MASCULINITY, WHITENESS, AND TECHNOLOGICAL PLAY
IN DIRT TRACK AUTOMOBILE RACING, 1924-1960

by

Alison M. Kreitzer

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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This dissertation was inspired by my own involvement in Central Pennsylvania dirt track automobile racing. For three generations, members of my father’s family owned and operated a three-eighths mile dirt track in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania called Silver Spring Speedway. The sixty acre property which included the speedway, a flea market, my childhood home, my grandma’s house, and my great-grandmother’s house, served as the central meeting place for my extended family. I regularly attended weekly racing events at Silver Spring to watch the racing action. I spent time with the network of family members and friends who gathered every Saturday night throughout the summer at the track. Automobile racing was not a popular leisure activity among my upper, middle-class group of friends throughout high school, and I never spent a lot of time pondering the uniqueness of my upbringing before reaching graduate school.

During my graduate coursework at the University of Delaware, I became interested in studying material culture, gender and ethnicity, vernacular landscapes and the history of technology. I began to re-explore my own connection to dirt track automobile racing and examine the ways that motorsports could extend historical conversations in each of these subfields. My advisor, Arwen Mohun, supported me as I pursued this somewhat unconventional topic for my doctoral dissertation. She provided invaluable guidance and support throughout the process and even attended racing events to help provide insight into the dirt track racing experience. I am also indebted to both Rebecca Davis and Kasey Grier for encouraging me to pursue
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I could not have written this dissertation without the constant support of my family and friends. I special thanks to my husband, Seth Lightner, for putting up with me throughout the process of studying for my doctoral exams and writing this dissertation. This dissertation is dedicated to professional golfer Sergio Garcia who recently won the 2017 Masters after 74 attempts to win one of the big four tournaments. Sergio’s career long quest for a green jacket is an inspiration in perseverance, which I find particularly poignant as I move forward with my own career as a historian.
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ABSTRACT

From 1924-1960, Americans spent a great deal of time and money participating in the technology-centered hobby of dirt track automobile racing. This dissertation examines how racing enthusiasts living in Pennsylvania and New Jersey derived pleasure from tinkering with passenger automobile technology and watching purpose-built racing machines compete in organized speed contests. The rising popularity of dirt track automobile racing as a rural pastime reflected a preoccupation with technological play and risk-taking within American culture. Participants and spectators alike celebrated the displays of technological daring at their local speedways, as drivers worked to avoid serious collisions in their endless quests for speed, technological innovation, and racetrack victories. I argue that social and cultural factors motivated racecar drivers, mechanics, and officials to develop complex sets of rules for racecar design, the organization of racing events, and direct participation within grassroots motorsports. By conceptualizing racecar drivers within contemporary conversations of masculinity and whiteness, racing insiders negotiated their personal beliefs about race, class, and gender at the speedway. Because of these gatekeeping practices, women and men of color faced widespread exclusion from competing in dirt track motorsports throughout much of the twentieth century.
INTRODUCTION

Every September, spectators crowd the grandstands of Williams Grove Speedway clapping in unison, as twenty-four specially designed racecars hum around the speedway at the start of the annual National Open race. Both spectators and drivers are adherents of an automobile sport called “dirt track racing,” which has deep roots in the Pennsylvania countryside. In the 21st century, dirt track racing is far less familiar to most Americans than its more widely publicized counterparts: NASCAR, INDY car racing, and Formula 1. But during the twentieth century, many Americans spent a great deal of time and money participating in dirt track automobile racing.

