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Remember When: Joe Viglione

My first recollection of Joe Viglione was when he was running a 1937 Ford Coupe #69 with Howdy Doody's face painted on the side of the car. As a teenager I spent a great deal of time in Hazelwood PA with Viglione during the late 1950's as a "gofer" on the Joe Vilsack crew for driver Gus Linder. One afternoon a local kid with 1950 Mercury challenged Viglione to a drag race on Second Avenue in Hazelwood. Joe cleaned his clock but had to leave the scene quickly to hide the car in Vilsack's garage to avoid the police.

March 14, 2006 Joe lost his wife Ruth to cancer. She was very involved in his 50 year racing career. They raised five children, John, Joe, Tony, George, and Jennie. Joe and Ruth created a lot of special memories during their years together.

Joe had success with the sportsmen coupes that he built and drove throughout the 50's at PRA and other tracks. During the early to mid-60's, Joe built and drove a variety of cars including super modifieds, dirt late models, and modified coupes in PRA and the Penn Western Racing Association. In the late 60's through the early 70's he built, owned, and sometimes drove late models that campaigned on both the asphalt and dirt circuit. As builder and car owner during the popular Heidelberg and Sharon asphalt days from 1967 through 1973 his drivers included Bob Wearing, Sr., Jimmy Bickerstaff, and Kenny Hemphill. During the mid to late 70's, Joe returned to the area dirt tracks driving his late models. Joe and his drivers won many feature races over the years in the Viglione cars. Joe's reputation for building sharp looking racecars was equaled by few. Viglione campaigned some of the most beautiful racecars on the east coast. As a fabricator, no one does it better than Joe Viglione.

One of his gems was a Chrysler powered 1934 Chevy coupe. One evening at Mon-Duke Speedway in Murrysville PA, Joe let Johnny Grum drive and John won the feature going away. Grum, thinking Viglione would be very happy, didn't get a warm reception in the pits because he put a dent in the side of the car. That was the first and last time Grum drove one of Joe's cars. On another occasion at the Indiana Fairgrounds he put Myles Whitchey in the car and he rolled it over. The car was back the next race night in primer but with a different driver.

Joe didn't always stay with the same make of car or engine. He raced Ford flatheads, Chryslers, and Chevy engines. In the Pittsburgh Racing Association days, he had a sharp 1937 Chevy Coupe numbered "77 Sunset Strip", which was very fast and very pretty. This car was a twin to the #77 that Buddy O'Connor drove for Jim Vilsack. Viglione built both cars. Another car, which he built, was nicknamed the "Batmobile".

On many of his cars, Penn Erection was the sponsor and his employer. Joe built most of his own racecars at his home. When the PRA went to the late models Chrysler product cars were mainly what Joe campaigned. He had a couple Plymouth convertibles, which once again were out of this world in looks and very fast.

In 1961, the PRA began the season with the Super Modifieds as its first division. However, at mid-season, they were dropped in favor of the late model cars. Once again, Joe built a beautiful super modified that was Chrysler powered; only this time he had Herb Scott behind the wheel. As soon as the late models took over, the Plymouth convertibles appeared with Joe Viglione once again in the seat.

Eventually he drifted away from the PRA and began racing under the Penn Western Racing Association as well as racing the Outlaw speedways. Joe Viglione may not be known as a racing champion, but anyone who ever saw his cars knew he was a "Master Builder" and a terrific mechanic. He always felt the best part of racing was being able to build a car that handles well, runs fast, and wins races. His toughest job was keeping the car in top condition. His most memorable moment in racing was winning a five lap shootout at Motordrome against Bob Wearing, Sr. and L. J. Dennis. Another memorable moment for Joe was the 100 lap late model

race at Jennerstown in 1980 driving his late model. His most embarrassing moment came while he was carrying the checkered flag at Heidelberg when the rear end locked up and Joe hit the wall. Joe got involved in racing when he helped to build Gus Linder's first racecar. His favorite competitor was Billy Ruffner, one of the top Modified drivers of the 50's and 60's. When asked which driver he would most like to be compared to he said, "Dick Linder because he was the best."

Tracks where Joe competed included Arden Downs, Bedford, Blanket Hill, Butler, Claridge, Challenger, Clearfield, Clinton, Greater Pittsburgh, Green Valley, Heidelberg, Hesston, Jennerstown, Langhorne, Latrobe, Lernerville, Marion Center, Mercer, Mon-Duke, Morgantown, Motordrome, North Hills, Pennsboro, Pittsburgh, Schmuckers, Sharon, South Park, Turnpike, Tri-City, Weston, and Windber.

Last year Adam Kostelnik, of East McKeesport, PA successfully defended his 2004 Modified Championship, by topping all competitors again in the final point standings for 2005 driving the Viglione Motorsports #60. Kostelnik was the leading feature winner in the division with six wins. The team has a new Left Hander Chassis that is scheduled to race soon. The car will be white and orange. Joe's younger brother Lou, age 76, and Joe's son Buzzy own the beautiful modified. Joe Viglione is 82 years old and shows no sign of slowing down and neither do his race cars. Western Pennsylvania race fans are fortunate to have Joe as part of the history of local racing and I feel lucky to have known him and watched him compete over the past 50 years.