

Manufactured chassis modifieds line up on the front straightaway at Syracuse. Developed in the mid-seventies, this configuration of car has remained relatively unchanged for the last twenty-five years.

8

Hired Gun

Introduction

By the mid-seventies modified racing throughout most of the Northeast had evolved into a form that would remain relatively stable for the next twenty years. NASCAR was concentrating on growing a base of super speedways for its Winston Cup Series and, in doing so, moved away from dirt tracks like Fonda and began focusing regional activities on the asphalt modified division. Stafford Springs, Thompson, Riverside Park, and Utica-Rome were hallmark asphalt tracks. During this period, stars like Buggy Stevens, Freddie DeSarro, Richie Evans, and Charlie Jarzombek drove low-slung custom racing chassis with fuel-injected big block motors and Pinto-like bodies. A few owners, such as legendary Lenny Boehler with his famous "Old Blue", carried on with the traditional coupe-style tin as long as they possibly could.

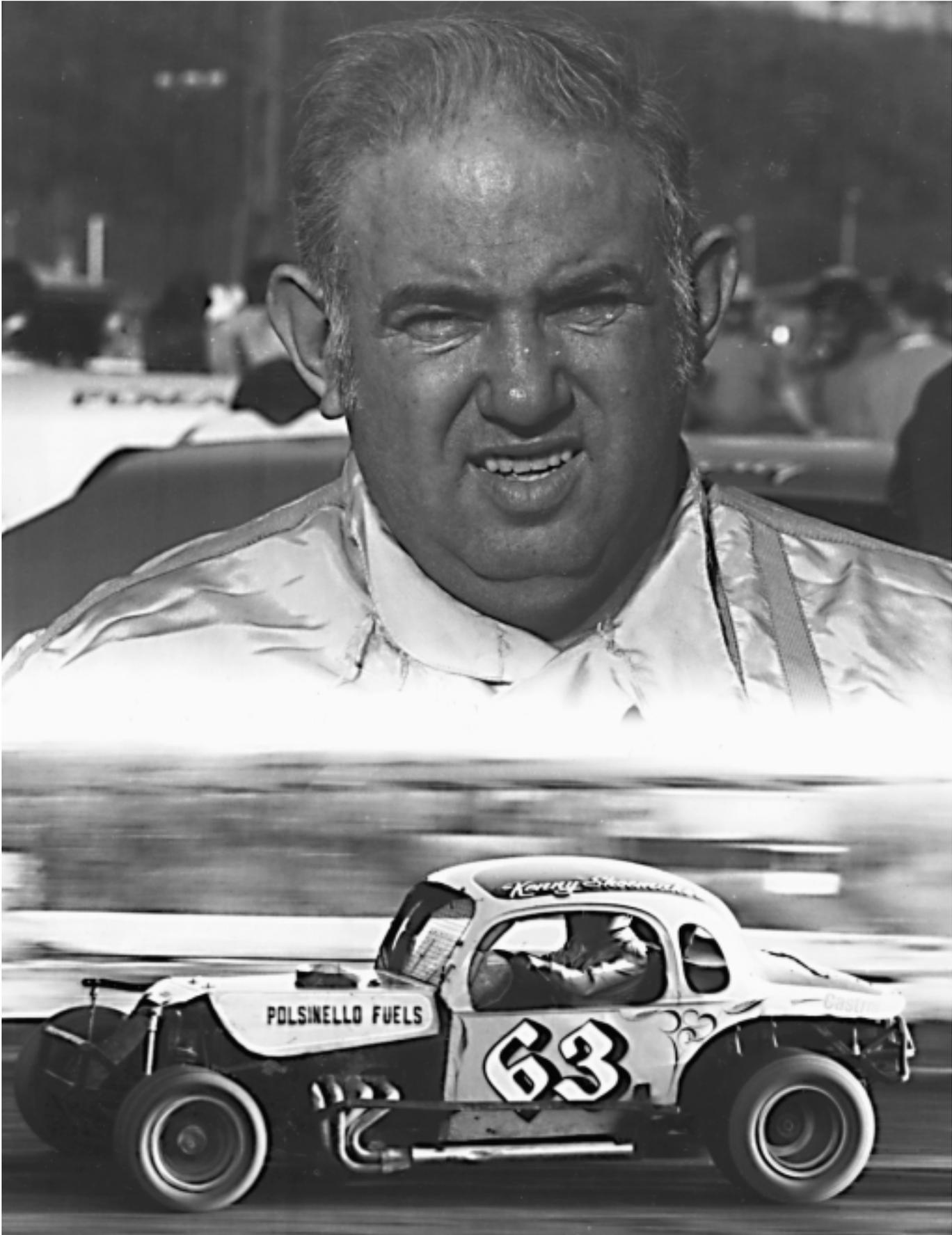
Dirt racing continued to diverge from asphalt competition. In fact, when Glenn Donnelly (a former GE account executive) and the Petrocci Brothers founded a new racing organization in 1975-76, they simply named it DIRT (Drivers Independent Race Tracks). DIRT, after successfully promoting itself at Syracuse Fairgrounds, became an immediate success and attracted many affiliated tracks. Modified dirt cars with a similar design configuration raced at facilities from Delaware to Ohio to northern New England, while the Empire District of upstate New York remained the hub. The supporting Sportsman divisions which sprang up allowed competitors to use the same style chassis and bodies as the modifieds, but with smaller motors and tires.

All this activity spawned a hot new market for speed equipment. Car builders like Grant King, Kenny Weld, Budd Olsen, Dave Kneisal and others emerged to fill the demand. Their name-brand tubular frames and aerodynamic aluminum bodies quickly replaced hard-to-find, rusted-out Chevrolet and Scout frames and coupe/coach bodies that had been used exclusively just seasons before. Engine builders responded enthusiastically to DIRT's relatively relaxed rules on horsepower, producing huge big-block motors. Next, tire manufacturers entered the fray and delivered gummy tires that typically lasted only one night of competition. The result was another big boost in speed. Stock cars were now very fast.

Happily the new manufactured chassis were generally better designed and safer than earlier garage-built cars. Their greater expense, however, led regional racers to reach out for the first time to the business community in search of serious sponsors. Once again, NASCAR forged the way. It was beginning to demonstrate successfully to corporate America that Winston Cup racing could be a valuable marketing tool for building brand loyalty with customers.

