

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Woolly!

Dale Van Johnson was the kind of racing driver photographers liked taking pictures of. Ed Lowther, Johnson's old friend and employer, kept the pictures in scrapbooks. Some were of Johnson in Lowther's Nos. 77 and 88 buzzbomb midgets, but the majority were of Johnson in



Lowther's No.2 sprint car. All of the pictures were from Pennsylvania, and most were taken on the dirt half-miles at Reading, Allentown, and Williams Grove from 1956 through 1959. They show Johnson putting No. 2's right front wheel almost in the cockpit of Jiggs Peters. They show him in a sandwich between Tommy Hinnershitz and Jud Larson. They show Johnson and Johnny Thomson caught in perfect, beautiful, four-wheel broadslides. They capture classic dirt track racing, a PA

invention and tradition that is as forgotten as Peters, Hinnershitz, Larson, Thomson, and Johnson himself.

Ed Lowther explained it: "These were Saturday and Sunday afternoon races, but without those awful, slick, daytime surfaces you get anymore. Everybody was a rim-rider. Van was, Johnny Thomson was, and Tommy Hinnershitz, of course, was the most respected rim-rider in the east. They'd all get way, way, up in the cushion – Tommy'd put his car on two wheels – making your heart stop. All of us were walking away thinking, 'Tommy's crazy,' 'Thomson's



crazy,' 'Van's crazy.' But the next week they'd be driving that way all over again. And no matter what, they never crashed.

"Van's always sideways. If No.2 isn't sideways, it isn't Van. If it isn't sideways, Van isn't standing on it. Van was always standing on it. He and Hinnershitz and Thomson knew how good they were. Their

attitude of other sprint car drivers was, ‘Well, whenever they get fast enough, they can come over east and try this.’ Sometimes Jud Larson or Pat Flaherty would, and that would screw everything up.

“Watching all those guys used to make me dizzy. I couldn’t figure out what was the matter. I had momentarily quit breathing – I’d been holding my breath watching.”

Though born in the Colorado Rockies, Van Johnson truly came from southern California and was a vintage southern Californian: he and his painting contractor father helped paint Disneyland. Yet Johnson ended up clear across the continent racing Lowther’s No. 2 in PA. The explanation was that sprint car racing, as sanctioned by the U.S. Auto Club, USAC, really was two circuits: the east, meaning rim-riding PA, and the Midwest, meaning Indiana and Ohio, and the high-walled deathtraps of Salem, Winchester, and Dayton. Asphalt-lovers sought the Midwest; dirt-fanciers, PA.

Johnson picked PA because he was partial to dirt and had a sparkling reputation among the jalopy, roarin’ roadster, and sprinter ranks of Los Angeles. And in the winter of 1955 he’d met Eddie Sachs, who was in L.A. racing buzzbomb midgets, and who brought Van back to PA and put him to work as bartender at the Village Mill, the boozy saloon that had been in the Sachs family for decades.

Sachs also found him racing work in Bally, with the Allentown hotelman Sam Traylor, who owned three sprint cars, a buzzbomb midget, and a dirt track Indy car, and who only employed racing drivers of the character of Sachs, Thomson, Flaherty (after he’d just won the 1956 Indy 500), Al Keller, the brilliant but short-lived Wally Campbell, Dick Rathmann, and George Amick.

Johnson took one of Traylor’s trio of sprinters out to Ohio, to New Bremen, where he knocked the rear axle out of it and found a fresh ride with Ed Lowther: “Van,” Lowther recalled, “traveled 50 feet and knocked the rear axle out of my No. 2 too.”

This was the beginning of Johnson’s and Lowther’s close relationship. Lowther was a building contractor who owned a big lumberyard in the Allegheny foothills outside Pittsburgh. He put Johnson behind the wheel of his midgets, sprinter, and lumber truck.



