straight for pictures. Kathy came down from the stands and Joe and Don (on crutches) came out from the pits. There were more boo's than cheers! You see, I was an Outsider. I don't normally race here and fans don't like outsiders winning! I like boo's! When I win you can boo me all day long! I love it! When you get booed you know you have been noticed! Hell, Earnhardt and Gordon get boo's!

It was one hell of a race! I was completely drained! I was spitting dust out of my mouth, while some tears helped clean my eyes. To this day, I just can't believe it! This was a race to remember! Not just the race but the work it took from being wrecked the night before and winning the next night! When I was up at the Cash window (a small gray wood shed behind the grandstand), picking up my pay, there was an old man sitting outside the shed near the end of the grandstand. A light that hung from the side of the little shed the Cash window shined down on him. He was sitting in an old green and white, aluminum folding chair. The white and green nylon straps were frayed and a couple of them were broken and hanging down from under the guy's rear end. Wet, he didn't weigh 90 lbs.! He had to be in around 70 years old. He had a filthy, red racing hat on and an old, red nylon racing jacket. I think it had the Champion Spark Plug Logo on the front left of the jacket. The hat was so dirty that you couldn't read the logo on the front. There was something there, but the sweat and dust from years of watching dirt races has made it impossible to read. It must have been his favorite hat, or his only hat. His jeans were dirty and the sandals he was wearing were out of place at a race track. Yeah, his toes and ankles were dirty from walking in the dust at the track! His grayish hair was a little long and uncombed. It stuck out from under the dirty hat and curled up by his ears. He had a 5 day beard that covered his, skinny, drawn in face. The cigarette that was between his two yellow fingers was giving off a steady column of smoke. His eyes were glazed and half closed. He had no expression.

As I walked by him, after picking up my money from the Cash Shed, he said in a loud but frail voice, "That you drivin' that 17 car, boy? Yoose a stranger here, huh! Only seen ya here once before!" I turned and said, "Yeah! That was me." He said, "Helluva good run boy! Gotta tell ya sup'um though! If ya come back next week, watch yer ass! These guys don't like outsiders takin' their money home. Just a word of warnin' sonny. Don't come back and think ya's gonna win another one!" Just then, his eyes suddenly widened to huge, white globes and a serious look came on his face! It was like he was putting a period on the sentence with his eyes! He put the cigarette back in his mouth and drew on it so hard the end turned bright red. It illuminated his face in an eerie reddish tint. I took a double take! Suddenly, with that eerie, red glow, he looked just like the Devil. I swear I saw the hat rise up a little as the horns stuck out of his head! I turned quickly and walked away! WOW! He scared me! I waved over my shoulder as I said, "Thanks man!" I didn't think about him again until the following week. That's when his words came back to me in one huge bang! I know now! He was the Devil!

On the way home, everyone was quiet. I think we were so happy that we were lost in our own thoughts of how the last two days went and how unbelievably it ended. I was thinking of last night and my car sticking half way through a guard rail and how I simply gave up when 4:30 came this afternoon. Saturday, in front of the garage working on the car, Joe taught me something. You never give up! It resulted in winning two races and both of them from last place! From that day on, I was a changed man! I never gave up on anything again! As I was driving home, I had a huge smile on my face! When you really stop and think about it, this was one for the books! There was no doubt that with all the circumstances that led up to that night at Five Mile Point, that was one hell of a win! From a totally bent up race car in the morning to a Feature win that night was incredible! This surely was book material!

Lap 39: More Memorable Moments

Yeah! I did get greedy! The next Saturday night, instead of going to my regular track (Canandaigua), I went back to Five Mile Point. I went with the reasoning: "I won there last week! I can do it again!" There was one major thing I forgot! It was what that old timer (the Devil) told me after the last race. "If ya come back next week, watch yer ass! These guys don't like outsiders takin' their money home!" Well, I went back and the race was actually going fairly well. I started the Feature Race in the middle of the field. By the half way mark, I was third. I was running right on the bottom, muscling my way up through the field. I felt really comfortable. I was not being overly aggressive but steadily moving forward. Tonight the track was not so dusty. I was actually using my head and with less dust there was less contact! I had about 6 more laps to get by two more cars.