Finally, the mid-seventies marked the beginning of the end of heavily watered dirt tracks. In response to environmental concerns and the need to contain costs, track operators began preparing dry, slick surfaces. Competitors were forced to adapt their driving styles and to negotiate turns with greater finesse, almost as if driving on asphalt. Gone was much of the wild broadsliding, so characteristic of the years of the coupes.

It was the dawn of a new era.



This is a typical driver publicity photo from Fonda. Kenny is shown in a composite shot with the Lepore 63.

Over the winter of 1974-75, Alan Kugler, a fellow who would become a life-long associate of mine, asked me if I would drive for him. Alan was a knowledgeable owner since he, himself, had raced in the sportsman division. He wanted to buy a car and do it the right way—the new way. He decided to buy a Schwinning chassis built over in Nassau and wanted to use Walt Bedell for the power. I said I'd drive his car if the deal was exactly what he was describing. I told him that whoever I drove for, this was the way it would be.

I started the 1975 season at Fonda with Tony Trombly and John Lepore once again, but by then they had painted the old coupe yellow and renumbered it 63. We were fast and won almost immediately that spring. I had told Tony and John about Alan, so they knew it wouldn't be a long-term deal and kept their eye out for another driver. Meanwhile I was thinking about that new Schwinning car. Alan and I were targeting to have it ready for Syracuse.

Around the same time, Joe Leto split up with Tommy Corellis and ordered a brand new Rossell car for Jack Johnson to run at Fonda. Jack and Joe pooled all their equipment. I liked both of them and helped them get the new Rossell car ready to run. I expected Jack and the car to be a real strong combination, because Rossell's cars were top shelf and Walt Bedell was building the engines. Then something weird happened.

I had been known to set up cars pretty well. There was a guy in Montreal named Jacques LaLancette. I could never say his name right and always called him Jack Lollipop. He asked if I could straighten his cars out for him. He said he had one of Jack Johnson's cars up there and he couldn't do anything with it. So on a Friday night my wife, Barbara, and I drove with Alan Kugler to Montreal. We arrived bright and early Saturday morning and soon had those guys going like crazy. I wanted everything apart on the car so I could string it, make sure everything was square, and then go right through it. Well, that turned out to be one of the most fun weekends I ever spent in racing. Those fellas wanted the best. They had a beautiful race shop. I don't speak or understand a word of French, but Jacques could speak pretty good English. We took the car apart and went right through it. By 11 o'clock in the morning, I had found half a dozen reasons why he couldn't drive the car. By 6:00 we had them fixed.

We got the car loaded up and then we followed them up to Drummondville Speedway. Jacques was a well-liked guy, and the crowd went crazy when they saw his car come in. I guess my name had got into Canada too, because everybody and his brother were there to see what I was doing to the car. Interest got so strong that we had to have guys move people away from the car so we could work. At first we had a few problems when Jacques went on the race track to get the car



Jacques LaLancette (right) was a stalwart Canadian racer in the seventies. His career ended abruptly when he was seriously injured in a crash. The photo above shows him alongside his number 48.



tight enough to suit him. It was a nice track with a good clay surface, but he was trying to cut the corners a little too tight. Eventually we got the car right, and when he entered a heat race he blew everyone away.

Jacques had to start the main event toward the rear, and it wasn't long before he was right out front. Then he was gone. Nobody was catching him; he was walking away from them. All of a sudden I see the car slow down and Jacques pull in. I asked what the matter was, but Jacques didn't know. It turned out something was wrong with the accelerator pedal, and in the rush it hadn't been hooked up right. The unfortunate part was the race was almost over. That was the end of Jacques' night. At any rate, he was real happy with the way the car handled. I told him what to do when the track dried out or got heavier.

After the Drummondville race, we had a delicious dinner at a restaurant while we discussed racing and how the car was handling. We stayed over, they paid us, and we headed back home. After that I heard Jacques won some races with

the car. I was pleased. He got his money's worth, and I had a good time going up there because I wasn't racing at the time and it was something a little different for me to do. I would end up spending a lot of time doing that sort of thing in later years. Sadly, awhile later Jacques was destined to be injured in a bad crash that finished a fine racing career.

The minute Barbara and I arrived home from Montreal the phone was ringing; it was Joe Leto. He told me his deal with Jack had fallen apart. The new Rossell car wouldn't run right, didn't handle right, and they'd been fighting with it all weekend. He said he wanted me to drive it. I said I'd need to come down and change the steering wheel and a bunch of things because they don't fit my size. He insisted I come down the next night because Tuesday there was a big race at Fonda.

I looked the Rossell car over carefully, and if they had changed anything from the setup I put in it, they'd put it back exactly the way it was. Everything was just the way I wanted it. Walt Bedell was there, and I asked if he'd mind if



After Jack Johnson left Joe Leto he returned to his familiar orange and white number 12A.

I fired it up. It was a good thing I did. I said, "This thing has got a dead cylinder somewhere." Walt said, "Yeah, one is dead." He reached over and noticed that the spark plug wire going into the mag was just about out. It wasn't even touching. Walt pushed it down, and the thing ran like pure silk. It was really ironic that the Leto and Johnson team, which had so much potential, went their separate ways over a plug wire.

On Tuesday we went up to Fonda. The Leto crew got there late like they always did; they never arrived on time. I think they brought the Rossell car in on a tractor trailer. They weren't set up for racing because when Tommy Corellis left them, he took all the stuff. We had to gather up all the tools and equipment left from the time I was driving the number 50 Pinto for them. Anyway, when they came it was late, and I already had my suit and helmet on. I jumped right in the car, headed to the heat race, and took right off. At the time, that little Rossell Gremlin was the Cadillac of cars. It handled beautifully. I went right around the whole field on the outside, and didn't I just win the first heat race I ever drove in that car!

I came in and all the guys were tickled. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ronnie Compagni, the track promoter, coming over to me. He seemed kind of hesitant. He knew that I sometimes wasn't the pleasantest guy to get along with, especially when I had problems. He said, "Jeez, Shoe, I don't know how to tell you this, but you ran the wrong heat race. You weren't supposed to be in the first or second heat race. You've got to be in the third, and you're going to have to start from scratch."

I said, "Jeez, I just started scratch in the last one!" I was giving Ronnie all kinds of hell, and he didn't realize that I knew all along I was supposed to be running the third heat race. Since I hadn't had a lap in the car, I wanted to get ten laps under my belt for free. I went to the rear of the third heat race, and didn't I win that also. I don't remember what happened in the feature that night, but I sure remember what happened the following Saturday night.

