

Dirt-Track Rookies Throttled Down Their Dreams

By DeWayne Johnston, Butler, Pennsylvania

As high school seniors, in 1959-60, my buddy Newt and I decided that the way to make a name for ourselves was to be race-car drivers at the local dirt track in Butler, Pennsylvania.

How hard could it be? We had been attending races for years, after all. We chose the hardtop division, for old coupes, because we had very little money.

By luck, in a junkyard, we found a 1940 Ford coupe that someone had already started making into a stock car, and we made further modifications.

Another friend professed to be a welder and, with borrowed equipment, installed a roll bar made of old pipe. As he declared the job done and crawled out of the car, the top pipe fell down and hit him on the head.

Using a tow bar made from a car-frame wishbone, we towed the car to a professional welder, who did the job right, and later to the track with Newt's '52 Ford pickup.

On opening night, in May of 1960, our other partner, Ron, won the coin toss and qualified the car in time trials. Newt drove it in the heat race but pushed on the gas pedal so hard that the throttle linkage came off halfway through the race, and we didn't finish. We wired it back together and got ready for the 25-lap feature race.

A young man approached us and said he drove race cars in California. He was looking for a ride in the feature. We figured this was a chance to make some money, so we let him drive.

At the end of the second lap, our driver was holding his own but got bumped from behind. Our car spun sideways and another car hit ours, tearing off the rear bumper. Yet another car tore off the front bumper and iron bars guarding the radiator.

Our driver apologized as the track wrecker set our car down at our pit spot, but we agreed it wasn't really his fault.

In the harsh light of the next day, we assessed the damage. Our dreams of fame and fortune were dashed.

But as all race drivers must do at times, we picked up the pieces and went on, eventually getting a better car and seeing Newt become a competitive driver.