Coming through Turns 3 & 4 and without warning, my car suddenly took a hard, instant 90 degree right turn to the right! I happened so fast that I hardly had time to lift my foot off the throttle let alone hit the brake! As I hit the concrete wall nearly head on, the last thing I remember was the hood crumpling up! It looked like slow motion. My car tried, in vane, to punch a hole in through the foot thick concrete wall! After the hit, I just calmly sat there. I knew I had been in a race, but for some reason, I was just calmly sitting in my car! It was quiet and all was stopped! I remembered hearing, "Get the ambulance out here! Get it now!" I was thinking that there was another car involved. "Hope the guy isn't hurt too bad!" I thought to myself! As I came to, I realized they were calling the ambulance for me! I had been out cold! The strange thing was that I could hear everyone talking! That was weird! I didn't get in the ambulance. Probably should have. Guess my brain wasn't damaged too bad, I'm still here. I never did see that old guy that night but I'll bet that he had a smirk on that old, drawn out face. He sure knew what he was talking about! Seems someone was on the outside of me and between Turns 3 and 4 and caught my right rear quarter. On purpose or not? I don't know. This turned me 90 degrees right and straight into the concrete wall! Plain and simple, "They took me out!" Just as the "Devil" told me they would do the week before! I should have listened!

Over the next few years we were among 5 cars in the Northeast that when you showed up at a track, everyone there knew you could win! It was great! Even signed some autographs once in a while! Ever since that race at Rolling Wheels where I wrecked the car and won the next night at Five Mile Point, I have NEVER, EVER driven a race car onto a race track, whether it was a qualifying race or a Feature Event, without one thing in mind. WINNING! If I ever knew, for some reason that I couldn't win, I wouldn't go out and just drive around. I had developed a "WWT" mentality! Win or Wreck Trying! This did get me a lot of wins, but it also cost me some!

I remember one night at Weedsport Speedway. This was when I first started racing. It was Hot Laps (practice). Don Romeo, my engine builder and part time crewman, was also a photographer for Gater Racing News. Gater News is a Northeastern Racing Paper covering dirt and asphalt tracks in the Northeast. He was inside Turn 1 & 2 shooting photos when our Hot Laps were about to start. The track was very wet from the track crew watering it to keep the dust down. Don turned to the photographer next to him and without saying a word, pointed, (like Babe Ruth did when he hit the famous home run) to a spot way over across the track to the Forth turn concrete wall. Then he calmly said one word to the photographer next to him, "Vickio!" Don knew the track was wet and he knew how I thought! It was just Warm Ups, but I had to be fastest! I couldn't just go out there and cruise around. I was new at this and my brain, for some strange reason, quit working every time I put my helmet on! Maybe it was too tight! First lap of the warm-ups I got a little high going into Turn 4 and into the mud BANG! I slammed the

Concrete Fourth Turn wall about 3 feet from where Don pointed to! (Don told me all this later as he chewed my ass about using my head!). We loaded up and went home that night not racing a single event that night. That stunt cost me a race! Not only that, it took quite a few bucks to fix the car! I did back off in the Hot Laps from that point on. Still, I never set foot on a track without knowing I could win the race!

Those were my own words that I raced by: "I will never set foot on a track without knowing I could win the race!" That was until a rainy, Sunday afternoon in July. I was sitting in my apartment watching TV. I looked outside and it was getting lighter and the rain was almost stopped. I was not happy the rain was stopping! I knew I couldn't race tonight even if it wasn't raining! If it kept raining I wouldn't feel so bad if the races were canceled. If I couldn't race, I didn't want anyone to race! You see, the week before I was racing at Weedsport and the Ring and Pinion in the rear end broke. Friday, I ran at Rolling Wheels and Saturday night at Canandagua. At these two tracks, I could use the same rear end gear ratio. The Wheels is a 5/8 mile track and Canandagua is a "long" 1/2 mile. At Weedsport was a short 1/2 mile track. I had to change the gear ratio to run competitively there. The new gears had not arrived yet. For that reason, I could not race tonight.

I said to Kathy, "Let's go to Weedsport tonight just to watch the races! I can't sit home and watch the stupid TV! The rain has just about stopped." "You're not thinking of taking the car are you?" she said. I said, "Hell no! With those gears, I could never win! Why take it?" I was bored just sitting home when there was a race going on. As we walking to the car, I said, "Let's go up to the shop first. I have to get something." As we pulled in, there was the car hauler with the dirty race car still on the hauler from the night before. I hadn't even washed the mud off of it yet. The rain washed some of the mud off, but in a way, it made the car look like a wet, tired dog. The roof and top of the hood were clean from the rain, but the sides of the car were wet and muddy. You could hardly read the number. The race that night at Weedsport was a special event, a July 4th deal and qualifying would determine the starting positions. While at the shop, I said to Kathy, "It's rained all day and if I can draw one of the first two Qualifying races, the track will be wet and with those low gears and a wet track I might just qualify. If I do, I can start the race and run two laps and pull out. Last place is paying \$75 bucks tonight!" Kathy said, "NO! Damn it! Leave the damned thing here! You already told the guys (the crew) to stay home! No one will be there with you and I'm not changing a tire! Leave the damn thing here! Don't be stupid! I'm saying it the last time! LEAVE IT HERE!" When she said, "Don't be stupid!" I knew she was right. You know how sometimes you get a sudden feeling when something is right? Well, she was right! At that point I should have turned around and drove my 442 Olds to the races. But, you know me!

