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Remember When: Dutch Hoag

Last week my wife and I visited relatives in the Finger Lakes Region of New York. I hadn't been there in fifty years but Donna had recently been in touch by telephone and internet with my Ansley cousins doing genealogy. One cousin in particular turned out to be an avid race fan. Bert Alexander was a coworker and friend of racing legend, Dutch Hoag. The two drove trucks for Penn-Yan Express the sponsor of the famous Red and White #96 Ford Coupe. We talked for hours about Dutch and the good old days which led me to this week's story.

Donald "Dutch" Hoag is a legendary stock car driver, deserving of membership in the numerous halls of fame he has been inducted into. He was a weekend racer who always held a full-time job, in Bath, New York. He estimated his win total at about 400. He counted up 100 wins just with the Turner Brothers car.

Hoag is best known for conquering Langhorne Speedway five times in the National Open/Race of Champions. He won the Race of Champions in 1956, 1960, and 1963 on dirt and in 1967 and 1968, after the track was paved. His memories of Langhorne go back to the very first National Open, in 1951. "That was the race where they had the big fire. The car right behind me was the last one to get through. He hit a car and when it spun, the track was blocked. When we came around, there were 15 or 20 cars in there and Wally Campbell got burned really bad. They finally cleaned it up and we went on." Pittsburgh racing legend Dick Linder was one of the cars that got caught up in the accident. Some of the other Pittsburgh area drivers that raced at Langhorne included Gus Linder, Herb Scott, Ed Fiola, Lee Stover and Dave Lundy just to name a few.

The speedway was known throughout the country as "The Big Left Turn," for its dizzying track with no corners and no straight-aways, as well as "The Track that ate the Heroes." If you followed racing, you knew about Langhorne. Built in 1925 to celebrate Philadelphia's sesquicentennial, the track was first known as the New Philadelphia Speedway. The dirt track and 17,500-seat grandstands were built on an 89-acre parcel of farmland owned by the National Motor Racing Association, where Kmart, Sam's Club and other stores stand today. The fourth-ever sanctioned NASCAR race was held at the Langhorne Speedway in 1949.

The track tested drivers from the start. To qualify for the first race in May 1926, drivers had to average 90 mph in time trials - three mph over the standing world record. One downhill section of the course was even nicknamed "Puke Hollow" - for obvious reasons. Cars would dig ruts in the dirt track, which was built on springs and marshlands. The ruts turned into holes large enough to lose a car in. At one end, drivers would be hubcap deep in the dirt and, at the other, the track would be hard and slick as pavement. It made for a lot of competition.

To keep up with the competition at other raceways, a 1/4-mile oval was built within the track in 1951. A 1/8-mile paved drag strip was added in 1958. And in 1965, the dirt course was paved. Though the track closed in 1971, there is still much interest in the old girl, where champ cars, sprint cars, midgets, motorcycles, modified cars and stock cars raced.

Hoag's first win came in a car he didn't normally run. He won in 1956 driving Hal Kempeny's car. It was a 1937 Ford coupe that Hal bought from Pete Corey's car owner. It had a Ford overhead V-8 and Bob Burns was the mechanic. The next two wins came in Dave McCredy's famed red, white, and black No. 33 coupes, renumbered No. 13 to avoid scoring conflicts with the team's primary car.

Two-time national NASCAR champion Bill Wimble said "Dutch was one of the very best, he was like Jeff Gordon. Things seemed to go his way, things you can't explain, plus he got around Langhorne just about as good as anyone. In 1967 Hoag put Turner Brothers coupe in Victory Lane for his fourth Langhorne win. Hoag's final Langhorne win came in his own car with

sponsorship from Gene DeWitt, who in later years would be nationally known for his support of perennial NASCAR Modified champion Richie Evans.

Hoag's final Langhorne win saw him take the flag a full lap ahead of Bobby Gerhart. The most interesting memento of that race is a photo of his pit stop, with young Geoff Bodine holding the overflow can. The first Modified Geoff ever drove was Dutch's. Bodine was running at his dad's track in Chemung and came to Shangri-La one night. Hoag let him drive his car and the rest is history. In 1972, Bodine won the first Race of Champions to be run at Trenton, New Jersey. Hoag went to Daytona one year on a shoestring budget with an ex-Ray Fox 1965 Dodge that Gene DeWitt and Dutch owned together.

Four decades and all those wins later, Dutch still goes to work at his business every day. When he retired he opened a truck stop in Bath New York, plus he still has a couple trucks on the road hauling logs.

Dutch's son Dean is the promoter of Black Rock Speedway in Dundee New York and grandson Alex runs at Five Mile Point and Oswego Speedway. Lee Osborne, the famed Sprint Car driver and fabricator who in his youth was Hoag's protégé and today is his son-in-law.

It was great meeting relatives and getting acquainted but even better is swapping racing stories with cousins Bert Alexander and Doug Paddock about legends like Dutch Hoag and Langhorne Speedway.

Photos compliments of Walt Wimer collection.