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Squirt Johns from far Away Brockway by Dave Dragovich

The first time I saw Squirt Johns race was in 1970 at Marion Center Speedway. His name immediately caught my attention when it was announced over the public address system before a heat race. Then I saw his car number. It was as unique as his name. A short time later, the green flag dropped and a new Squirt Johns fan was born. My first thought was, "Wow, this guy can sure drive a race car."

I became one among thousands of Squirt Johns fans. Those fans saw him race from 1949 through 1976. People who followed his racing career all of those years saw him win between 400 and 500 features, and 30 track championships along the way, at tracks situated in northern Pennsylvania and across the border in New York. Those fans were lucky. I was sort of unlucky because Marion Center was about as far south as Squirt ventured. I only got to see Squirt race for a year. But those Friday night races in 1970 were special, and are forever etched in my memory. Every chance I got on Friday nights during that special summer of 1970, I traveled to Marion Center Speedway in my brand new 1970 Plymouth Roadrunner to watch Squirt race.

I never talked to Squirt at the race track. I sat in the grandstands, and never went to the pits after the races. I often wondered how he got his nickname, and how he came up with his car number, the '511.' Those questions went unanswered for 36 years. They were finally answered a couple of weeks ago when he and Lola, his wife of 53 years, invited me to their home in Brockway, Pennsylvania. I really had an enjoyable visit talking to one of the pioneers of auto racing. It was great to meet him in person after all these years.

"My first name is Lee," he revealed. "But my mother gave me the nickname 'Squirt' shortly after I was born. It stuck with me my whole life. I was born and raised in Brookville. I came to Brockway in 1945 when I was 15-years-old."

Squirt's dad started an auto repair shop in Brockway, a family establishment that still exists today. It's called Johns Garage. Squirt worked for his dad, and eventually took over the business himself. "We were grease monkeys," he laughed. "We did about everything. Before I retired eleven years ago, we worked on mostly trucks. I either worked for my dad or worked for myself all of my life."

Like many other young mechanics of that era, he developed an interest in racing. "My first race car was an old Model A jalopy," he remembers. "It didn't even have a number. I took it to Clarion Park and finished third my first time out. A short time later, I upset it at DuBois. It actually landed on top of me. I was sore, but I wasn't broke." The year was 1949.

He continued, "A guy my father and I knew, Jim Brubaker, wanted to get into racing. We helped build his car. He had Don Bailey drive it. I eventually bought the car. It was orange, black and white, and had '51' on it." When I took it to the track, I saw another car with the same number. So I just added another number '1' to it." Thus, his legendary number '511' was created. Squirt kept the number and colors throughout his whole career.

Johns served our country in the Army. He constructed another race car and would work on the project every time he'd come home on leave. The final product was completed in 1952. "It was a 1938 Dodge with a flathead Chrysler 6 in it," he recalls. "In 1954, I put a Hudson motor in it. That did the job as far as power goes. But some tracks complained about the Dodge body with the Hudson engine, and I wasn't legal at certain tracks. So I put a Hudson body on it, and went to a Hudson transmission. I also added a quick change rear end. That transmission wasn't too dependable. I either won the race or broke down. In those days, we ran Kittanning and Shippenville, a half mile with a quarter mile cut inside."

Squirt solved the transmission problems the following year. He relates, "The Hudson won over half the races it started in 1955. We ran Butler and PRA against Herb Scott and Gus Linder. Butler paid the winner in silver dollars. We also ran at Bradford Speedway and other tracks that year. One night at Shippenville, I broke the left front spindle. John McGinley was right behind me with an Olds 88. The race was 50 laps, and I lost the wheel on lap 36. I won the race. But in another lap, I think I would have lost my steering."

In 1956, Johns got into Late Model racing, campaigning a 1956 Chevy. "A guy named Wayne Bullers started the Late Models in the area in 1955," he said. "I didn't get in the first year. But there were so many people who wanted to see the Late Models run when they first started; they had thousands of people in the grandstands. It took off like wildfire. The first Late Model race I ran was up at McKean County."

Squirt ran a lot of different tracks in his career. He said, "I mostly ran north and south. Not too much east and west. I never went to Heidelberg or Motordrome. I raced Skyvue, Olean, McKean County, the Civic Center in Downtown Erie, Stateline, Eriez, Cuba Lake, Highland, Airport, Schmuckers, Clearfield and Lancaster speedways, and others I can't remember. Some aren't there anymore. I'd run five nights a week once in awhile."

"I had some bad experiences," he relates. "I went to a couple of races and didn't get paid. One was at Perry, New York. The other was a NASCAR race at Bradford in 1959. They only had twelve NASCAR guys entered. Lee Petty was running a 1958 Oldsmobile. Junior Johnson was there. They didn't have a full field, so a bunch of us local guys raced against them. Buck Baker spun me out in practice just to show me he was one of the big boys. He did a heck of a job of it, too. I never went around any faster in my life," he chuckles.

Squirt recalls, "I showed the NASCAR officials all the things that made me illegal according their rules before the race, including an electric fuel pump. They said, 'Oh yeah. You can race.' It was a 100-lap race. I ran second almost the whole race, even though I ran out of brakes on lap 30.

