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Let's Go Racing by Dave Dragovich

Jeep Iacobucci...Ohio's Racing Legend

When I first moved to the Pittsburgh area in 1968 for an employment opportunity, I had to rely on public transportation to get around because I couldn't afford a car. And the only people I knew were the guys at work. Sure, my job training was important. But one of the first questions I remember asking on the job was, "are there any stock car races around here?" Judging from the non-verbal responses of shoulders shrugs and looks of bewilderment, it didn't take me long to realize my co-workers were not racing fans. Finally, someone in the background piped up, "I think they have them up at Heidelberg and South Park."

I did some more research and found out that South Park Speedway was closed, but I could get to Heidelberg Raceway by taking three buses. I'd have to wait for a bus until 2 o'clock in the morning to get me home, but I didn't care. Growing up watching dirt track racing at Jennerstown, Greater Johnstown, and Windber, I wasn't sure I was going to like the asphalt, but it didn't matter. I just wanted to see some races. I'll never forget the day I first walked into Heidelberg Raceway. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before, and the races were terrific. I was in awe the whole evening.

Attending the races at the Heidelberg Raceway from 1968 through 1973 became a big deal for me. Friends I made at the track insisted on picking me up and taking me home after the races so I didn't have to ride the buses, and I eventually purchased my own car. Now, almost 40 years later, I guess it's safe to admit that I occasionally called off work to watch the races at Heidelberg.

One of the first races I saw at Heidelberg in 1968 was the Tri-State 150. All the fans were excited because over a hundred cars would try to qualify for the race, and outside invaders from Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and several other states would come in and try to beat the regular competitors.

The No. 69 Late Model with an Indian Chief on the side immediately caught my eye that day during the "fast lap" or practice session. It was a car I had never seen before, and was fast and smooth. I wondered who the driver was and where he was from. Those questions were quickly answered during time trials when the late, great announcer Bill Steinbach relayed in a booming voice, "Driving the number sixty-nine (pause)... out of Cleveland, Ohio (pause)....Jeep (pause).....eeeeeeeeee-yock-a-BOOOOOOOO-cheeeeeeeeeeee!!!"

Jeep quickly became one of my favorites. Knowledgeable racing fans informed me that he was a big winner on the Ohio asphalt circuit. I'd cheer for him every time he came in to take on the regulars. "We went to Heidelberg mostly for the 150's and the Pittsburgher 200's," said Jeep during a recent interview. "Those guys came from all over. It was a tough field down there. I always looked forward to racing at Heidelberg at the end of the year."

Heidelberg had a dirt surface when Jeep first came to compete in 1963. "I really wasn't used to racing on dirt when I first got there," he remembers. "The car wasn't really set up for dirt. Then they changed the track over to asphalt. It was a lot more fun for me. I liked the asphalt a lot better. It was tough to qualify because there were usually over one hundred cars for the big races", he continued.

One of those cars was driven by Herb Scott, a multi-PRA champion. "Herb Scott and all of those guys were tough," said Jeep. "I'm kind of blunt on a lot of names, but Herb Scott was probably my idol there. He was the guy to beat."

Jeep has many great memories of Heidelberg. He recalls, "One time, I didn't make the feature and had to run a semi-feature. Kenny Lowe and I were coming across the finish line. Somehow or another, we got tangled up. I got a hold of Kenny's fender. I won the race, but Kenny claimed he won it because his fender was hanging on the front of my car."

He continues, "I started last in another race with no brakes. We were an alternate and didn't have any brakes on the car at all. I figured I'd just go a couple of laps, but I was doing pretty good, so I stayed out there. I ended up tenth in the race."

Heidelberg Raceway had a famous dip or "ski jump" in turn one Jeep remembers well. He relates, "It was there on dirt and was still there when they paved the track. I loved it. It was like being on an elevator. Ron Fike once started beside me in a race. I was on the inside, and he was on the outside. We ran side by side for one or two laps. Coming into turn one, we hit the ski jump. I saw him go up in the air, and he disappeared. I didn't see him anymore. The next time I came around, I noticed he wrecked his car pretty bad."

