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## Remember When: Pennsylvania Motor Speedway 1979

Pennsylvania Motor Speedway owner Nick Garin started smiling for a change. Few track owners ever had more problems getting a race track open than the one time car owner did with his half mile speedway located west of Pittsburgh. The location for the speedway is excellent. The track is close enough to Pittsburgh that most city dwellers can be there in less than a half hour. It is served by major four lane highways and interstates and is also a short drive for many fans in Ohio and West Virginia.

In August of 1979 Garin was preparing for his 75 lap Valvoline Invitational. The weatherman continued to throw Garin and track manager Bob Sandman curve balls right up until race day. After two straight cancellations, the big race ended up on the same weekend as the popular NDRA race scheduled at Motordrome 70 Speedway. That in itself was no real problem until the NDRA show was rained out both Friday and Saturday and had to be run on Sunday, leaving the two tracks going head to head with big races. Despite that problem, a large field of over 70 cars turned out with 66 of them running in the six qualifying heats. The field was missing some of the areas biggest stars such as Bob Wearing Sr., Charlie Cragan, Gary Martz, Clate Husted and Bobby Marhefka, all of whom elected to run the higher paying NDRA show, but with the racing that was to follow, we doubt that many of the large crowd of fans really missed them.

The racing was really super as the wide half mile track allowed plenty of passing and three abreast racing was common all night long. At the end of 75 laps Dave Hoffman collected the \$1500 winner's share of the purse in what had to be the Butler driver's greatest victory. Hoffman won his qualifying heat and was clearly the class of the 36 car starting field. Behind Hoffman a great race was unfolding as Lynn Geisler and L.J. Dennis made their way through the traffic. Geisler could do no better than 5th in his heat and had to start in 26th position. At the

green Dennis was even further back due to problems in his heat race. This forced him to qualify through a consy win which put the veteran driver 31st in the starting line up. The hard driving pair spent the first half of the race working through the traffic and by the half way point they were in the top five. A yellow flag came out after 37 laps and, from that point on, the fans were on the edge of their seats until the checker dropped. Ohio driver Chuck Maloney dropped out of contention on the 46th lap when it appeared that his steering let go.

From that point on it was a real super four car race between Hoffman, Dennis, Geisler and Tom Peck. Hoffman held the lead most of the time but he continually had either Dennis or Geisler along side of the Bob Brocket owned Camaro. Dennis kept the fans on their feet as the terror of the West Virginia tracks was riding the outside groove, throwing showers of loose dirt and often riding just inches from the steel guard rail. In the late stages of the race Dennis got just a bit loose allowing Geisler to be Hoffman's biggest worry in the, closing stages. The former sprint car driver nosed the blue and white No. 97 Camaro ahead on a number of occasions. He was along side of Hoffman on the final lap but had to settle for second place.

Ohio driver Jeff Watson drove a solid race and, after the final yellow was right in the thick of the action with the four leaders before settling for a fifth. Larry Walters looked very strong in the early stages. He had just moved his Nova into the runner-up spot when what appeared to be a blown engine put him out of action with just 17 laps down,

Chuck Maloney was in action and impressive. He was running second when mechanical problems sent him to the pits. Had continued he surely would have been a five car race far the checker. There was only one wreck in the feature around lap five when Dick Gill, Jim Irvine Jr. and Connellsville's Gary Henry got together on the backstretch. The accident took the three top runners out of the event. The best heat of the night was the final one when Ohio drivers Jeff Watson, Earl Teeters and Frank Buccella put on a real battle before finishing in that order. The worst wreck of the night came in the fourth heat when Ohio veteran Skip Evans and Butch D'Antonio got together in the first turn with D'Antonio flipping his red No.96. D'Antonio was a promising young newcomer in the waning days of Heidelberg but has never been able to put it

all together on the dirt. The hard luck driver of the night was Ronnie Schmucker; He qualified the Skip Bertges B & R Speed Shop No. 34 Camaro in the first heat but blew a head gasket in the process and was done for the night.

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. In the closing week of the 1979 season at Pittsburgh I was in a battle with Bud Kunkel for the Semi Late Championship. The Friday night before the final race at Pittsburgh my team decide to skip Lernerville and save our car for the big race the next day. When I got to Lernerville one of Bud's crew asked where the car was and I explained the game plan. In a strange turn of events Bud called the track and said he couldn't make it. After the call the Bud's crew asked me if I would drive the car. I had driven their car on a couple other occasions with success and it seemed like a good idea. The problem confronting me was what if I wreck or blow the engine. It would appear that it was intentional and a shabby attempt to win the title at Pittsburgh. I ran the car, very carefully, finished somewhere in the top five and brought the car home safely.

Saturday our team arrived at Pittsburgh ready to battle the Kunkel Team for the championship. Once again business commitments kept Bud from the track and the team put Frank Chappel in the car. In fast laps I lost and engine. We talked to Bill Yakin, who had purchase the car that we won the 1978 track Championship at North Hills Raceway, and he agreed that we could put our number on his car and run for the title. Pit steward Smokey Schempp said that we could not do that but could swap engines. Time was a factor and we were unable to contend and Frank helped Bud win the title in the car I drove the night before.

Bud and I were good friends and I won several times in his cars, the Super Compact and the Semi Late. He left us too soon but I have many fond memories of our time racing together.