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Remember When: Buddy O'Connor

During the early years of local dirt track racing the familiar maroon and gold No. 38 and its driver Buddy O'Connor were blazing a path to glory. Anyone that went racing during the 1940's, 50's, and 60's that did not know Buddy was not a real racer.

Dennis Joseph (Buddy) O'Connor started his racing career in 1938 on Route 51 (where the Southland Shopping Center is now located). Back then he drove a 1932 Plymouth convertible with a four cylinder engine.

In 1945, after serving in World War II, he raced Sunday afternoons at Bill Kayser's track on Route 51 in Large, Penna. He drove a Hudson for Nick Nicklovich from Clairton, Penna. The car was called the Clairton Ace. Some of the old timers that Buddy raced against included: Norm Luffy, Matt McKeone, Jimmy Chester, Pete Pania, Chuck Mertz, Eddie Succoup, Billy Walker, Bill Guthrie, Byron Horn, Woody Brougher, Dick Linder, Skip Rovesti, Dick Bailey, and Bill Webster just to name a few.

During the years of 1946-1948 he raced at the New Kensington, Penna. track, alternating Sunday afternoons at both Route 51 and New Kensington. The cars they raced were called jalopies. After this, Buddy went to roadsters, modifieds, and then late models.

Some of the other speedways where he raced included: Rose, Schmucker's, Langhorne, Butler, Mercer, Bedford, Sharon, Claridge, Mon-Duke, Lernerville, Ruffsdale, Green Valley, Elkins, Clarksburg, Morgantown, Lumbersport, Bridgeport, Pennsboro, Barberton, Canfield, and Trenton.

The P.R.A. circuit included: Sundays at Claridge, Tuesdays, Arden Downs, Thursdays, Heidelberg, Fridays, Mon-Duke, and Saturdays at South Park.

In 1953, Buddy built Green Valley (North Hills Raceway) which he ran and promoted in 1953 and 1954. He also raced at South Park Speedway for Ed Otto and NASCAR, as well as Heidelberg which was being promoted by Joey Chitwood. In addition to all of this Buddy also promoted Turnpike Speedway, Mon-Duke Speedway and Claridge as part owner.

1954 was the beginning of the Pittsburgh Racing Association. Ed Witzberger was president and Buddy O'Connor vice president, Chuck Campbell, Morgan Lutton, Jack Hollman, and Steve Petrovic were members of the board.

P.R.A. had five member tracks: Heidelberg, South Park, Mon Duke, Claridge and Arden Downs. The P.R.A. insisted that the member tracks pay a good purse and comply with the rules set up by the membership.

Buddy won the P.R.A. Championship in 1954 and 1966. He also won the 1966 Tri-State Championship.

In 1954 and 1966 he was honored by the Dapper Dan Club of Pittsburgh. Some of the other sports greats honored included boxing champions Archie Moore and Fritz Zivic. Arnold Palmer was also honored. O'Connor was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Western PA Sports Hall of Fame in 1994. Some of his racing memorabilia is on display at the H. J. Heinz Sports Museum in Pittsburgh.

Buddy and his wife Jeanne were married for 55 years at the time of his death. They had four children, Dennis J. III, Anne Renee', Barbara Jeanne, and Philip. They had seven granddaughters and four grandsons.

Buddy O'Connor's contributions to local racing, both as a driver and a promoter will always be remembered by his many friends, fans, and admirers.