Suffice it to say that in those days Louie Lazzaro and I had differences of opinion on a few things and weren't inviting each other to Thanksgiving dinner too often. Back in 1968, there'd been an incident when I was driving the Greene Electrical car. I'd started in the middle of the pack and had made only one complete lap when the red light came on. I'd already come up to second by running around the pack on the outside. I remember this incident so well because Jimmy Devine was in a sportsman alongside of me in a car I had built. It was my brother's beautiful '52 Chevrolet coupe. Jimmy had done the work and I'd just told him how to do it. He was on the pole because he was down on points. When I looked down the homestretch, it looked like a car was upside-down. There were pieces all over the place.

Everybody stopped for the restart. A few seconds later, I spotted this guy with a white shirt and white pants walking up; I presumed he was an official. When you're racing and you are a bit sweaty, your glasses steam up. The next thing you know, I get a swat alongside the head. Of course

that woke me up a little bit. I quickly unhooked the belts and started to get out of the car. I looked again, but I still didn't really know who it was. I said, "You can't take a swat at a guy strapped in his car! I'll show you what kind of a man you are as soon as I get the hell out of here." He ran towards the infield where everybody was standing, and I followed him.

I got about halfway over there when Ronnie Compagni grabbed me. I'll never forget it because he put his arms right around my chest. I used to chew Tums a lot back then, and I had a three-roll pack in my firesuit. He crushed them right there, that's how hard he was holding me. I told Ronnie I didn't know who the guy was, but shortly after I found out it was someone in Lazzaro's gang. They claimed I had dumped Louie. I said, "How the hell did I dump him if I'm up here in second place? He had to be somewhere behind me."

But back to me and Lou at Fonda. When I raced the following week, I was driving Leto's Gremlin, while Louie was in the Lepore 63. After I left the 63, a few guys tried it and had trouble with it. Louie was struggling. Since the 63 guys sure knew how to make a car run, I guess it just didn't suit Louie's style. When the heat race started, I was at the rear and could see we had a pretty good field of cars. I decided to lay back a little because I was on the inside and wanted the outside. As we're going down the backstretch, I'm alongside of Lazzaro. I wanted to go high into three so I looked and could see Louie wasn't there, then I went to slide across. Didn't he tap me on the left rear wheel and bumper. The impact spun me right around! I said to myself, what the hell was that for? Now, I'm hot—really hot.

The officials stopped the race and put both of us to the rear. The steward came down and I asked, "What was that all about?" He walked over to Louie, and Louie said that I had chopped him. I reasoned there'd been no call for Louie to hit me in the left rear wheel once I'd got by him. I said, "You tell him that he is not getting through the first turn!" The steward jumped all over me. He told me I couldn't do that. I said to him, "If you want to see one helluva big wreck, you go down there in the first turn. You're going to see the biggest wreck you've seen in a long, long while. I've taken all I'm going to take from him. He has no call at all for hitting me." The steward passed the message to Louie, and I guess I got the bird and a few other choice things.

If anybody had told me that Kenny Shoemaker was going to run into me, I would have made sure I stayed clear of him. People knew that when I said something I meant it. It didn't make any difference if it was on the track or off. Well, the officials dropped the green, and I let off and then stepped on it. The Gremlin was powerful; it really got a bite. At Fonda you had to go toward the outside in turn one before cutting-off the second turn, so I knew just about where I was going to get Louie. I waited until I got down underneath him, then I threw the back end of my car into the front end of his car. Turned him head-on into the wall. When I hit him, I jumped over his left-front wheel and stood Leto's car right up on its front bumper. It made almost a 180 before dropping back down on the ground. I pushed the clutch in, started the motor, and drove away. It hadn't hurt it



Kenny wins his first feature in the Rossell-built Leto 50 on the second night out.

at all. But when I looked over and saw that 63, there was nothing left of it. It was totally torn up. I hated to do it to Tony, but if the shoe had been on the other foot, I know Louie would have done the same to me.

When the race was over one, someone took a swipe at me, and there was a rowdy-row afterwards. I said, "Just go blame the guy that started it." It would be a different story if I hadn't warned Louie. I made the steward warn him that I was going to wreck him when he got down into the first turn; he wasn't going to make it. It wasn't very nice, and I'm not really proud of it. I'm just telling it like it was. That's the way I was when I drove. If you wanted to try something funny with me, you were going to pay for it.

I got pounded on a lot when I came up through the ranks. Those guys knew that I was young and that they had the experience, and they whopped on me. Well, Louie was an experienced driver, and I was probably at the high point of my career at the time. There's been all kinds of stories about what happened, but that's the true story. Now, everybody knows what really happened when I dumped that 63 car. Again, I'll say I'm sorry to Tony and John Lepore for ruining their car, but as far as Lou Lazzaro goes I still feel he got what he deserved. I will always have great respect for Louie, but all I could think of was somebody from his crew coming down and sucker punching me in the car, and then him spinning me out. I thought it was pretty near time that all Louie's bunch had for dinner was just plain spaghetti, no more meatballs.

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Things started to go really well with that Leto car. We were always fast at Fonda and we started to get adventure-

some. In August of 1975 we heard that one Tuesday or Wednesday night there was going to be a big money open competition at the half-mile track in Nazareth. Walt Bedell spent one whole day just putting fuel injection on that car. He got it running real, real good, and we were excited. But I'll tell you—the whole trip was a disaster from the moment we left.

Barbara and I rode down to Nazareth with Joe and another fellow in Joe's new Lincoln. We drove down the Interstate, trying to catch up with the truck and trailer, which had left earlier. One of Joe's employees was driving us, and he got behind a car that wouldn't let us by. I said, "Get up alongside of him and run him up a ramp. He'll let you go by. Or take him out in that little strip there, he'll let you by." The other driver wasn't to happy about our trying this at 80 mph. He was shaking his fist at us. There were two other guys in the car, a smaller one and a pretty good-size fellow. The next thing I know one of them pulls out a revolver and points it at us. I tucked my thumb and finger at him—like shooting a gun—and pointed at him. He didn't do nothing. It's just as well, as he could have blown my brains out. They stayed glued right on our back bumper after that.

Flashing by a service center, we spotted the race car and the pickup with its hood up getting serviced. Our driver pulled over and backed up the ramp to see what the trouble with the tow truck was. Apparently it had been overheating because it was such a hot day. Next thing, I look down and see this other car backing up. The driver pulled all the way up to the gas pumps and got out of the car. I said to Joe, "That's the guys that were giving us a problem on the Interstate!"