The year 1972 was a very successful one for Jeep and his racing team. Jeep won 10 out of 32 feature races at eight different race tracks, and finished at least in the top ten numerous times. The race car was owned by Blackie Joseph, and still had the distinctive picture of an Indian Chief on the side. The pit crew members were Bill Andreski, Joe Schustek, Tom Stakowski, Bob Giachetti, and Dave Osadczyk. Giachetti and his twin brother Richard were natives of the Uniontown, Pennsylvania area who relocated to Ohio. Both brothers were boxing trainers. Richard trained Larry Holmes and eventual champion Mike Tyson. Dave kept an unbelievable detailed log of the team's entire 1972 season, including tire temperatures, weather and track conditions, starts and finishes of every heat race, dash and feature, with hundreds of comments about each individual race and the race car itself. Historically speaking, it's a gem.

For example, Jeep and the #69 team entered the Pittsburgher 250 at Heidelberg on October 7th and 8th, 1972. The following are excerpts from Dave's log regarding that weekend almost 35-years ago. "Track condition: Decent. Cool, damp weather. Car weighs 3600 pounds. Qualified 21.02 and 20.92. Heat: Started 11th. Finished 6th. Big weekend time. Inspection was something else. We waited four hours for a three-minute quickie. Tires seemed real good and we only had to make minor chassis changes on camber. We changed the gear before qualifying to squeak out a couple more rpm's. It didn't work out. We went too far and the tires would spin coming out."

"That night for the heat race we had a good shot to make the feature, but once again, the shaft. There was a wreck on the back straight. Jeep made it through okay, coming across the line second for the caution. But they went the reverse of last year and put us back to seventh with the cars that were involved in front of us. They restarted and Ron Fike had us blocked with Paul Sibila racing his heart out on the outside of us. So we didn't make the feature out of the heat. That night we weighed everything out and decided that we would lose money running the consy and the feature for a lousy \$170 to finish 10th. So we watched the races on Sunday. This was the only way to go. But all in all it was a real nice weekend."

Jeep really liked Heidelberg Raceway, the track that closed forever after the 1973 season. "I was planning to be a regular at Heidelberg in 1974," he said. "It would have been nice. I enjoyed the privilege of competing against the best of the best at Heidelberg."

Although Jeep never won a feature at Heidelberg, he was victorious at plenty of other speedways. Like many drivers, he never kept a record of all of his feature wins. However, he estimates that he won over 300 features in a racing career that began in 1954 at Ziegler's Field in Ohio behind the wheel of a 1933 Ford. He raced at just about every race track in Ohio, and frequently traveled to compete at speedways in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois

The native Clevelander never owned his own race car, but drove for several owners including Lalor Herst (1954-1955), Tom Hinske (1956-1959), Mac McClenon (1960-1962), Charlie Bridwell (1965-1971), and John "Blackie" Joseph (1972-1975). Jeep just didn't show up at the track on race day to drive. During the week, he was right there in the garage, getting dirty with the owner and crewmembers, working on the car. "I made sure I knew what was going on," he said. He was sometimes able to race when he served our country in the United States Army from 1960 through 1962.

According to the August 1973 edition of "Wheel World", Joseph's racing roots went back to the 1930's. The magazine quotes Blackie as saying, "I look for the best in a driver: one who knows the track, knows when and how to move, and how to keep out of trouble. My racing philosophy is put your foot in it and win." For those obvious reasons and many more, he chose Jeep Iacobucci as his driver.

"I had most of my success with Charlie and Blackie," said Jeep. "Charlie had a 1961 Ford and his driver didn't show up one day. I got there early and qualified his car for him. I qualified it faster

than the one I was driving. Charlie asked me whether I wanted to drive for him. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. We talked about it and actually switched drivers in both cars. I stayed with Charlie for many years."