We drove to the races in the Car Hauler! With the car on the back! It wasn't a good ride to the track. I don't think we said one word on the hour drive! Looking back, I probably should have listened to her! This was not the right thing to do. Not only we weren't talking, but I broke my own rule! As I drove in the Pit Gate a guy was holding an old, faded, Maxwell House Coffee can towards my window. I told Kathy, "I'll tell you what! If I don't draw a number that gets me into the first or second heat, I won't even unload the thing! The track has to be wet for me to have a chance (to qualify)". She gave me the Glare! "I promise! I want it muddy!" I said to her. She didn't even look over at me. Just sat there, glaring straight ahead. The guy at the gate said, "Pick your number for the Heat". I reached in and drew out a small piece of white paper out the can. I unfolded it and it had the number 10 on it. I looked at it and said in an excited voice (as I knew this would get me into the first heat!), "10"! I handed it back to him. He rolled it around and flipped it over as it was upside down and said, "10"! I shook my head up and down thinking, "That's what I just said!" We drove into the pits and parked. Kathy said, with the same glare she

had on her face as when we left, "You aren't really going to try to run the car are you?" Not waiting for an answer, she said, "I'm going in the stands. Go talk to all your buddies, then, come to the stands. I'll save you a seat." She stormed off before I could say "OK!"

There were a lot of cars here tonight! Big races draw lots of cars! Many of the cars I had never seen before. The place was packed! There were a few cars from 5 Mile Point. Wonder if the guy that put me in the wall was here tonight? I could return the favor if I knew who he was! I was pulling the ramps from under the truck. They make a screeching metal on metal, like finger nails on a black board! Not only that, they were heavier than hell and dirty! "Crap!" I thought. Now I know why I have a Crew! This is work! Just then it stopped raining! Fitting right into my plan! I got into the car and coast it down the ramps. It jolted to a stop just behind the truck as I hit the brakes. The car was clean after the drive in the rain. I left the ramps down as I was not picking those damned things up again!

The gears I had in the car are 4:56s. I need a 5:12 ratio to run here. I probably could have ran good here by using 3rd gear with the 4:56 rear end gears, but trying to get maximum horsepower, I took 2nd and 3rd gears out of the transmission. I only use first and fourth. Taking these two gears out of the transmission would reduce friction, causing less heat and increasing horsepower at the rear wheels. My concern was that when the track dried out, it will be like trying to drive off in a standard shift car from a dead stop in fourth gear! My car will lug down so much, I will not be able to keep up! But in the early Qualifying races, with the rain and the track being so muddy, lugging the engine will be a benefit. It will not spin as much and actually will get more traction. This would work for the Qualifying race only! After that, when the track dried out.....I'm done!

Here was my plan.....(1) Qualify..... (2) Start the race.....(3) Run two laps..... (4) Pull in and collect \$75.00 for last place! The first time in my life I am at a track knowing I could NOT win! I'm disobeying my own "WWT" (Win or Wreck Trying) strategy. I know in the back of my mind, "I should not be doing this"!! Suddenly! Kathy's words echoed in my head, "DON'T BE STUPID!" Now I was getting a feeling of pending disaster! Another premonition?

Drawing the number 10 put me in the first Heat! I was almost last in a field of 12 cars. They are taking the top four cars. I need fourth. When Kathy saw the car coming out onto the track she almost fainted! I couldn't see where she was sitting, but as I was going down the front straight on the Pace Lap, just after the flag stand, I suddenly felt this ray of heat on the right side of my face! It was the "GLARE"! I knew right where she was sitting!

Knowing the track conditions and my gear problem, I started the first Heat. Driving with my brain, for a change, I won the Heat race! The other cars, not changing gears, were spinning and sliding around like they were on ice. I just drove, or should it say, putted, by them at the bottom of the track like I was on a rail! This meant I would start the 30 Lap Feature on the Pole! I was SICK! On the Pole and I have to pull off as I will be a definite hazard out there! "I was on the pole and would have had a good chance to win! Damn it! This sucks!" I kept thinking. I should have listened to Kathy. I shouldn't have brought the car and I wouldn't be feeling like this! Damn! There was nothing to do now but stick to my plan.