Joe ain't no slouch; he was a pretty big guy. And there were three guys in our truck, including Charlie Leto who was tough as nails. The strange driver started running his

mouth and demanding to know who'd been driving our car. I said, "Why don't you get back in your car and get out of here before you get yourself in trouble?" Well, I don't remember exactly how it all started, but he took a swipe at somebody. That's all Charlie needed, and all hell turned loose. One of our guys who we used to call Dirt Man picked the little guy up and bodyslammed him on the concrete. I thought, ohmygawd, they're going to kill these guys before we get out of here.

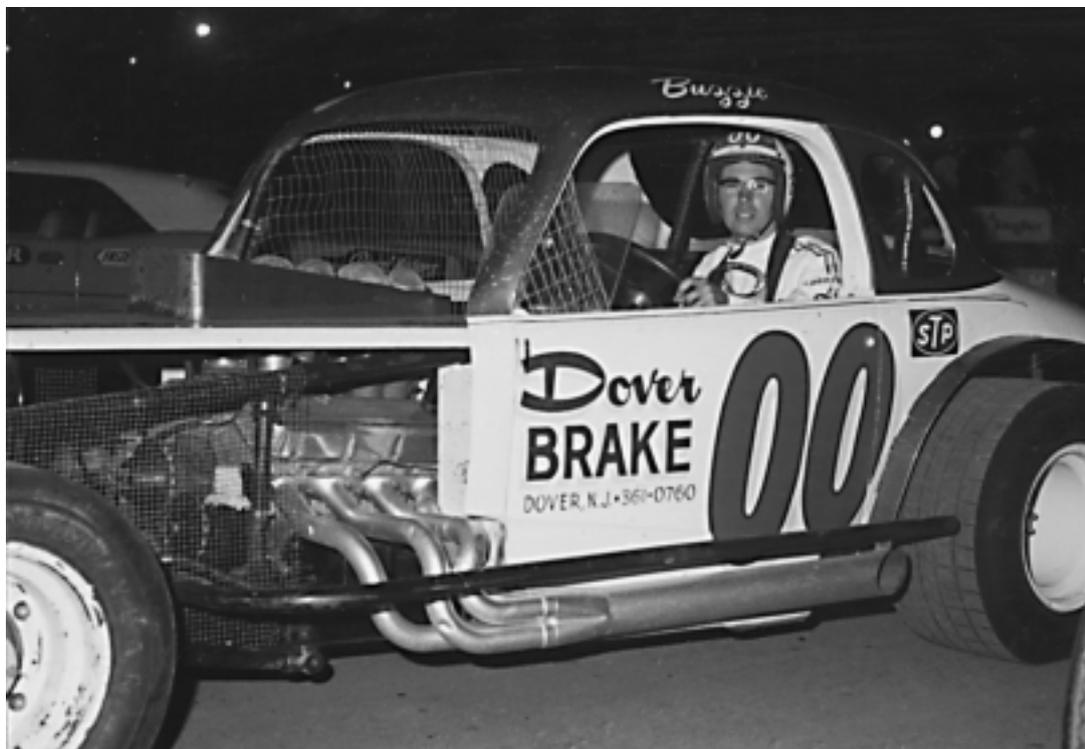
Charlie had another guy upside-down and was going to drop him right on his head on the concrete. I said, "Oh no, don't do that; you'll kill him!" So Charlie threw him on the ground. The guy got up and said, "Boy, you guys are something else." Charlie says, "You ain't too bad yourself. It's too bad I ain't got time to finish it, we've got to go to the races." The next thing you know, three or four police cars pulled up; apparently somebody called the State Police. But by then we were already on our way. We may have been just getting back onto the Interstate as they were getting off. We drove on down to Nazareth.

I hadn't driven the Gremlin with fuel injection on it until the practice run that evening and, boy, that car was quick. I mean it was quick! I could see the rest of the pack down on the bottom of the track. It looked like they were running a little race down there all by themselves. I was running another track up on the outside. It was probably three and four-wide in the turns. I thought, "Let me get up here on the outside and see how this thing goes." Well, it felt excellent. We had just the right gear in the machine, and when I came in I tightened it up just a little bit. I didn't want to get out of that car; I wanted to keep riding. I told the guys I needed to get some laps under me just to feel out the car and make sure I knew what I had underneath me.

While I was practicing, a couple kids came over and asked who was driving. It was the first time they'd seen the car and, as I said, it looked real good. Joe Leto and Walt Bedell were great kidders. They told the kids that the driver was a 19-year-old sprint car driver who they'd hired out of the Midwest. Back then I didn't wear the full-face see-through shields. I had a mask insulated to protect my face from stones and clods of mud. I also had goggles on so my face was covered up. I must have put thirty laps on that car in the warm-ups. It felt real good; then I brought it in. When I climbed out of the car, I took off the face mask and helmet. The kids were standing there, and one of them said, "Hell, he's older than my grandfather."

They had a house-full of cars at Nazareth. I think the old Shoe started 18th in the heat race. I don't know if it was the first, second, or third heat. During the warmups, I'd stayed completely on the outside. Everyone on the watch said I was the fastest thing there. Cagle was there and even he agreed. I figured the other drivers who'd watched me practice would squeeze way up in the heat, having seen how fast the upstairs groove was. The minute the green flag went down, they drove down into one, leaving a hole on the bottom that you could've driven two tractor trailers through. The only guy that took advantage of it was Buzzie Reutimann. He dove down there, and I got right on his back bumper and followed him on up through.

When we hit the backstretch, I drove right by Buzzie and passed a car in the middle of the backstretch. At that point I saw Tommy Hager just going into the apex of the turn. He was out in the loose stuff. Looking ahead down the straight-away, I could see that only a couple of cars were ahead of us. I was going really hard and cut down low on the inside to go under Hager. Because I was coming so hard, I couldn't turn



Buzzie Reutimann, from Zephyrhills, FL, traveled north for the summer racing season for several decades. He's shown here in his familiar Dover Brake sponsored "double zero."