Bridwell was a great mechanic who was frugal by nature. Jeep said, "We called Charlie 'The Junk Man'. He was on a low budget and would use junkyard parts. His race cars would really run good. One night, Tony Dilillo's car owner threw some rocker arms in a garbage can at the track. Charlie dug them out of the garbage can, and put them in our race car. That thing ran like heck after that!"

A newspaper clipping from 1967 reveals that Jeep was the first driver in the 8-year history of Cloverleaf Speedway to win a track championship racing a Ford. Another clipping from 1973 mentions that Blackie's race team won the most money in the 1972 season of any Late Model in the history of Cloverleaf Speedway with Jeep as the driver.

"Cloverleaf Speedway was my home track," said Jeep. "That was my back yard. My money tracks were Cloverleaf, Lorain County, Midvale, and any Ohio tracks I was close to. I was pretty much set up for them. I won four Late Model track championships in my career, two at Cloverleaf, and two at Lorain County."

Jeep enjoyed competing at Midvale Speedway. He said, "Midvale was a nice track. It was family run. The Tolloty family ran it. They were a lot of fun and very fair. Gene used to meet the guys at the pit entrance before the race and told everyone how glad he was that they came. He was a good promoter."

"I thought I did very well at Midvale Speedway," Jeep commented. "I won a few features there, including a Firecracker 150. I think I had one or two track records. We had team races at Midvale. Teams were from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Indiana, and I won one of them." Australian Pursuit races were popular back in the day. In those races, drivers who were passed were eliminated from the race. "I never cared for those too much," Jeep stated. "I liked the long races."

His most embarrassing moment in racing happened during a team race at Midvale Speedway. Jeep recalls, "During a team race at Midvale, I was running first and my teammate was running second. On the last lap, he decides to pass me. And he took us both out."

"I did a lot of racing up in Michigan and Indiana at tracks like Flat Rock, Fort Wayne and others," said Jeep. "I really enjoyed those tracks up there, also. Probably the most memorable race I ever ran was in Avilla, Indiana. I believe I finished third. It was a 100-lap race up there and they had over 300 cars that came to qualify for the race. Out of those 300 cars, there were two Fords. I was the only Ford that made the field, and was the second fastest qualifier. Carl Smith, Bob Senneker and I lapped everybody twice in the race."

Jeep ran one or two dirt tracks a year after making the transition to asphalt. "I never really did very well on dirt with the setups I had," he remembers. For five years, he raced a Crosley in the stock division at an indoor track during the wintertime.

Facing some very tough competition through the years, Jeep ranks Roy Gemberling, Bob James, Joy Fair, Danny Byrd, Tony Diano, Bud Middaugh, Jimmy Bickerstaff, as well as Herb Scott, at the top of the list. Jeep said he was happy to hear that Herb Scott recently received national Hall of Fame recognition. "They were all good competitors," Jeep remembers. "It's like bowling or anything else, you run with them guys, the better you get. You run with the good guys."

Jeep also had high praise for John Markum, the founder of the Marc Racing Series, which is now the ARCA Remax Racing Series. "You never went home broke with John Markum," Jeep recalls. "He always made sure you got home. One time in Indiana, he didn't have enough cars to make a full field. So he went out and rented four cars. He asked me to drive one of them. He instructed me to start the race, then after about three laps, pull off. Well, I started doing pretty good with that thing. I didn't want to pull out. It was a dirt track, and I really started pushing and shoving. John was pretty upset. I ruined his car for him. But John was a neat guy."

Running a few NASCAR races in the South at tracks like Daytona was something Jeep wanted to attempt. "I tried to make it down there, but three times, I got skunked," he remembers. "The first time, I had a 1959 Chevy convertible I was going to race in the Sportsman division at Daytona. The owner took it to Painesville Speedway and put another driver in it to showcase it. He started last in the race and rode around and around. All of a sudden, this guy, I don't know whether his throttle hung or what, but he came around, hit the wall about three or four times, and totally destroyed the car. Then we were going to go to Darlington, but we couldn't get the car done in time. Another time, we were on our way to Rockingham when the truck broke down in the mountains."