As the drivers complete their final pace lap at Williams Grove, announcer, Johnny Gibson, brings the pre-race excitement to a fever pitch screaming into the microphone, “You wanted the best, you got ‘em, four abreast, often imitated, never duplicated, the greatest show on dirt!”¹ The fans at the Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania dirt oval go wild – whistling, cheering, and waving – as the brightly colored racecars get set to challenge each other for victory on the speedway. Unlike the Indianapolis 500 or stock car races on the NASCAR circuit which last several hours, the aptly

named “sprint car” features are short contests of thirty laps or less. As the name of the sport implies, sprint car divisions compete on circle tracks covered with dirt rather than an asphalt racing surface. The excitement from dirt track racing comes from the skill with which sprint car drivers make daring passes and thrilling maneuvers on the speedway to be the first to the start-finish line when the checkered flag waves. For spectators, sprint car racing is a multi-sensory performance. They are bombarded by the loud roar of racing engines, the dust kicked up as the cars round the track, and the blurring colors of brightly painted racecars travelling at over 100 mph. After attending racing events each weekend throughout the racing season, spectators are knowledgeable about the rules of racing and learn specific details about each driver’s racing style and personal background. Similar to die-hard baseball or football fans, each race fan develops his or her own cast of heroes and villains among the speedy pilots and cheers on their favorite driver throughout the race. Fans recognize that a split-second decision by a driver or an unanticipated technical mishap can change the outcome of the race at any moment. The anticipation and excitement of unscripted racing action draws spectators and participants alike to dirt track motorsports.

For over 100 years, men and women living throughout Pennsylvania and neighboring states have argued that oval track racing is the “greatest show on dirt.” Motor racing has long attracted an avid following because the sport provides
practitioners and spectators alike with “a satisfying emotional experience.” On the most basic level, people like to see cars go fast. Fans enjoy the adrenaline rush of cheering for their favorite drivers and watching the racing action unfold before their eyes on the speedway. Unscripted competition is the hallmark of any great sporting event, and this is especially true with dirt track racing. Anything can happen during a sprint car race. A driver can come from behind to win. He can lead an entire race only to blow a tire on the last lap. Cars can crash without warning changing the outcome of the race. The psychological satisfaction that men and women receive from watching and participating in motorsports is the main factor that draws people to the racetrack.

For drivers, mechanics, and technically savvy fans, dirt track competitions take on a second layer of meaning. Participants challenge each other directly to prove the superiority of their driving prowess as well as their mastery of complex racing equipment. Race teams spend endless hours building and preparing their racecars for racing events. Winning races is often described as a team accomplishment, as each crew member has a role to play in ensuring their racecar is at peak mechanical performance. Racing is an expensive pastime, and car owners consistently spend more money on racing equipment than what they receive for participating in racing events. While race teams strive to win money through racing, the emotional and personal satisfaction participants, mechanics, and car owners receive from their involvement in

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motorsports ultimately trumps concerns for financial success. For drivers, mechanics and car owners, racing provides an outlet for self-expression outside of their families and careers. Racecar drivers do not need engineering degrees or trust funds to gain celebrity status at their local speedway. Behind the wheel of their racecars zooming around the oval speedways at high speeds, racecar drivers are known for their technological skill, their driving abilities, and their courage.

The continued operation of area speedways and consistent regional popularity of dirt racing makes Southeastern Pennsylvania and its environs an ideal region for studying this American pastime. Analogous environmental and cultural characteristics, such as similar annual weather patterns, soil composition, racing formats, track facilities, and racecar designs, link dirt speedways throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, northern Delaware, and New York. 3 From the 1920s to the 1960s, a small group of promoters and racing associations also maintained control over dirt track racing throughout the mid-Atlantic providing a high level of organizational consistency to regional motorsports. As the primary sanctioning organization for automobile racing contests in the United States, the American Automobile Association’s Contest Board set the rules for racing competitions throughout the

3 Daniel Simone, “Racing, Region, and Environment: A History of American Motorsports.” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Florida, 2009): 15-18. Simone’s dissertation examines the regional and environmental factors that helped to shape the development of dirt track auto racing throughout the United States, and he coined the term “eastern heartland” to describe the similarities of motor racing in the states that are the focus of this study.
region and provided their own officials to direct speedway events. While drivers continued to travel great distances to participate in motor racing events, a core group of men lived, worked, and raced in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The experiences of these competitors within eastern dirt track racing as well as the spectators who regularly filled area grandstands to watch them compete serves as the focus of this study.