This shows what's left of the Leto 50 after the Nazareth crash. Kenny calls it "the worst accident I ever had," and gives credit to Bobby Rossell for building a strong cage.



the car enough to go back underneath the next car, so I went between Hager and the wall. There was plenty of room. Hager, however, must've gotten a pretty good bite because he come right along with me. Just as I got wheel-even with the front of that other guy's car, Hager must have hit the guy's back bumper, and the guy got turned right into me. I ran over his right front wheel. My car caught the wall and that wheel at the same time and the impact launched me. By then we were almost to the starter's stand. I was so high in the air that people sitting at the top of the grandstand claimed they could see the bottom of my car. I knew it was going to be a heck of a crash when I came down. I didn't know exactly where I was—I could only hope I didn't end up in that grandstand.

Somehow the Gremlin spun around and came down on its roof crosswise on the concrete wall. Then, all in a split-second it tumbled onto the race track—right in the middle of the oncoming cars. I had passed out cold, and I have no memory of coming down. The first thing I do remember is the faces of Tommy Corellis and Will Cagle. Everything was blurry, but I could see them. Nobody wanted to touch me because they were afraid I'd been badly hurt. They could see that my car was literally torn apart. The crash had knocked the fuel cell out of the car and torn the seat loose from its fittings. I must have pushed the steering wheel so hard that it turned right around the clamp that held it down. I remember Cagle saying, "Are you all right, are you all right?" I answered, "Jeez, I don't know. I hurt so bad all over." They took their time getting me out of their car and loading me in the meat wagon. All the way to the hospital I was in and out of consciousness. I remember some things, but not others. I was one sore turkey, I'll tell you that.

The emergency staff laid me on a wooden table and turned me back and forth for x-rays. You feel like you've just gotten run over with a steamroller, and they want to move every part of your body. It's their job, I suppose, and

it's the only way they can do it, but if they'd just let me lay there I would have felt 100% better. The doctors found something wrong with my neck and weren't going to release me because they thought I might have injured my spinal column. But I'd had all I was going to take with being turned back and forth. Being the big brave guy you are, you're not going to stay put. Joe Leto told the doctor to let me get dressed. He said he'd take me home and get me down to General Electric in Schenectady the morning to be magnafluxed. I thought I was going to roll off the table with laughter when he said that.

Well, they brought me home, and if they ran over a dime on the road, I could feel it. That's how sore I was. We didn't get home much before daylight the next morning. They put one of those whirlpool things in the tub, and I got in and tried to work the soreness out that way. A chiropractor over in East Greenbush who took care of all the banged up race car drivers called me and told me, "You get your fanny over here and we'll straighten you out." I said, "I don't think I could let you even touch me!" He told me again to get over there and that I'd be all right. So Barbara took me over that afternoon and they worked on me. I actually felt pretty decent that afternoon, and the next day the pain wasn't too bad. I think I may have gone over the next day to have the treatment again. The doctor did it. I was all right. I went back to work.

Boy, am I glad that Bobby Rossell built that car. The roll cage had a small bend in it, which we porta-powered back up. That was the only thing on the car that bent. The rest of the stuff came flying off, as would be expected after getting hit so hard. It was the worse accident I ever had.

After that accident I was glad to be driving the Gremlin, even though I was waiting for Alan's car to be finished. It was a real safe and sturdy car—one of my favorite rides. Bill Williams wrote a book about Fonda in which he called the car "the potent Leto Gremlin that did most of the winning."



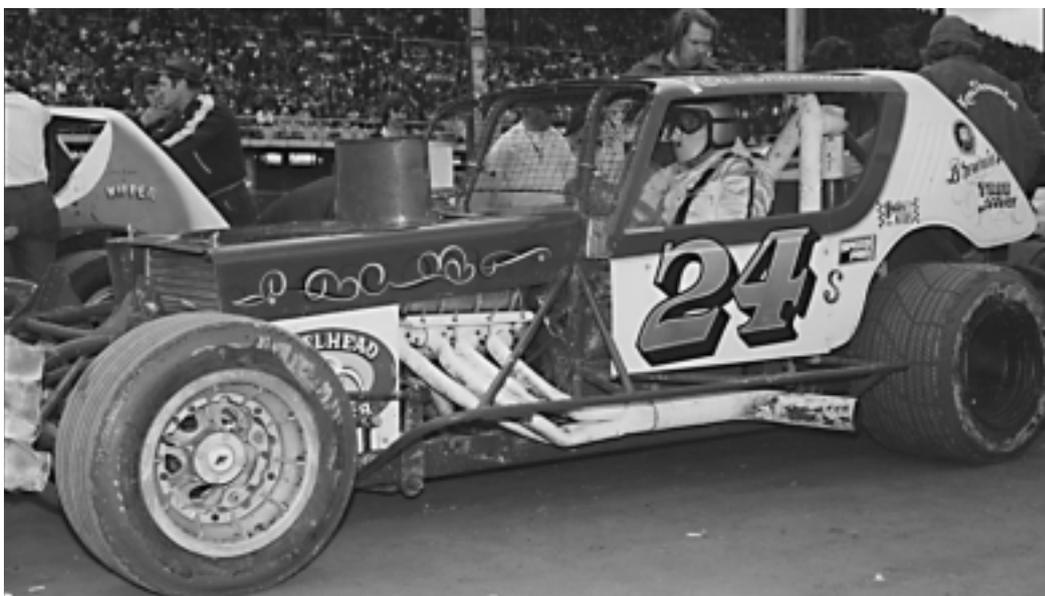
Kenny set up Joe Leto's 50 for Mike Grbac to drive. Grbac was a popular young driver from New Jersey who lost his life in a crash at the Reading Fairgrounds. This picture shows Mike ready to time-trial his own number 47 at Syracuse.

I believe that when I eventually left, Mike Grbac was the last guy to drive it for Joe. Mike had called and said he'd heard the car was free for a ride. He ran it at Syracuse, and I set it up for them. Unfortunately, Joe was soon to leave racing and Mike would be killed at the Reading Fairgrounds

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Although we waited almost a year for Alan's car to be ready, we were sure it would be finished in time for Syracuse. Walt Bedell was building us a radical new motor just for the

Mile, and Alan had done a good job getting sponsorship money through a friend of his. We were probably the first ones at our level of racing to get a major corporation's sponsorship. It was Barrelhead Root Beer, owned by Canada Dry. It was a real good root beer and pretty popular around the area. It was a big surprise to get to Syracuse that October and see a plane flying around above the Fairgrounds with my name on it. It said, "Welcome Kenny Shoemaker with the Barrelhead 24s." I was really thrilled. In our era you never saw that kind of advertising at races. We were used to the guy from the corner store or the local liquor store or something



The calm before the storm. A masked Kenny awaits the start of the consolation race at Syracuse in 1975 in Alan Kugler's Barrelhead Root Beer sponsored 24s.

putting his name on the sides for a few bucks. This was a good dollar sponsor.