When you're racing, half the fun is getting to and from the track. Jeep has so many road stories that he could probably write a book. He remembers one in particular. He said, "One night we were coming home from Heidelberg and going up to Fort Wayne, Indiana. We were hauling a trailer at the time. Charlie Bridwell was sitting in the back of the pickup truck going up the turnpike welding up an extension for the gas tank for the race car so we could make the race. We got off the main highway and were going down the road, when a skunk crossed the road. We straddled the skunk, but kept smelling it, and smelling it all the way to Fort Wayne. When we got to the track, we found that we snagged the skunk with the safety chain on the trailer. We dragged the skunk all the way to Fort Wayne."

"Another time we were coming out of Mt. Clemens, Michigan after a race near Chicago. The Sox and Martin drag racing team pulled up next to us. We both cruised down the highway all the way to Toledo as fast as we could get the rigs going. Our team won," he laughed. Jeep also remembers an incident at a gas station after a race. He said, "We stopped to fill up the truck and had a 1958 Ford race car on the trailer. The kid pumping gas pointed to our race car and told us it wasn't a race car. Then he pointed to a 1957 Chevy on the rack in the gas station and

said, 'now that's a race car.' My car owner told the kid to get the '57 Chevy from the rack, and 'we'll see which one's a race car'. We unloaded our race car and told the kid we'd race him down the road for a tank of gas. I raced him. We went home with a free tank of gas!"

Fortunately, Jeep never experienced any serious crashes in his racing career. "I got tore up sometimes," he said. "Probably the worst crash I had happened at my first dirt race at the Burton track sponsored by the American Legion. I had a 1956 Ford Late Model. This guy from Canfield nailed me. I went end over end I don't know how many times. I got out okay, but ruined the car. I was young and chewed a lot of dirt then."

Jeep ran his final race in 1975 driving a 1969 Ford Fairlane. Why did he hang up his racing helmet in his prime at 38-years of age? He relates, "I came home one Sunday night after a race at Cloverleaf and saw my son laying there sleeping. I thought about how big he was getting, and all the things I was missing. I got tired of looking at my family through a chain link fence."

The family Jeep fondly speaks of is his wife Georgene, and children Don, Alan, and Sue. The kids are all grown now, the youngest being 33-years old. Jeep retired from his job as a heavy equipment mechanic six years ago. He was in charge of the equipment shop at Medina Supply when he retired. He doesn't attend races very much anymore.

"I'm pretty involved with my old car," he said. "I have a 1947 Mercury Coupe, and just made a coast to coast trip with it. I put 6,931 miles on it traveling from Virginia to California. The trip took 31 days. Among the roads we traveled were Route 40 and Route 66. One of the things I wanted to do for a long time was stand on the corner of Winslow, Arizona, like the song says.

A few years ago, Jeep was inducted into the Ohio Twin State Auto Racing Club Hall of Fame. He humbly said, "I don't think I deserved it. There are a lot of guys who deserve it more than I do."

Jeep was born Don Iacobucci in 1937 in the Italian district of Cleveland, Ohio next to the Polish district. He was a paper boy for polka great Johnny Pecon. Polka king Frankie Yankovic lived nearby. Everybody wonders how Jeep got his nickname. "It's a long story," he laughed. "Everybody in my neighborhood had a nickname. I was the smallest guy in my neighborhood. We all watched Popeye and read the comic strip. There was a little guy named Jeep in the series. That's what my friends called me."

Jeep Iacobucci was one of the finest stock car drivers in the state of Ohio and beyond. It was an honor for me to write a story about him. I thank him for his time and for providing me with a wealth of information. A special thanks to Denny Hudock, Dale Miles, and Darlene Hassey for helping me contact Jeep a few years ago. And I'm really glad I decided to take those three buses to Heidelberg.