Mid-Atlantic dirt track automobile racing enthusiasts were part of a larger group of Americans who made end user modifications to consumer automobiles.⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, people spent large amounts of their free time and economic resources experimenting with objects that operated off technological systems. They worked to improve or modify existing technologies to fit their everyday needs or bring their most creative ideas to fruition. The interpretative flexibility of consumer automobiles made cars a popular focus of backyard tinkering during the early twentieth century.⁵ Americans modified passenger automobiles to fit both their occupational and recreational needs. They created makeshift tractors, trucks, and campers from popular sedans, such as the Model T Ford.⁶ Transportation devices,

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⁶ For a history of early consumer modifications to passenger automobile technology, see: Reynold M. Wik, *Henry Ford and Grass-Roots America* (Ann Arbor: University
such as passenger automobiles, airplanes, and trains, generally served as a major source of inspiration for technological tinkering because these modes of travel challenged pre-existing notions of time and space. Competitive automobile racing originated as part of this larger American quest to push the boundaries of scientific possibility. Racecar drivers and mechanics believed that they could always make their racecars go just a little bit faster and this endless pursuit for increased mechanical performance pushed men to take on real physical risks at the speedway.

This history of dirt track automobile racing in the mid-Atlantic also contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions regarding the social construction of American identity through participation in consumer leisure activities and pastimes. Historians of gender, technology, and consumption have explored the development of a multifaceted urban leisure culture, especially within the eastern United States during the early twentieth century. The rise of amusement parks, dance halls, department stores, of Michigan Press, 1972); Ronald R. Kline, Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Warren J. Belasco, Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1940 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979).


and movie theaters allowed urban wage earners to participate in a growing heterosocial consumer leisure culture outside of their homes. By choosing to participate in specific forms of entertainment and partake in certain fashion trends, men and women used consumer leisure to help them rationalize the daily realities of work and family. Dirt track automobile racing offers the ideal lens to examine a similar rise of consumer leisure among Americans living in rural and suburban communities. Rural Americans took an equal interest in entertainment and technological play. Attending automobile races during county and state agricultural expositions allowed rural residents to experience the similar sensations of fun intermixed with danger that their urban peers discovered at amusement parks, such as Coney Island. Americans of all geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds participated in consumer leisure. Understanding the similarities and differences behind their consumption patterns and participation preferences sheds light on the multiple ways Americans constructed gender, race, and class identity within twentieth-century America.

Dirt track racing first became popular during the 1920s. Hoping to cash in on growing interest in automobility among rural and small-town Americans, promoters began hosting automobile races at county and state agricultural fairs. Agricultural societies already had circular horse tracks on their fairgrounds to host harness racing and other horse racing events. Early automobile racing events replicated several aspects of horse racing programs to easily transition fans to this new form of entertainment. Promoters held time trials to see which racecar driver could make the fastest lap around the track. Lap times determined starting positions for the short series of races that made up the fairgrounds racing program. Drivers were placed into small groups to compete in a series of qualifying races of eight to ten laps each. Their finishing positions in qualifying races determined where they would start in the feature event. The most highly anticipated race of the program known as “the feature” pitted all qualifying drivers against each other in a race of twenty to thirty laps. Fairgrounds speedways remained the primary location to watch auto racing in the United States well into the 1960s.

The rising popularity of automobile racing on pre-existing horse tracks during the 1920s initiated a lasting split within the development of American motorsports. Promoters on the fairground circuit desired to make racing entertaining for both participants and fans, so they designed racing programs with a series of short races to encourage exciting passing and lead changes during racing events. These grassroots racing programs differed significantly from the format of the Indianapolis 500 and other automobile races that were part of the American Automobile Association’s AAA
Championship Series. AAA stressed that motorsports was an important testing ground for consumer automotive products and hosted long endurance races to test the durability of automotive equipment. The AAA Championship Series would remain the premier racing league within the United States, but the rise of grassroots automobile racing on fairgrounds horse tracks expanded the geographic scope and frequency of closed circuit racing within the United States.