While he was living in Bally, Johnson had met and, following a month’s courtship, married Sandy Sacks, who was the daughter of Charlie Sacks, a fixture of PA racing. This turned into a family affair and then some. Van drove the Lowther lumber truck and Ed’s racing cars – finishing second to unbeatable Hinnershitz two seasons in seasons in

succession, 1957-1958; Sandy was employed as Ed's secretary; and Charlie maintained the Lowther racing gear, Nos. 77, 88, and, of course 2.

Momentum picked up. By 1959, Ed was preparing to purchase for Van, from Bob Estes, a Kurtis-Kraft for the Indy 500, as well as a speed shop in partnership with him. That June, driving the same Jake Vargo championship dirt car that had killed his and Ed's good friend Dick Linder in New Jersey, at Trenton, Van won the race of his career – in PA or anywhere else – at Langhorne. But that same July, back in the Vargo, he was killed at Williams Grove.

Sandy and Ed were devastated but carried on, as racing people of their generation did. But how do you measure impossible grief? Sandy, following a long period of mourning Van, married Jackie McLaughlin, another racing driver, feted to be killed in PA, at Nazareth. Ed Lowther also tried continuing on. The next winter at Allentown, after Van's replacement driver Bob Cleberg – whose wife was terrible Teo Heaton Cleberg, the virago who used to harangue her drivers – had put No. 2 on the pole, Ed told him this was going to be his, Ed's, last sprint car race.



Then he went home to the lumberyard where he was visited by Clint Brawner and young A.J. Foyt, and he sold them No.2's 220 Meyer-Drake. Next he sold his pair of buzzbomb midgets, Nos. 77 and 88, and got rid of everything else, including the tools and overhead lights. No. 2, Ed's engine-less sprinter, was the last thing to go.

How a racing car looks frequently tells how it is raced. The first thing about No. 2 was that it wasn't truly a sprinter at all, but a buzzbomb midget Kurtis-Kraft with its wheelbase stretched to accommodate the 220 Meyer-Drake, which was the making of sprint car racing in the 1950s. With its short, nervous powerband, its four pistons had to buzz like mad and the tiny knobbed tires only scratched at the surfaces of Reading, Allentown, and Williams Grove. Guttled of all surplus weight, No.2 came in weighing between 900 and 950 pounds. Just like all PA sprinters, it was open-cockpit and lacked protection of any kind. Adding bulbous rollover bars would have added surplus pounds. Far worse, it would have implied that they were there to be used.

Racing drivers of the caliber of Van Johnson, Tommy Hinnershitz, and Johnny Thomson respected one another too much to bang wheels, to bump one another. For as long as Van raced No. 2 he never came in afterward with a scratch on the car. Ed Lowther was amazed by this: "You'd see them sticking wheels into each other like you wouldn't believe, yet they knew exactly what they were doing. Sprint car racing hadn't yet become a contact sport."

Over in the Midwest, in the following decade of the 1960s, another irreplaceable sprint car personality, Don Shepherd, had this opinion about protective rollover bars and cages: "They brought in a different breed of racing drivers. Sprint car drivers used to treat each other with respect; if you were going to pass somebody you had to work at it, be a little patient. But once the drivers lost their respect for personal safety and knew they could turn over and survive, they started chopping underneath, just sliding into each other like a bunch of old jalopy drivers. They lost their manners."

Maybe they have lost their manners, but they have kept their lives, which is more that can be said for Van Johnson and so many other prime members of the old PA tribe. Whenever they made a mistake they were obliged to pay. But strange as it may sound, considering what happened to them, those guys almost never made mistakes. They were professional racing drivers They were level-headed.

Eddie Sachs, who was best man at Van's and Sandy's wedding, was really level-headed. He didn't worry about, and he enjoyed racing, an inch off his pal Van's wheel But if somebody new to racing did something wrong, Sachs would walk up to him and lecture, "Don't you get me killed!" (as it later turned out, the rookie Davey MacDonald got Sachs killed in the Indy 500, but that is another story).