Lee Petty was following me. He could have hit me anytime in the turns. But he waited until five laps to go. Then he hit me. I didn't spin clear out, but he hit me enough to get by me. Junior Johnson won the race."

Squirt continues, 'Then after the race, when it was time to get paid, the NASCAR officials said, 'Our guys protested.' They paid their guys the top prize money, and were going to divide what little was left over between us outlaws (outlaws to them). I told them, 'if you're not going to pay me what's fair, what I have coming for finishing third, I'm not taking any of your damned money.' And I left."

In 1960, Squirt went up to Lancaster Speedway in New York . It was a dirt track then, and he broke the track record in a 1957 Chevy Late Model. Soon thereafter, he built a 1960 Chevy Late Model. "I made a dog there," he recalls. "Then I built a 1961 Dodge full sized Coronet with a 383 cubic inch engine, and I made a dog out of that. The engine was bad .I later discovered it had very low compression. Plus, I was running a three speed, instead of a four speed like most guys. I was blowing three speeds up so fast it just about wore me out fixing transmissions. I was the point champion at Stateline without ever winning a feature in 1961. When I tore down the engine after the season was over, I found it had 7 to 8 compression instead of 10 to 1 like it was supposed to. That's not enough to burn high-test gas. I should have run regular gas in it. I would have run better. I put a high block crank in it, bored it out, and made the compression 11 to 1 for the following season. Then it was a real bear." He raced the Dodge through the 1965 season.

"In 1966, I built a Plymouth Belvedere and raced it for a year or two," he continued. "Then I went to a 1967 Chevelle, a Camaro, and finally a Chevy II in 1970, then back to a Camaro in 1973. I built them all myself with some help from friends. One of the guys who helped me a lot was Bill Lyle Sr., the father of World of Outlaws sprint car driver Bill Lyle Jr."

The biggest purse Squirt ever won was at Schmuckers Speedway in 1968. "Since I had those bad experiences not getting paid at different tracks, I was a little leery about traveling all the way down there to race. A trusted friend of mine said, ' Come on down. You'll get paid here.' So I went down there for the first time, and wound up winning the 100- lap feature in the Camaro. I got paid \$1300. Turk Burkett led the race for a long time. I remember Herb Scott and Blackie Watt being in the race, too. I didn't do anything spectacular until the end. I was running Kannapolis recap tires made in Kannapolis , North Carolina . They were hard tires, and helped me at the end of the race. That was the only time I ever raced at Schmuckers (now Latrobe Speedway)."

A huge win. Pretty good for never seeing the track before. Another amazing thing about Squirt's big win at Schmuckers is that he accomplished it in an un-sponsored race car. As a matter of fact, that's the way he raced his whole career. He notes, "The only sponsor I ever had was my Dad. He gave me gas. I never got any sponsor money. I always made enough money racing to cover my expenses. I raced on race money. I never took it out of my pocket. The only names on my race cars were 'The Johns Garage' and 'Bogacki', a businessman who was a friend of mine."

Lola accompanied her husband to almost all of his races, many times driving the tow vehicle. She was at Schmuckers for Squirt's big win. She remembers, "You could see dents on the car under the lights. We'd just pound out the dents in the car since we didn't have any sponsors. Then I'd paint it." Lola explained that some people in the pits and grandstands at Schmuckers laughed at the car when they first saw it. Well, I bet they weren't laughing after the race was over.

Johns ran many tracks in his stellar racing career as we mentioned before. There was none he particularly disliked. He said, "Some drivers would complain about track conditions being too rough in some places. But I always figured, we all run the same track. My cars were pretty flexible. I actually did better when the track was dug up with a lot of holes, because my car would ride the holes better than those stiff cars."

However, Squirt did have a favorite track. It was Stateline Speedway. He said, "I liked Stateline. It was a good paying track. The purse was a percentage of the grandstand income. The same outfit had Eriez Speedway, too. I actually did better at Eriez, but I liked Stateline better. In 1969 and 1970, I was the Late Model point champion at Stateline. The point champion got a brand new car. You got them totally free for a year. All you had to do was buy gas. The first car I won was a Plymouth Roadrunner. The second one was a Ford Mustang. I towed my race car with the Roadrunner in 1970."

Squirt recalls, "The son of one of the owners at Stateline would run the track in before the races. He started when he was 5-years-old. I always ran the inside groove, and the young fellow would pack down the inside for me because he liked me. They tried to get him to go up further where it was sloppy, but he wouldn't. When he came back in, his Dad would ask him why he wouldn't go up higher on the track. And he told his Dad, 'I'm running the inside in for Squirt.'" The young Squirt Johns fan became a race car driver himself when he grew up, and has developed into one of the best dirt track racers in the entire country. His name? Chub Frank, fondly known as "Chubzilla" to his legions of fans.

Lola comments, "Kid's really liked Squirt." Squirt adds, "One of the greatest things was, at Stateline, if you won the feature, they let the kids come out after you handed the flag back to the flagman after the victory lap. The kids would climb on and in the car. One night, there were so many kids on my race car; I had a heck of a time getting up over the cushion at the edge of the pits. The body was dragging."