Drivers and mechanics on the eastern dirt track circuit utilized a complex network of exchange, reuse, and mechanical innovation to build and maintain their racing equipment. Men searched junk yards for used parts from passenger automobiles. They used aftermarket parts and conversion kits made by speed equipment manufactures to convert stock engines into racing power plants. By the 1920s, racecar drivers competed in racecars that were purpose-built for competitive racing on the small horse tracks. Known as “big cars,” these predecessors of the modern-day sprint car featured open cockpit designs. Drivers sat behind the wheel of their racecars with their heads and torsos exposed to the elements. Throughout the period of this study, grassroots racing teams became increasingly dependent on specialized racing equipment built and sold by talented racing mechanics. The price of a sprint car continued to rise, as teams needed specially crafted racing engines, chassis, and tires in order to remain competitive and comply with the rules of their racing organizations.
Open-cockpit racecars were complicated pieces of machinery to build and maintain, but they were also incredible difficult to drive and control on the speedway.

The historical experience of driving a racecar is not comparable to driving a contemporary passenger automobile. Driving a racecar during the interwar period required a series of orchestrated movements of a driver’s hands and feet. There was no power steering or automatic transmissions in racecars. Drivers had to simultaneously
steer, change gears, apply the brakes, and pump their own oil during a race. While managing all of these mechanical aspects inside their racecars, drivers also had to navigate track conditions, pass other racecars, and avoid accidents while racing at speeds of 60 to 120 miles per hour.

Negotiating risk and safety at the speedway played a significant role in the evolution of grassroots motorsports. The constant quest for a technological edge over their competitors propelled race teams to make continuous technological innovations to their racecar designs with the goal to increase the average speeds of their cars. The rising speeds of open cockpit cars significantly outpaced similar safety innovations to racecar and speedway design. Crashes and racing fatalities were an ever-present aspect of the sport. Since racing was a pastime and drivers willingly took on high risks to participate within the sport, racing accident rates did not initiate significant calls for widespread reform. Few drivers or officials wanted to restrict racecar design and limit the speed of racecars themselves. Promoters instead worked to make improvements to the built environment of the speedway, such as adding additional fencing or working to eliminate uneven track surfaces and dust, to combat accident rates.

Opinions towards speedway safety changed following World War II. Americans were increasingly concerned about the rising fatality rates on America’s highways, and they failed to distinguish speedway accidents from highway collisions.

10 Todd Gould, “For Gold and Glory,” American Legacy (Summer 2003), 64.
Dirt track racing had also expended into one of America’s top consumer pastimes. A series of high-profile racing accidents during the 1955 racing season prompted government officials to threaten federal regulation over the sport. While this never actually happened, Americans’ analysis of acceptable risk for leisure time activities such as motorsports had changed since the 1920s. Racecar drivers and grassroots promoters began experimenting with new design features, such as roll cages and overhead wings, to increase driver safety on the speedway.

Several additional changes to dirt track racing within the mid-Atlantic region also occurred during the postwar period. Speedway promoters expanded their racing operations by constructing new racetracks, hosting weekly automobile races, and organizing racing programs that featured multiple different types of racecars at the same racing events. New types of racecars made their debut on eastern dirt tracks. Racecars, known as “stock cars,” more closely resembled passenger vehicles and raced with factory-produced frames and engines. Stock car classes served as entry level divisions for racing newcomers. Participants in entry-level stock car classes could continue to work full time jobs during the week, while spending their evenings working on their racecars and weekends at their local speedway. The various stock car divisions offered a more affordable alternative to the increasingly expensive open cockpit classes. By the 1950s, sprint car racers were becoming more dependent on outside funding and sponsorships to financially support their racing teams. This technical variety resulted in entertaining performances for spectators, while catering to participants with multiple levels of skill and economic investment within the sport.
Participants and spectators who patronized grassroots dirt tracks perpetuated a specific set of cultural ideas about gender, race, and technological skill. Having an interest in fast cars and the money to compete did not guarantee newcomers open-access or acceptance within the technological playground of the speedway. Promoters, officials, drivers, and mechanics consistently regulated entry into the technical center of the speedway known as the “pit area” where drivers and mechanics prepared their cars. Pit areas were often located on the inside of the front stretch and were enclosed with special fences. Entry into the pit area necessitated a separate fee that was higher than the cost of a grandstand admission ticket. Promoters and officials worked to monitor entry into the pit area by constructing a complicated set of technical rules for each racing division and an unspoken code of behavior for pit members. They used technical specifications to regulate who entered the speedway pit area and directly participated in racing events. Pit members viewed the pit area as a masculine space for white racecar drivers and pit men who had advanced technical skill sets. My research supports historian Steven Gelber’s findings that hobbies transcend class differences more easily than gender and racial divisions.11 White men from various socio-economic backgrounds interacted in the pit area, while women and African American men failed to gain the technical knowledge, mechanical skill sets, and financial patronage needed to succeed within the sport. White men continue to dominate dirt