Right from the start I knew the Barrelhead car had tremendous power. The gears that I had run for years with other cars were what we put in that car and it just wouldn't hook up. We went through time trials, and it was horrible. The time trial we pulled was bad enough that I started 22nd in the first consi. That's how far off we were. I told them the only thing I could think of was to keep the car under 5,500-6,000 rpm because the only thought in my thick head was that the motor must have too much power for the car.

We had everything on that car—super new light wheels, everything. There wasn't a thing that car needed that Alan didn't put on it. I said to Alan, "I can't get the thing hooked up and it's driving me crazy. The springs are a little bit stiff, but I don't think that's doing it." Well, we softened the springs up a little which helped, but the big change we made was taking away about 30 points of gear. You may not believe it, but I was still turning the same identical rpms. In essence what I did was to change miles per hour. That car had so much power, you couldn't hear the tires spinning. The tires were the Firestone 30s; if you misused them, they still wouldn't show any wear. By luck we hit on the answer and finally we started turning good times. If we'd turned the same times I was turning back in the time trials, we would have started no worse than in the top five or six, maybe seven. That's how fast that car was.

However, we had another incident. If you look in the magazine they have at the Syracuse race each year, you'll usually see a picture of that car flying through the air over the top of Rene Charland's head. Here's the story. Charland started on the pole. I started 22nd. Coming off the fourth turn, when the green flag dropped, I took to the outside. I went right around and stayed there, three abreast between three and four. I don't think I've ever seen anybody go around three and four three abreast. My advantage was that everybody else was afraid to get out there a little; instead they hugged it down there and stayed close to one another. I kept feather-footing it all the way around until we hit the backstretch. The rest seemed to stay right in line. I went down the outside of that line and got all the way into the third turn. I only had to get by Rene, and I would have been home-free. I would have passed 22 cars in one lap.

That was how fast that car was up at Syracuse that year. It didn't do us any good because we ended up on the hook. My problem was that a guy, Wes Moody, pulled out in back of me. He was right on my back bumper. Now, I'm three abreast when I see Rene starting to lose it and go around. Then Moody turned his car sideways because he couldn't see what I could see. I was trying to slow the car down, letting off and hitting the brake and turning. I was in a nice little tiny drift when Wes slammed sideways right into the back of my car. That's all it took; it turned me right towards Rene. Next I was flying over the Frenchman, and that's when all the flipping began. We towed the Root Beer car back home and repaired it. The damage wasn't as bad as we'd thought. A little cosmetics and maybe a bent tube or

axle. In two weeks we were ready to go over to Lebanon Valley for the last race of the season.

Toward the end of my career I tried to drive Lebanon with cars like Alan's straighter into the turns, because they weren't suited to being thrown in. When I drove tight curves there with the Root Beer car, I couldn't believe my eyes. I could actually see the right front shock and mount and everything twist up. I didn't know what the problem was, but I felt there was something wrong in the front of the car. Maybe the problem started at Syracuse, I don't know. I told Alan that when it did that, it unloaded the left rear wheel. It wanted the back end to come out from under it. The frame was flexing. Alan said we'd take a look when we got home.

We ran the Lebanon race, but about halfway through there was a caution. This was the second lap under caution. I don't know where I was running, but I was up-front somewhere—not too far back. At the time we wore goggles that would steam up. I took off my goggles and was wiping them off while holding the steering wheel with my knee. It fit under there real nice. We came through the corner, and I was almost all the way out of it when I get hit in the back, snapping the car to the right. I went right into the fence, and the car flipped over and landed on its roof. Again! Who hit me? It was Charland. He got out and acted as though it was a big deal. He said, "We've got to stop meeting like this." I felt like popping him one right on the spot.

When Alan and I got home, we checked damage to the car and found it wasn't that bad, because it was one of those Tommy Tipovers. It had barely rolled over. I wanted to strip it down to the frame and check a few things to understand the front end. We took the bumper off and found it was below .065 tubing. I told Alan I hoped the top tubing wasn't also .065 because if it was, that's what was letting the thing flex. I told him all we needed to do was cut off the two tubes and we'd know what we had. We'd be putting new ones on anyway because the car had been on its roof a couple times with those tubes on it. I suggested calling up Harry Peek, who was a good car builder. Well, mygawd, I never saw such thin tubing. The roll cage, however, had never collapsed even though I'd tipped over twice. Although I hit hard, none of the other tubes tore up either so I believed in the rest of the car. We cut off the thin tubing and put .095 wall from the firewall right down to the front bumper of that car and it handled like a dream from that day on.

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Things seemed to go better in the Spring of 1976. In May, we finished third three weeks in a row at Fonda and we got four seconds during the summer. We just couldn't win. Then one night at Fonda the car was running on cruise control. I was lapping cars like crazy—and not even working up a sweat. About halfway through the race, the car was still running perfect. I was one to watch gauges; I always watched gauges. No problem. We had good oil pressure; temperature was running 180-185 like it always did. All of a sudden the motor exploded.



Harry Peek was a four-time track champion at Fonda—once in the sportsman division and three times in the modified division. The Rotterdam, NY, driver won a 200-lapper on the Montgomery County oval the second week he ran modifieds. Harry was a meticulous car builder and was one of the first to blue print his chassis before construction.

A rod had gone through the side of the motor. I had oil all over me, all over the inside of the car. That was the end of the night. When I pulled in, I told Alan that the motor was shot. I said, "I'm going to show you something. I'm going to turn that over, and I'll bet you've got 40 or 50 psi of oil pressure right now. Don't pay no attention to the rods knocking because the block is shot anyway." I turned the car over and just cranking it with the starter it still had 40 or 50 pounds of oil pressure. The temperature gauge was 180. I just didn't understand it. I had no idea why that thing blew.

When the car was sitting there, I spotted a puddle of water by the radiator. The crew took off the front part of the cover and we looked down in there. Turns out a stone had gone right into the bottom of the radiator, into the tank. Just a little tiny stone. It busted it and let the water slowly run out. Our temperature gauge was in the wrong spot. We had it up by the thermostat, but it should have been somewhere in the head. Right near the thermostat you don't get a good, true reading. It was reading 180 without a drop of water in the engine. That's why the motor blew up. It must have gotten hot, and one of the bearings locked up and broke the rod.

