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Remember When: Joe Mihalic

In 1955, I attended my first race with my father at Mon-Duke Speedway. The announcer spoke excitedly about one of the new young drivers at the track, Joe Mihalic. As a youngster, Joe attended the races at Large Speedway in South Hills of Pittsburgh to see the jalopy races. Jalopies were cars with a steering wheel seat, an engine and a frame; nothing else. He remembers Buddy O'Connor being there, fell in love with racing, and decided that's what he wanted to do. In 1950, Joe built a jalopy and took it to New Kensington Speedway to race.

When the Jalopies were discontinued, Joe got into stock car racing. He didn't have a number on his 1937 Chevy Coupe so he picked the #1 because it was an easy number to paint. He ran it and won just about every race he entered.

Joe regrets that he kept no records of features wins or anything from that era. Joe raced for several car owners in the 1950's and occasionally fielded his own car. He drove for the Palone brothers after Dick Linder was killed. He ran most of the local tracks in his career. Arden Downs, Bedford, Blanket Hill, Butler, Canfield, Claridge, Clinton, Columbus, Debo Park, Greater Pittsburgh, Hagerstown, Heidelberg, Jennerstown, Langhorne, Lernerville, Monduke, Morgantown, Motordrome, New Smyrna, Pittsburgh, Rose Speedway, Schmuckers, Sharon, South Park, Spring Church, Trenton, Turnpike, Uniontown, Volusia County, and Williams Grove. Joe turned many laps at the following NASCAR Winston Cup tracks. Atlanta, Bristol, Charlotte, Darlington, Daytona, Dover, Richmond, Martinsville, Michigan, Nashville, North Wilkesboro, Pocono, Rockingham, and Talladega.

His favorite track was Heidelberg on the dirt or asphalt. He really did not like racing at South Park. In spite of his dislike for the tight quarter mile, he had a lot of success there. One year, he

did not have a ride, went to South Park, drove different cars five weeks in a row, and won each time.

When the Palone brothers sold their car to Pat Massaro, Mihalic went with it. He drove the Chevy coupe for many years starting, around 1958, and spent a lot of time in victory lane. In the early 1960's, Joe received an invitation to go up to the Jennerstown Speedway for their season ending Championship race. He had never raced the old 1/4 mile. Joe started last in the heat race and finished last. He also started last in the feature and passed the leader coming across the finish line to win. Trouble started because the regular drivers did not like the fact that an outsider won the race. The promoter asked him not to come back.

Joe said some of his toughest competitors were Herb Scott, who was the toughest, and others were Jim Bickerstaff, Bob Senneker, Ed Howe, Dick Linder, Gus Linder, and Buddy O'Connor. Joe's favorite competitor was Herb Scott. Among the car owners that Mihalic drove for included: Palone Brothers, Larry Jackson, Frank Vasko, Art Munch, Lou Viglione, Danny Karalagas, and many more too numerous to mention. The Munch creation was a beautiful gold and white #57 Chevelle. Joe said that Art had a lot of knowledge about racecars but had no financial backing. The team raced on a low budget and made the best of what they had. Joe still turned in some very fine performances in the car. It was completely different when he ran the Lou Viglione #60. Joe said that he got anything he needed for the car. Viglione treated Mihalic very good and made racing fun.

Joe changed car owners several times during his career, but never changed his aggressive driving style. Joe remembers the night he broke his back in a wreck at Heidelberg. Someone lost a wheel during the race and Mihalic tried to miss it but hit it head on. The car went airborne, came down on its nose, and rolled over. His back took the full force of the impact and was hurting but he did not go to the hospital. Joe was lying in the back seat of the car on the way home when his wife convinced him to stop. The hospital took X-rays and sent him home. The next day Joe felt good but was a little sore. The family doctor called and said the hospital

misread the X-rays and that he had a broken back. He ended up in a body cast and traction with a two week hospital stay.

