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Remember When: Joseph Pitkavish

On July 28th The Joe Pitkavish Memorial Race will honor one of the most successful car owners in local racing history. His accomplishments were recognized recently by The DIRT North East Hall of Fame. The induction ceremony took place in Weedsport, New York, in May. One of Western Pennsylvania's greatest, the late Joseph Pitkavish, of Brackenridge posthumously received the "Gene Dewitt Outstanding Car Owner" Award.

Everyone at Lernerville Speedway remembers that famed black and Orange Modified #1 that was driven by Blackie Watt and owned by Pitkavish Racing. Most car owners and mechanics have relied on "Chevrolet power" for short track race cars over the years but not Pitkavish; he was a true believer in Chrysler engines; running and winning with these power plants under the hood for over 25 years. Although a quiet man, who let his race cars do the talking, Pitkavish was willing to leave the local tracks to challenge the best in the east. In 1985 Joe Pitkavish was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame and his driver Blackie Watt became a hall of fame member in 1990.

Pitkavish, who passed away February 2002 at the age of 88, had built and owned dirt track race cars for over 30 years. In the 1950's, Pitkavish's first race car was a flathead Ford that was driven by Bucky Walters. Paul Walters, Bob Schaeffnocker, and Dick Hecker also drove the Pitkavish cars until the 1960's when Pitkavish teamed with hard charging New Alexandria driver William O. "Blackie" Watt. Watt said, "I watched his cars; they never broke down on the track, and I wanted to race for him." For the next 25 years the combination clicked like few others along the Western Pennsylvania-Ohio circuit. The pair reached a pinnacle in 1974, copping 36 feature wins and laying claim to season point championships in the Keystone State at Lernerville, Motordrome, and Schmuckers (Latrobe) Speedways. Watt said, "Joe Pitkavish was an honest man that never cheated; He went by the rules."

Pitkavish and Watt became one of the teams to beat on the Penn Western Racing Association circuit in the 1960's; Pitkavish built a new car especially for pavement racing. He took it to the Langhorne

Speedway, north of Philadelphia, for the biggest Modified race in the country. The car was heavily damaged in a preliminary race crash and they could not compete. It was later rebuilt for local dirt track racing. The car was a 1937 Chevy coupe with a Dodge Hemi engine, and before the orange and black race car was retired the famous #1 transported Watt to 110 victories. That car #1 was replaced by a new car with a Tobias chassis, with Watt winning many even more races before Pitkavish retired. When Pitkavish finally hung up the wrenches in 1986, he and Watt had spent an amazing 25 years together as a team; something nearly unheard of in the volatile world of motor sports. Watt added, "Joe was like a father to me."

Blackie had phenomenal success driving Pitkavish prepared modifieds. Blackie recalled winning an Australian pursuit race at Blanket Hill Speedway in 3/4 of a lap. The flagman told Blackie, "Please make a race out of it next time". Joe said with a straight face, "Way to go Blackie, don't wear out the equipment" Blackie campaigned the Pitkavish cars, not only locally, but at such tracks as Langhorne and Syracuse. He was the fastest qualifier at Langhorne in 1961 and was running third in the feature when the kingpin broke, sidelining him. Langhorne was always the main event of the year and included the best in the business. Blackie always ran well at Langhorne only to experience mechanical problems.

The worst accident of Blackie's career happened at Motordrome in 1983 when the steering broke on the model Blackie was driving sending him out over turn two, fifty feet in the air landing on pit road, and barely missing a pickup truck. He sustained a broken back from the impact and was sidelined the rest of the season.

The incident left the Pitkavish coupe without a driver. Instead of putting another driver in the modified, Mr. Pitkavish elected to park the car for the rest of the summer.

Joe admitted, "That car was built for Blackie to drive. We wouldn't let anyone else even sit in it" and added the following, "Everything comes naturally to Blackie. He pays attention to the gauges and takes good care of the car. If I had it to do all over again; I'd have hired Blackie five years earlier than I did."

Blackie recuperated and successfully campaigned the modified until Mr. Pitkavish decided to retire in 1987. It is estimated that cars owned by Pitkavish won over 200 races in the western Pennsylvania area from the 1950's through 1986, when the long time auto repair shop owner retired from the sport.

Blackie Watt speaks highly of Joe Pitkavish, "I raced for Joe for 25 years, and we never had a disagreement and nine out of ten times Joe was right".

Remember When auto racing history is available on our website <http://www.speedwayproductions.biz/> it includes nostalgic photos of pioneers in local auto racing. Go to the webpage and click on articles. There will be a large selection of Blackie Watt photos after the website update in the next week or so. If you have any old photos that you would like included, please send me an email at: don@speedwayproductions.biz We welcome your ideas and especially any photos that you can contribute.