I found out later why the gauge read 180. It never got any hotter in there because steam don't make heat; it just goes out the radiator or overflow or wherever. So if the reading on the gauge was 180 when the water temperature was up there, that's where it stayed. If water touches that bulb on the water indicator, sure it's going to register a temperature. But once all the water leaked out of the radiator and there was no water touching the bulb, the reading stuck at 180.

That was the end of the 24s. Alan parked it, and that was the end of it. I never drove that car again.

Although July of '76 was the last time I dove the 24s for Alan, it wasn't the end of our friendship. We got together later on, and our friendship has lasted throughout the years. He put together a great car, and we should have won some races with it. But it was one of those things that wasn't to be. The 24s was over-strong for Syracuse, and some of the mistakes we made when building it hurt us when we started the season. Still, I got a lot of thrills out of driving that car, which I helped the crew assemble. We set it up the way we wanted, and it was good right out of the box. Anyone who drove it would have thought they were driving a Cadillac. There were no rattles, nothing squeaked; all you heard was the motor. It didn't do funny things. You could make mistakes with it and recover. Once we put a new nose on the front, it was an ideal car. I never drove a car that handled any better—maybe just as good, but never any better.

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Once Alan decided he couldn't go any further and that he wanted to sell the 24s, I got back into my jumping from car to car routine. Soon, however, what seemed like a good opportunity came along. Late in 1976, I got involved with George Schell, who was having problems setting up his car. I went to help him. I remember going up to George's one night with Wayne Figler, a fellow who worked on my cars and married my wife's niece. George and his gang got to

talking about building a car and asked if I would drive it. I told him I wanted to design my own car. "Go ahead," he says. "Draw up some plans and bring them up, because that would be a good business for us."

George had a huge fabrication shop across from Metro Ford, with all the equipment you could think of for working with steel. George was smart when it came to steel, and I felt good about the venture. I sat at my kitchen table and drew up plans for my car. It was only a rough sketch. There wasn't a whole lot to go by, but it showed what I wanted for a wheel-base and how far back the motor should be. When George looked at it, his eyes lit up. He said, "That looks like it would make a nice race car." Then he went into his drafting room to see what he could come up with. He was in there an hour. When he came out with blueprints of my car, it looked exactly as I had intended.

We got going about seven o'clock that night bending the pipe for the frame. Before we left, around 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning, we didn't have just one frame made; we had two frames made. George had a huge 12 x 8, 2-inch thick surface plate that was so easy to work on. You could bend the tubing, set it on there and wedge it; it had a million holes where you could put a wedge to hold the tubes exactly straight. As I recall, we took parts off another racer George had there. We spent a solid week on that car, Monday through Saturday, and it was done. It would be the second

24 Root Beer car because the sponsorship was supposed to stay with me, and we had to hurry because I needed to maintain the Barrelhead sponsorship.

I told George we had to do something about the motor because it lacked a lot in the horsepower department. In Fort Johnson there was a fella named Vern Vogel whom everyone called Cheyenne; he was the one taking care of George's engine. I'd raced against his engines for years and had always respected them. Vern had worked with Jack Farquar, "The Judge," for years. Jack, who was a longtime friend of mine, had raced over at the Valley and at Fonda and was a stand-out in the old sportsman division.

All my life I drove for 40%. This was the first time I ever cut my price. I suggested I'd drive for 30% and give Vern 10% to take care of the motor. Since he'd been doing it for nothing, I suppose that was a pretty good deal to him. He knew I ran up front all the time so he was pretty sure of getting a pretty good paycheck. It bit me in the behind. I never should have given that 10% away because we didn't go no faster. The car handled good, we did everything we could to make it go faster, but the best we did was pull a second in a 100 lapper at Fonda in September.

At the end of '76, we took the Root Beer car to the Syracuse race. I don't know what the matter was, but the car would skip all the way through the corners. To me that indicated high floats—or low floats. We bought a new carbure-



Jack Farquar, a Justice of the Peace from Ephratah, NY, was a popular driver at Fonda and Lebanon Valley during the sixties and seventies. Nicknamed "The Judge," Jack was cheered on to victory by his purple coated fan brigade. Jack is shown here in the white number 22 sportsman car.



Jack Farquar drove the Barrelhead 24s to his only feature win at Fonda.

tor and put it on. We took the fuel lines off. We even took the cell apart. And still the car skipped all the way through the corners. Eventually we all got disgusted with the situation. I also began hearing rumors that some of the crew wanted to replace me with Jack. It irked me because I'd put a lot of blood, sweat, and knowledge into that car.

We raced the car a couple more times in the Spring of 1977 but never went anywhere. One night the engine blew. The engine had been done over shortly before the incident. I said, "Oh, boy, this is sickening." But those things happen. Rod bolts break, things fall apart. That was the end of it. I knew the only other engine George had was an illegal engine—too big to race legally. When I got home that night, I told Barbara that was it. I wasn't putting myself through all

this stress and strain for nothing. It seemed best to walk away from the car rather than keep myself on edge all the time. I decided to take the rest of the season off. It was a shame things didn't work out because we had the makings of a good operation. Jack Farquar ran the car for a while, and the next year he won his one and only career feature at Fonda with it.

I was more than a little surprised after I left the Barrelhead car to get a call from John Lepore and Tony Trombly of the 63 team saying that they wanted me to drive for them again. After all, I guess you could say I had done in two of their cars not long before—first when I drove their coupe into the wall to avoid Jack Johnson and second when I stuffed Lou Lazzaro in the first turn at Fonda. Anyway, by this time they had a new Schwinning car, and I decided to



Kenny is shown at Syracuse in the Schwinning chassied Trombly/Lepore 63. A few weeks later Kenny destroyed the car at Lebanon Valley when the throttle stuck.



Dick, "Toby," Tobias is shown in his number 17 Tobias Speed Equipment house car. Tobias was an innovative builder who brought sprint car technology to modified racing.

give it a try. We didn't do a whole lot because they were way down on money, but I do have a clear recollection of an unusual night at Lebanon Valley.

