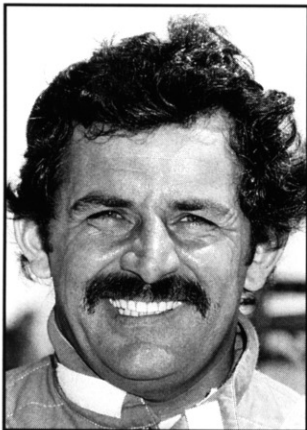


NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

JACK HEWITT

by Pat Sullivan



Jack Hewitt John Mahoney Photo

Jack Hewitt through both words and deeds has become a treasure for those who love straight-talking, no-nonsense racers. There are no filters between what Jack feels and what Jack says. There is not a drop of political correctness in him. And for

these very reasons, he is one of the most beloved and respected drivers in the history of the sport. When once asked to name drivers he admired, Tony Stewart quickly noted, "If Jack Hewitt asks me to jump, I ask how high and how much hang time he needs."

Similarly, Jeff Gordon once said of his hero 'Do It Hewitt', "Jack Hewitt taught me so much. Jack told me when I was doing something wrong. He's the best at this business."

Sprint car racing was once a regional phenomenon, but with the advent of The All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) and World of Outlaws (WoO), a generation of fans were able to witness first-hand the drivers of whose exploits they had only previously heard. It wasn't long before Hewitt became one of the most colorful characters to hit the road. With jet-black hair that often approached his shoulders and an equally lush moustache, Hewitt fit the outlaw image. Moreover, Jack gained a reputation as a man who settled disputes the old-fashioned way. In time, the driver who was born on July 8, 1951, also became one of the greatest drivers to ever strap into a sprint car.

When Hewitt searched for a racing hero, he didn't need to roam very far. His father, Don, was one tough hombre. The elder Hewitt toured Eldora Speedway before a gate ever swung open, and like his son who followed, he had the magic touch at Earl Baltes' joint. No child prodigy, Hewitt's career did not begin until he was 23 years old, fresh from a stint in the U.S. Army.

Eager to get his feet wet, Hewitt took his first trip in a sprint car in 1975 at the most natural of haunts - Eldora. He emerged from this trial-by-fire in the top ten in season points with three victories. With a year's experience under his belt, he reasoned that he was ready to take his program to the next level. He was mistaken. With the will to race still strong, Hewitt was taken under the wing of another Ohio legend, Rick Ferkel. A trip out west with the Buckeye Traveller was the prerequisite course he needed to march down a path towards greatness.

Hewitt became a full-fledged member of Ted Johnson's new group, the World of Outlaws, in 1978. In the inaugural campaign, he finished fifth in points. While Hewitt scored with the WoO in June of 1979 at Washington's Skagit Speedway, it soon became abundantly

clear that Hewitt was a true Outlaw prepared to run with any series, anywhere and at any time.

It is a credit to both Hewitt's longevity and talent that he began to amass some impressive statistics, but his penchant for wanderlust suggested that season-long titles would never fall into his column. Still, he hung around the All Stars long enough to win the championship in 1985 on the strength of an Ohio Speedweek crown and 11 overall wins. He had also been runner-up in 1980 to champion Bobby Allen on Bert Ernick's Midwest Outlaw Super Series (MOSS), which became the ASCoC in '81. Over time, the sheer number of All Star dates in proximity to his Troy, Ohio, home gave him plenty of opportunities to shine, and as a result, his 58 All Star wins put him third on the series' all-time winner's list.

With Hewitt, everything seems to be in symmetry; he knows who he is, what he believes and for what he stands. He is a throw-back racer to the core. He's old school and damn proud of it. Accordingly, a moment's reflection was all it took to realize that Jack Hewitt was made for the old lumbering beasts of the United States Auto Club (USAC), the Silver Crown (dirt championship car) division.

