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Remember When: Mel Minnick

When race fans talk of legends in racing they often mention Junior Johnson or Fireball Roberts, drivers who were tough on the track and sometimes tougher in the real world. In Uniontown and the surrounding areas of Western Pennsylvania fans often reminisce about the hard charging driving style of Mel Minnick, Sr. Auto racing in the 50's was a tough sport where only the strong survived. Hard times, hard knocks and rough driving were the norm at many of the bullrings of Ohio , Pennsylvania and West Virginia . One of the most successful, and perhaps one of the toughest, drivers of that era was Mel Minnick, Sr. His driving career began in 1949 and covered four decades, 511 feature wins, 102 trophies and track championships everywhere he raced on a regular basis.

Mel was born and raised in Uniontown. His family included wife Patricia, daughters Sheila, Sherree, and Shelly, son Mel, Jr., and stepson Paul Craft. He eventually retired from driving but the fans that watched this pioneer of local racing in the 50's, 60's, and 70's, will always remember his aggressive, hard charging style of racing. The list of tracks that Mel raced reads like the Speedway Directory, they included: Uniontown, Latrobe, Mon-Duke, Motordrome, Jennerstown, Jefferson, South Park , and Greater Pittsburgh.

Traveling out of state to race involved tracks in West Virginia such as Brennen, Morgantown and Shinnston. Deep Creek and Fort Ashby were popular Maryland speedways. Sportsman Park , Route 8 Speedway and St. Clairsville were few of the Ohio tracks and a trip to Winchester , VA often resulted with a checkered flag.

It came as no surprise that Mel won championships at all his regular tracks, but the ultimate race day came at the Uniontown Speedway in the late 50's when Mel won seven races in seven

different race cars on the same day. Try to follow this if you can. The first heat win came in the "13Jr." that Mel owned...win #2 was in the J.B Byres #319...win #3 the #M3 owned by Cornish Garage and Fish Carburetors... the 4th win was in the #711 of Bob Arsenberger...win #5 included the Helmet Dash in the Marlin Larson L1...the All Winners Dash victory came driving the Ace Rodgers #98 and the feature victory belonged to car owner Pap Cornish and the # 6 7/8. To take this a step further Mel went undefeated in 13 match races at Morgantown Speedway in the Paps Cornish 6 7/8's. The car was a 33 Ford powered by a 312 T-Bird engine.

Mel competed in stock cars, coupes, modifieds, super modifieds, sprints and late models. He built his first two cars, a 33 Chevy coupe with a 270 GMC and a 37 Chevy coupe with a 105 cubic inch engine (note: this is not a misprint, it was 105). His career covered 27 years as a driver and 46 years total. He helped his sons Mel Jr. and Paul Craft build their first race cars.

One of the stories about "the good old days" that was very interesting was the night after the races were rained out at Ruffsdale when he went home and was in his kitchen having a cup of coffee. A man that he had fought with earlier came to the house seeking revenge and shot Mel in the head while they were fighting. The only reason he stopped fighting was because of blood loss. A couple friends took Minnick to the hospital where they put him in intensive care. Recovery was quick, several days later he walked from intensive care to the nurse's station carrying his I.V. bottle.

He said "are you going to take these I.V.'s out or am I? We are going racing tonight". That night with the bandages on the wounds and the LV. punctures, he drove G.T. George's modified to yet another victory.

Mel told me about a race night in 1967 when his car owner G.T. George wanted to fly Mel from Morgantown to Jennerstown to race. G.T. was half owner of an airplane and would fly the plane on occasion but he could not read a compass. On the way to Morgantown G.T. shut the motor off and let the plane go into a dive...when they got close to the ground he re-fired the engine. While Mel and the other passenger were recovering from the dive G.T. said "watch this I am going to fly under the Cheat Lake Bridge ". Mel put his head down, shut his eyes and began

to pray...after a few seconds...and no crash, Mel sat up and said to the passenger "did that crazy S.O.B. fly under the bridge?" The other guy who was visibly shaken said "I don't know I was under the seat". When they landed Mel drove G.T.'s car that was at Morgantown but he told G.T. there was no way he would get back in the airplane to fly to Jennerstown to race the other car.

Mel felt that his success is because of good sponsors, good car owners, good crew members and people that believed in his ability to drive a race car. He said "it's more than a one man job". Mel Minnick, Sr. was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame in 1995 along with Bob Cochran, Frank Choura, Art Munch, and Ed Howe. Mel and I became good friends and I always looked forward to talking to him and reminiscing. When Mel passed away I had the honor of being one of the pall bearers at his funeral. Minnick was a pioneer in the sport that we love, and one of the drivers that make you "remember when".

June 9th Roaring Knob Motorsports Complex highlighted their racing event with the 40-lap, \$2000 to win, Mel Minnick, Sr. Memorial race for the Super Late Models. When the checkered flew, the "Bruceton Mills Bullet", Doug Horton, was in victory lane.

If you would like to hear Mel's story in his own words you can go to my website at www.speedwayproductions.biz go to the internet broadcast for July 4, 2005 and click on the internet broadcast.