Stateline drew huge crowds, too. He recalls, "One time, they had so many people that they climbed up on the roof of the restroom to watch the races. The roof caved in, and they had to stop the feature so the ambulance could get through to help the injured people."

Squirt really enjoyed racing at Marion Center Speedway, also. He recollects, "I ran Marion Center on Friday nights, pretty steady for two or three years. It was a safe track. You didn't get your car bugged up there. They paid a low purse compared to up north, but I only had to repair the car once the whole time I ran there. I didn't want to miss Saturday night at Stateline

and Sunday at Eriez. At Marion Center , I brought the car home in one piece and go to Stateline the next night. I'd have the car ready for Stateline, and then go to Marion Center . All I'd have to do is change the right rear shock."

Blackie Watt was one of Squirt's toughest competitors at the Indiana County dirt track. "I ran against Blackie quite a bit down at Marion Center ," he recalls. "He filled the whole track with his car in the turns. You had to really watch. He'd really dump it into the turns. That was good the way he did it. But it was like a roadblock. I didn't think it was fair, but that's the way he had to run that car to get it around the track. I knew what was going to happen. Blackie wasn't bashful about hitting you. You had to watch that he didn't come down and ding you and make sure you could clear him before the straightaway. I raced against guys doing that kind of stuff all my life. You had to learn to cope. Blackie and I are good friends. The last time I talked to him he said he was racing school buses."

Squirt said, "During that time, I was one of the first drivers to lift the left front tire off the track. I did it in a different manner. I ran coil springs instead of leaf springs in the back. The car came with the coils, so I just left them in when I built it. It would really go down into a turn. When the track was tacky, it really worked well. I could really pick it up."

Utilizing his inside groove driving style required Squirt to use his brakes a lot. He changed brake springs after every race. One of the secrets to his success was maintenance on his race cars. "I changed the right front spindle every three races," he said. "I replaced things such as the right ball joint every six races, changed the left ball joint every 20 races, and the quick change every twelve races. Running rear slicks towards the end of the season helped, too. We worked on the race car every night from February through October until 1 o'clock in the morning or later, and all day Sunday."

Squirt says some of his toughest competitors through the years were drivers such as Tom Dill, Bobby Schars, Ron Blackner, Jay Plyer, Skip Furlow, Dave Turner, Hyle Russell, and Emory Mahan.

In the winter following that glorious 1970 season, Squirt had a very serious accident at his business. As he was working in the shop, a piece of metal flew up and struck him in his eye. Tragically, he lost the eye. The accident put his racing career on hold for a couple of years.

He returned to the racing wars in 1973 with a new race car and renewed enthusiasm. He enjoyed moderate success and won his share of races. However, a year or two later, disaster struck again when he flipped his race car end over end at Eriez after breaking an axle. Squirt severely damaged a kidney in the incident, rendering it non- functioning.

Squirt clearly remembers the final race of his outstanding racing career. It took place near the end of the 1976 season at Clearfield Speedway. "I did terrible," he stated. "I hit a guy broadside and broke my foot over the brake pedal. It was really dusty. I was following a guy ahead of me, and I thought he was lost in the dust the way he acted. I thought, 'I'm sure not going to follow

him anymore'. I guess he saw enough of a spinning car ahead of him that he avoided it. By the time I saw it, I was right there. I hit him broadside. Man, it scared the hell out of me. I thought I hit him in the driver's door, but after it was over I realized his car was pointing towards the outside wall. I didn't know it was the passenger side. That's how dusty it was when I hit him."

Lola adds, "I always liked the orange color because I could pick it out on the track. With a little bit of dust, I could see Squirt. But that night, it was so dusty I couldn't see him at all. You couldn't see the cars right in front of you."

"I said to myself 'you've been racing this long, and you're so damned dumb that you'll race in dust that bad, you better quit,'" laughed Squirt. "And I did. The driver I hit, his car looked terrible, but he was okay. It was a very hard hit."

Johns has an attic full of trophies, symbolizing the great things he accomplished in racing. His children, Ed and Joni, are now ages 51 and 43 respectively. He has two grandchildren, Jacey, 17, and Jada, 13. He's enjoying retirement, and keeps busy running here and there, when he's not cutting grass on his large property. He usually travels to the NASCAR races at Michigan International Speedway, and spends winters in sunny Moorehaven, Florida, located on Lake Okeechobee.

When I asked Squirt if he would do anything different in his racing career, he replied, "I probably should have gone NASCAR. I did pretty good against those guys. But I was raising a family, and there would be no family time. Plus, it took a lot of money to run NASCAR, even back then."

Track announcers would always introduce Squirt as "Squirt Johns, from faraway Brockway." I remember watching Squirt race during the Fourth of July weekend at Marion Center. For some unknown reason, sparks were flying from underneath his race car the whole evening, at high speed as well as during caution periods. The announcer made a funny comment I'll never forget. He said, "It's the Fourth of July, and it looks like Squirt Johns is setting off some fireworks of his own."

I'll never forget those wonderful Friday nights at Marion Center Speedway in 1970. Thanks for the memories, Squirt.