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Remember When: Heidelberg Raceway

It was a bright, sunny Memorial Day afternoon in 1948, opening day for the first race at the legendary Heidelberg Raceway. There were long lines of race fans at the ticket windows. The raceway had 15,000 seats for the 25,000 fans that came that day. The Indy big cars were the main attraction. Jimmy Daywalt was just beginning his career but then later competed in seven Indy 500 races.

Heidelberg Raceway wasn't originally built for automobiles, but for horses. When the State of Pennsylvania didn't legalize horse racing, there was this beautiful quarter mile track inside this awesome one-half mile speedway, which had no purpose. The stockholders decided to use it for auto races until the State decided to legalize horse racing. This never happened, and over the years, the stockholders and race fans of the Tri-state area never regretted it.

The first weekly racing division at Heidelberg was the midgets, where such names as Jimmy Bryan, Al Shaffer, Billy Spear, and Bill Schindler competed. The midgets gave way to the roadsters, which did not go over very well with the fans, and then to the coupes, which was a big hit.

During the early years most of the racing was done on the quarter mile, but occasionally the sprint cars were brought into the raceway. Then top names such as Tommy Hinnershitz, Bill Holland, and Lee Wallard competed on the half mile. As NASCAR was formed, the second Grand National Race ever run was at Heidelberg in 1949. The infamous Lee Petty won this race, which was his first win in the Grand National ranks.

The coupes took over the spotlight in 1950; the local drivers were becoming racing stars right before the fans' eyes. Names like Buddy O'Connor, Dick Linder, Herb Scott, Joe Mihalic, and

many more were making the headlines by this time. From 1950 until 1953, the raceway was under NASCAR sanction, but the drivers were not making expenses, and Pittsburgh race drivers were not very happy.

In 1954 Ed Witzberger, a local coal operator and racecar owner, decided there was a better way. With the help of other car owners and drivers, he formed the Pittsburgh Racing Association. The PRA raced five nights a week, but Heidelberg was still the stellar raceway.

The PRA coupes flourished from 1954 until 1961 when the late model type cars took over. However, the same drivers still dominated as the O'Connor's, Linder's, Scotts, and Mihalics were still leading the pack.

At each year's end in the PRA, the Tri-State 150 was run on the Heidelberg half mile with some of the best purses anywhere in the country. Later the Pittsburgher 200 was also added in late October with even bigger payoffs.

As the 1967 season approached, auto racing in Pittsburgh was to change forever. Ed Witzberger decided to pave both the quarter mile as well as the half-mile. New names started to show up in the winner's circle at Heidelberg. Most of the regular PRA drivers were dirt drivers, and until they caught on to the pavement, names such as Senneker, Smith, Gregory, Middaugh, Bickerstaff, and Howe became the big winners.

Pittsburgh's Tom Collela got his act together and began winning the big shows at Heidelberg. This included the Pittsburgher 250, which was added after the paving of the raceway. The big names of pavement racing from all over the country came to compete in the 250's, including the great Bobby Allison. Over the years of both dirt and pavement racing, both Indy 500 winners as well as Daytona 500 winners had competed at Heidelberg Raceway.

The raceway was unique since it ran on a weeknight for more than 15 years, a feat no other track in this area could accomplish and still fill the stands week after week. Back in 1948, the owners of the speedway didn't know what evening of the week to have their show. They looked at the Pittsburgh Pirate schedule, and there were only three night games scheduled on

Thursday evenings, so that's how it was decided which night to race. The rest is history, and in the years to come, Heidelberg usually drew more fans on any given Thursday night than the Pirates. Some of the most exciting auto racing anywhere in the country took place at Heidelberg as the property became more and more valuable in the process.

In 1973, Ed Witzberger, due to business pressures, decided to stop promoting Heidelberg after nineteen consecutive years, and Tommy Colella took over the reins for a season. But the handwriting was already on the wall. At the end of the 1973 season, the gates closed for the final time, and a legend of auto racing history ended. Later a shopping center was built on the property.

I am sure even the young fans have heard many racing stories about the exciting years the raceway has given us all. Heidelberg Raceway will live forever in race fans memories. I will always "remember when".