In the heat race at Lebanon I knew something was wrong when the gas pedal started to stick. We were experimenting with a tunnel ram induction, and I thought maybe the linkage was rubbing on some tinwork or something. After I came into the pits, I was focused on helping the boys fix the problem, which could create a dangerous situation. While we were talking, a guy who insisted I'd passed his car a little rough kept putting his nose in my face. I kept telling him, "Just let me finish with my car owner and I'll give you all the time you need." He wouldn't quit bothering me. So I excused myself from Tony, moved Tony aside, and gave this guy a good smack. He flew right over the top of one of those dual-height roller tool boxes. I figured the situation was over, but sometimes life ain't that easy. It turns out that the guy was my son Keith's automotive teacher at the school over in Hudson. Oh, well.

Anyway, I raced in the feature, and it soon became obvious that we hadn't fixed the problem. Going down the long straightaway, the throttle struck wide open, and I went into that steel wall at full tilt. We hit with such force that my goggles flexed way out from my face, then snapped back so hard that I ended up with two black eyes. But I expect I looked a lot better than that car. The 63 was trashed yet again—big time.

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The winter of 1977-78, I did my usual thing. I went deer hunting down South for a couple weeks. Then out of the blue Henry Natale called me and asked if I'd drive a car for him. I said, "What have you got?" He told me he'd just bought a four-bar Tobias car. Well, I knew about as much about that Tobias car as I did A.J. Foyt's car. It meant nothing to me, because I'd never driven a bar car. Down South I'd driven Plymouths and stuff that had torsion bars in them, but that was a whole different breed of cat. Dick Tobias was one of the best sprint car drivers in the country. You could say the same thing about him being a stock car driver. He really knew his stuff. His four-bar modified chassis had sprint car mentality—but I didn't.

My son, Kenny, and I drove down to Henry's shop in Connecticut early on a Saturday morning. Although we were surprised at how small the car was compared to what we'd expected, we really liked it. Henry had put a good strong motor in it and adjusted the seat for me. Well, we got the Tobias car together and went to Fonda early one Saturday afternoon to practice. I wanted to test its limits so I drove it as hard as I could until I spun it out. Turns out its limits were low. It didn't handle, and it had me pretty well baffled. It was the first car I ever drove that had a push in it and was loose, too. It had no forward bite whatsoever. And when you went to stop, the back wheels would jump up and down.

I had no idea what Henry was going to do with this car. I doubted Tobias could help him out a whole lot, unless he was going to drive it himself. I couldn't see how to drive this machine like a sprint car. It was the difference in weight that threw me. You're talking twice as much weight as a sprint car—2,400 pounds versus 1,200 pounds. Sure, I'd driven sprint cars quite a bit over the years, but everyone else was turning the nuts and bolts. I never touched anything because I didn't know anything about it.

Henry had connections over at Chassis Dynamics, a Connecticut-based chassis fabrication company owned by Bobby Vee and Bob Cuneo. The company later became famous for building Olympic bobsleds in connection with Geoff Bodine. Those guys said they had somebody there who understood these cars. I said, "We'll give it a whirl." Our first night at Fonda, I went down into the corner and hit the brake, and don't one of the radius rods break right off. It tore off a panel on the side of the car where somebody ran into me. It wasn't a very happy beginning so we started over again. I told Henry and the fellas from Chassis Dynamics, "It's a shame that you guys pulled this car all the way up here from Connecticut. Why don't we take it down to Middletown? I'll meet you down there, just like we did several years before." So they took it to Middletown, and I'll tell you I got in the heat race and started pretty good. Then I

went into the first turn and hit the brakes, and that thing went to hopping around like crazy. I almost took four cars out with me. I really never got the handle on that car. I worked with it and did what I thought was right, but the car never wanted to respond.

Chassis Dynamics kept working on the Tobias car. Today, I could tell them what the problem was—they didn't have enough spring split. Plus, they didn't have strong enough shocks. When I thought the wheels were hopping up and down in the back, they weren't; they were hopping from left to right. One wheel would hit, bite, and then release, and the other would do the same. It was bouncing back and forth from left to right. I thought it was chattering. It wasn't. We also should have had a bias bar in there so I could change the brake bias from the rear to the front. On a bar car you don't want that much brake on the rear; you want more brake on the front. Otherwise, the backend slides out from under you, or does what it did—jump up and down.

We messed around, but we still couldn't do anything with the car. The guys wanted to go to Syracuse, and I didn't know what to tell Henry because I didn't want to drive it there. I wasn't scared of it, but I felt it was unsafe. It wasn't a car you'd want to drive at 120 mph and then hit the brakes. If it was all over the place when you drove 60-70 mph and hit the brakes, what would it do when you went



Kenny in the Natale/Tobias car at Fonda on opening day of 1978.

twice that fast? I called Henry and told him I didn't think the motor was strong enough for the high-speed track at Syracuse. "Oh, yes, yes," he said, "We got a helluva motor for Syracuse." I said, "Well, good. If you got enough motor then maybe I can overcome the handling characteristics. Maybe I can go down the straight-aways quick enough, then let it glide through the corners and get away with it." So up there we went.

They had flown in the Chassis Dynamics crew, and the car was actually getting better. I even got to a point where I could go through the turns without it jumping all over. I could drive the car. But that great motor Henry told me about, well that didn't work out. It was completely flat—no power at all. That made me real unhappy because during the fall we'd talked with Joe Leto, who was willing to lend us a strong Syracuse motor that Tommy Corellis had led with up there. It wouldn't have cost Henry a nickel.

When we time trialed, we missed the cut-off by one. That was the year that Billy Osmun was on the pole, and when it came time his car wouldn't start. I was all suited up and ready to go because we were the first alternate. Every

year there's probably 150 or 160 cars up there. We time trialed 61st which really wasn't too bad for a car we knew nothing about. So I ran over the scales and joined the tail end of the field. I was lapped in five or six laps. Although the car went halfway decent through the turns, down the straightaway it would do nothing. I was sick to be running this poorly.

About thirty laps into the race, the Tobias car started to get hot. It was really, really hot. As slow as it was going, there was no reason for it to heat up so. At that speed, you'd have thought you could drive from Canada to New York City without ever getting it warm. I'm looking at the gauge and saying, "Geez." First I'd slow up a little bit and the temperature would drop down. Then the heat would start coming back up again. Finally I said, "To Hell with it," and drove the car into the pit. Henry was upset—I was upset, and I guess we had two or three words. That was it. I walked over to the truck. Barbara was there, and she knew I was pretty well steamed-up. I changed my clothes, threw my helmet and firesuit in the helmet bag and said, "That's the last time you'll ever see them on me."