Van's fatal wreck at Williams Grove wasn't his fault. Joe Barzda's car ahead of him went out of control with a stuck throttle and Van couldn't miss hitting it. But certain curious events leading up to Van's demise were interpreted as premonitions.

For instance, the night before the race, Van and Sandy had been out driving when a black cat darted across the roadway in front of them. Sandy, a Berks County girl with normal Pennsylvania-Dutch superstitions, took this as the first omen. The second omen occurred when Van qualified 14 fastest at Williams Grove but, after Jud Larson's refused to fire, had been obliged to line up unlucky 13th.

Normally buoyant --"Wooly!" was his trademark expression -- Van seemed oddly subdued. Part of it was because of his ill health. An inflamed boil on one arm was painning him, and he'd told his car owner, Jake Vargo, to expect no victory today. Even when it was time to race, Van stalled. For several moments he sat silently in the back seat of his passenger car with his infant son. Then he kissed Sandy and handed her his wallet -- a third omen for ordinarily he carried it with him.

And finally he climbed into the Vargo Special with its mixed history. It was an old Kurtis-Kraft, originally the property of Sandy Belond of Los Angeles. Belond had sold it to Sam Traylor who'd lost it for awhile at a railroad siding in St. Louis. One of Traylor's many drivers was Al Keller, who'd ensured the vehicle a measure of posterity by making itself the fastest dirt-track Kurtis-Kraft ever to qualify for the Indy 500 (141.198 mph in 1956). Traylor later sold it to Jake Vargo. Vargo, too, had many drivers, including, at the 1959 Trenton, Dick Linder. And after serving as pallbearer with Ed Lowther at Linden's funeral, Van had become the Vargo's next driver, scoring i sensational win at Langhorne. Now, at Williams Grove, Van was again racing the Vargo.

In three laps Van hadn't picked up a position, was running 13th. But he couldn't miss Joe Barzda's out-of-control car just ahead of him; over-turned; and was killed (Three seasons later, again at Langhorne, the Vargo, now considered a hoodoo wagon, flipped still again and claimed its third victim, another rookie, Hugh Randall)

Thinking back about Van Johnson and the rest of the PA heroes, Ed Lowther wondered where this breed came from. "Van, Dick Linder, Eddie Sachs, and the others were the beatnik racing drivers of the 1950s. They were always broke. They lived for the moment. They came into racing at a transitional time. The 1950s was the last era before it became sophisticated, before racing got safe. They were racers before the college boys started racing. I must have been the only college graduate in the tribe but all our guys were well-spoken. There wasn't a dummy in the crowd. They were smooth, clean-looking guys. They had some kind of flair to them.

“Modern racing any more – it’s Daddy’s toy that the kids are racing. The old man owns it, the mother and girl friend are supporting it, and it’s a wholesome deal. Anybody with money can go racing and inside of six months become a pretty decent driver. If the kid turns the car over, he says, ‘Daddy, buy me a new one.’ Its even that way in the Indy 500. Everybody does it. You’ve got to have balls like a gorilla, but kids today must have. It just doesn’t seem to take what it used to to be a race car driver.”

Lowther saw to it that Van’s last request was honored. “We were both coffin bearers at Dick Linder’s funeral and Van -- I thought as a sick joke -- said that one day I’d be putting him, too, in one of those things. He was a Californian who hated the cold and he went on, ‘Whatever you do, don’t bury me around Pittsburg.’ And I made sure he wasn’t. His funeral and burial were in Pottstown.”

Lowther’s own exodus from racing was strange. A pair of kidnappers abducted him from the lumberyard, took him into a forest, tied him onto a tree, and threatened to annihilate him unless he coughed up his bank PIN code. Lowther did so gladly. It’s FOYT,” he exclaimed. “You know, A. J. Foyt the race driver.”

Once they left him to get his money, Lowther untied himself and fled to police. But the kidnappers didn’t get a red cent on his money. Being racing illiterates, they spelled it FOIT.

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