In many ways, the most significant turn in Hewitt's career took place behind the scenes. In 1985, friend, ex-drag racer and talented wrench Bob Hampshire secured a chassis from Gary Stanton that would affectionately become known as 'Gussie.' Racing obligations allowed little time for new projects to get adequate attention, but on the morning of the 1986 Hulman Hundred at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, the car was finally ready for action. Hewitt captured the pole position and led all 100 laps in the Silver Crown opener. They next took Gussie to Springfield, where Jack took over the top spot on lap 29 and was never headed. Next came DuQuoin where it took him 54 laps before he secured the lead for good. Finally, it was back to Indy for the Hoosier Hundred, where he again dominated the field. When the dust had settled, it was the first time since Al Unser's glorious 1970 season that a driver had swept the traditional mile events.

Hewitt claimed the 1986 and '87 USAC Silver Crown titles and was nearly unbeatable on the dirt in these magical years with friends Bob Hampshire as owner, and J.W. Hunt Produce and Lee & Jeff Barfield of Barfield Gift Fruits as sponsors. While a third championship has eluded him, he has become the standard by which other drivers in this series are measured. At the start of the 2002 season, Jack Hewitt is the series' all-time leader with 160 starts and 23 wins.

Persistence and perseverance are just a few of the key descriptors that are necessary in any profile of Hewitt. These traits were called upon mightily during the 1993 campaign. With a midget win already in the bag, one of seven in his career with USAC, Hewitt hit the Eldora clay in Hamp's familiar number 63 sprinter as the favorite to bag another 4-Crown Nationals feature. Then disaster struck. Leading with four laps remaining, Mike Mann's flipping mount landed squarely on Hewitt, knocking him unconscious and placing his life in the bal-

ance. Under the care of Dr. Terry Trammell, Hewitt was not only treated for his Eldora injuries but was subjected to a complete makeover as several neglected areas were repaired. In the end, one problem remained - his right eye. In an ironic twist, Hewitt was soon wearing a patch over his eye - much in the fashion of his father.

Jackie Lee Hewitt was far from through. No, he wasn't the hell-bent kid of a decade previous, and when the tracks are poorly lighted and heavy, he has additional challenges to face. Not surprisingly, there were some that felt that he should call it a career after his Eldora crash. They were wrong. Fast forward to 1998. Fulfilling a lifelong dream, Hewitt survived a practice crash and qualified for the Indianapolis 500, finishing a credible twelfth. Short track fans everywhere, including his legion of fans in Australia where he won the Grand Annual Classic and finished second to Max Dumesny in their World Series tour in 1991, delighted in Hewitt's accomplishment.

But those same grass-roots fans were more impressed with his exploits that October of '98. With fall clearly in the air, the 1991 Belleville Midget Nationals winner held off Tracy Hines to take a surprise win in the midget portion of the 4-Crown Nationals. A quick dash to his sprint car, and soon Hewitt was dueling wheel to wheel with Dave Darland. With Darland finally dispatched, Hewitt was off to a good start going two-for-two. No stranger to economy modifieds, Jack climbed into his assigned seat and once again found victory lane. By this time the atmosphere was electric. Jack Hewitt was on the brink of doing the impossible. Powering around Jimmy Sills at the start of the evening finale, Hewitt waved goodbye to the rest of the field. When the jubilant native son erupted from the cockpit, Earl's joint was rocking with joy.

It is hard to predict how long Jack Hewitt, who even has a few California Racing Association (CRA) wins to his credit, can continue to race in the major leagues of auto racing. Two USAC sprint wins came in 2001, and his 46 career tallies place him second all-time in this category, just six behind Tom Bigelow. Can he catch Bigelow? It is a difficult question, for while wins don't seem to come in bunches anymore, they do still come.

However, at the moment such statistics matter little to Jack Hewitt, who in 1999 was ranked nineteenth in a special edition National Sprint Car Poll honoring the "24 greatest sprint car drivers of the 1900's", for he is still out there hustling. But one gets the distinct impression that Jody's husband and Cody's father fully realizes that he is now in the bonus round of his career. Now there is satisfaction in the process of competing, even if the outcome is less than desired. He has quietly slipped into the role of elder statesman in the sport, and his popularity is at an all-time high. Yet go to Eldora, Terre Haute, or any bullring in America, and Jack Hewitt is still on the short list to kiss the trophy queen.

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