Back in the pits, I was kneeling down in front of the car cleaning the radiator. I don't know why I was doing this as I would be pulling out in two laps anyway. I guess it was habit! I just wanted to race so damned bad! I keep thinking, "I'm on the Pole! It isn't fair"! Just then I felt a sharp slap on my shoulder that almost knocked my head into the hood. Then the words, "What the fuck you doin' workin' by yourself? Where the hell is your crew?" I look around and there is

Jim Jarvis. Jim is a hell of a runner! Not only that, he's crazy! I don't mean crazy like a guy having too much fun.....he's crazy! He's got this wide eyed crazy look on his face and the red bandana wrapped around his head just adds to the crazy look. I think a few of the drivers were scared of him! I got to like Jim a lot and we are good friends to this day. I said, "HEY! Jarvie! Believe it or not, I'm here alone. Where are you starting?" He said, "Third. Right behind you." I told him the story. He said, "You idiot!" That's twice I've heard a similar thing today! Then I said, "I've got a plan. Going into Turn 1, I'll drive up high and force the guy on the outside of me up the track. You be ready and go under me! That way I won't slow you down." "Cool!" he said. "I still can't believe you came here alone!" he said as he turned and walked back to his car. I was still kneeling in front of the car just staring at it thinking what could have been and thinking, "I'm breaking my own rules! I never went onto a track without being able to win and now I'm telling the guy behind me I'm moving over for him. This was a bad omen! Then Kathy's words came back, "DON'T BE STUPID!" I really felt like shit! This just isn't the way I race! Is it worth \$75 bucks to humiliate myself?"



Just then I heard a clatter and voices coming my way! Sounds like something dragging across the stones on pit road. I didn't pay much notice, except it was getting close to my car. I peeked up over the hood and there is Jim Jarvis, Jerry Schwites (now gasman for Sterling Marlin), Charlie Trickler and the rest of his crew coming towards my car. Jerry was dragging a jack behind him. Jerry is BIG! About 6'-8", 220 lbs! He is a great friend to this day. The other guy was carrying a center section for the Olds rear end and Charlie had some tools! I said, "What the hell ya doin'?" Jim said, "Get the hell out of the way! We got work to do and there isn't much time!" I said, "You don't have time! The Consi is just going out! We will be next!" They didn't listen. I stood back! Those guys went to work! They jacked the car up and at the same time, two guys were pulling the axles and the drive shaft. It was incredible! They got Jim's spare set of

gears (Jim had a spare everything) in just as the Consi race ended. I said, "Man, thanks! I don't know what to say!" Jim said, "Just don't wreck me!" and they all walked back to their car. I stood there all alone by the side of my car thinking about what just took place. I couldn't believe it! I looked across pit lane to Jarvis's car and watched them doing last minute work on their car. After working on my car, they were intent on beating me! If he could, he would beat me fair and square. After what just took place, I got goose bumps! I opened the truck door and stood behind it and took my pants off! Then I put my Nomex (Fire Proof) socks and long underwear on. The Fire suit was next and my sneakers. All alone, standing by the side of my car, the speaker blared, "Late Model Feature! Late Model Feature to the line!" WOW! I got in the car!

As I drove out onto the track for our 30 Lap Feature, I slowly drove down the front straight for the lineup lap. There was that heat again! This time it was hotter! Down the back straight I had my feeling (WWT) back! I was smiling! All this worrying and now I have a chance to WIN! Man did I feel good! Kathy had to think I was nuts for coming out in the feature and starting on the pole. She figured I would start last and then pull in. She had no idea of what just took place in the pits.

About half an hour later and after 30 Laps of dusty, unbelievably hard racing, I was standing in front of a full grandstand with a Checkered Flag in my hand doing an interview. I led from start to finish! I had a couple of good challenges but that night there was not one car that was up to the task! I was going to win and it would take a super human effort to beat me on that night! Jim finished where he started, 3rd. I publicly thanked Jim and his crew as I told the story to the crowd! Over and over, on the way home, I couldn't stop saying, Oh my God! Can you believe it? I can't believe it!" Kathy sat on the passenger side just smiling, as I did, while driving home. There, between us on the seat, was the proof! A big, shiny trophy and a roll of cash in my pocket! I couldn't wait till the next morning to call the boys. I called all of them and told them the story! That night they all came over to the garage. I had the trophy sitting on the roof of the car. At first, they were calling me all sorts of names. Then they realized, even though they were not there, they still were a part of the win!



A win at Weedsport Speedway

This was one of my most memorable wins! Back then, racing was fun. You helped each other even if it meant getting beat! Today, money has taken over and racing isn't the same. Some guys would put their own Daughter in the wall to win! Well, maybe I would, if she was in the

way! (Remember the Go-Carts Beth?)