The infamous confrontation at Heidelberg with fellow driver Norm Benning, Sr. is something that Joe regrets. He felt that Benning deliberately put him into the wall at Heidelberg. Mihalic was suspended, the races were cancelled and all the drivers went on strike to protest Joe's suspension. Joe never forgot all the people who stuck up for him. When he got out of the car after being put into the wall he saw the gas running down the track and realized that a spark could have ended everything he really got mad! "Ed Witzberger did what he felt he had to do when he made the decision to suspend me" Said Mihalic.

The race that everyone remembers at Heidelberg was the Tri State Championship 150 that Mihalic won on three wheels. I was in the stands that day and will never forget the incredible driving performance that Mihalic displayed. On lap 94, he was three or four laps ahead of the second place car when all of a sudden the left front wheel came off the car. We discovered later that his plan was to make a lap and give the pit crew time to get the jack and new wheel ready but Joe discovered that he had no brakes. Joe learned that the faster he went the better the car handled. There must have been a good bit of wedge in the car because he ran 54 laps on three wheels and won. I watched the race in disbelief.

After Heidelberg closed, Mihalic decided to try his hand at Winston Cup racing. Lou Viglione really gave him a break and let Joe drive his car in 1974 Daytona 500. Entering Winston Cup racing was just like starting all over again they didn't know anyone. The first Twin 125 qualifying race was pretty exciting. Joe waited in the lineup before the race not knowing what to expect. He said, "Daytona is not a hard track to drive, but you have to watch yourself because things really happen fast. On the other tracks you have a good chance of getting the car back and straightened out if you get into trouble, but at Daytona, it's a different story."

"For example, during one Daytona 500, Jim Vandiver passed Joe and several other cars but when he got to the third turn, he lost it and took out seven cars. Joe's car was done for. Mihalic

raced in Winston Cup for about five years running as many tracks as he could on a shoestring budget. He often bought tires the other drivers threw away.

He ran his own car starting in 1976. Joe reflects, "It was tough because you went up against good drivers and cars and big money. I feel that I could have represented Western Pennsylvania much better if he had more sponsorship. The money just was not available.

Joe liked aggressive drivers like Dale Earnhardt. Mihalic was always in favor of starting the fast cars in the back, even when he raced on Saturday nights. "You work your way through traffic and put on a show. That tells you how good a driver you

really are getting through the traffic. If you start the fast cars up front, the race is over before it even starts. That is why I admired Earnhardt".

"Mihalic says that if he had to do it all over again he would have moved to Florida early in his career. He said, "I had my chance to do it but backed out. That was my mistake. I should have been down there. There were guys who got jobs driving factory cars that did very well."

Joe Mihalic moved to Daytona Beach, Florida in 1986 with his wife Pat after he retired from his auto repair business in Murrysville. I drive past his former auto repair shop everyday and often wonder if the walls could talk?

Both of Joe's children Troy and Trent live in Florida. Joe is glad that both sons are there. He said, "When my first marriage broke up, I had to raise the boys myself. It was a hard job being a single parent, running a business, racing and everything else. I was also learning to fly at the time. I would work in the shop in the morning after I got the kids off to school. We lived right above the shop so in the afternoon I would run upstairs to start supper before the kids came home from school. I would run back and forth, working on cars then running upstairs to check the stove. My sons and I are very close. One of the hardest things I ever had to go through was when Troy was hurt in a racing accident at Pittsburgh's Pennsylvania Motor Speedway, shortly before he moved."

Joe and his wife Pat live about a mile from Daytona International Speedway. He can hear the cars when they race or during test sessions. He does not attend the races much anymore because he would rather be involved in some capacity. Sitting in the grandstands is not for him. He usually watches all the races on television.

Joe felt that people thought he was stuck up and aloof but actually he is very shy until he gets aggravated then look out. Time goes by and things change but one thing that will never change is the excitement Joe brought into his thirty six years of stock car racing and that he thrilled many fans whenever he raced. Joe Mihalic is gone from the Western Pennsylvania racing scene, but he will never be forgotten.