track auto racing today, because of decades of gatekeeping practices within dirt track pit areas.

Members of the dirt track automobile racing community willingly invested copious amounts of time and money into this leisure activity. Historian of technology Alan Meyer termed activities that revolve around a complex, technological system or machine as “technology-centered leisure-time pursuits.”\textsuperscript{12} Meyer argues that Americans (specifically white men) used their participation in technology-centered hobbies to construct tangible machines as well as intangible ideas about their personal identity and outlook. Through their active involvement in private aviation, ham radio, and motorsports, Americans defined and debated their feelings about gender, race, and class within American society.\textsuperscript{13} Literature focused on sprint car design provide ample evidence of the technological evolution of dirt track racing.\textsuperscript{14} However, these


\textsuperscript{14} Gordon Eliot White has written two important technical and business histories of racecar construction in \textit{Offenhauser: The Legendary Racing Engine and the Men Who Built It} (Osceola: Motorbooks International Publishers and Wholesalers, 1996) & \textit{Kurtis-Kraft: Masterworks of Speed and Style} (St. Paul: MBI Publishing Company,
technical histories fail to examine why Americans actively participated in motorsports. The people who designed, raced, and watched dirt track automobile races take a subordinate role in these narratives. While participants need an advanced understanding of technology to directly participate in these activities, advanced technical knowledge is not necessary to enjoy technology-centered hobbies. Race fans - who have a near encyclopedic knowledge of racecar drivers, racetrack statistics, and racing rules and regulations - can enjoy motorsports without understanding any of the engineering that goes into making a competitive racecar. Spectators share in the celebration of technological creativity and negotiate the same cultural concerns as pit members at the speedway despite their lack of direct participation in the construction of racing technology.

Participation within the dirt track racing subculture can be subdivided into a series of categories based on the level of involvement individuals had within the sport. Throughout this project, I utilize the terms “racing insider,” “racing enthusiast,” and

“outsider” to distinguish between these various groups. Drivers, mechanics, crew men, race officials, and promoters directly participated in auto racing events and formed the core of the dirt track racing community. These “racing insiders” were often white men with advanced understanding of racecar construction and operation. They determined the rules for racing events and directly interacted with racecars and racing teams in the pit areas of dirt speedways. For most participants, dirt track automobile racing was more than just a casual pastime. Men invested huge amounts of time and money into their racing careers. Most drivers and mechanics did not have engineering degrees, but they developed a high level of specialized knowledge about automotive technology and racing through first-hand experience at the speedway. Participation in building, repairing, and racing racecars gave technically-minded men opportunities to experiment and innovate with automotive technology. The feelings of success and achievement that racecar drivers and mechanics gained through their direct participation in automobile racing could not be duplicated through other leisure pursuits.

People who regularly attend automobile racing events, including family members of racecar drivers, season ticket holders, speedway photographers, and

15 In his analysis of hot rod culture, historian H.F. Moorhouse has developed a similar subcategorization for hot rod racing. Moorhouse defined the “hot rod economy,” “amateur enthusiasts,” and “interested public,” as his main three organization categories, see: H.F. Moorhouse, Driving Ambitions: an analysis of the American hot rod culture (1991), 22.
racing reporters make up a second group which I call “racing enthusiasts.” These men and women had a vast knowledge pertaining to racing regulations, traditions, driver biographies, and speedway histories. Racing enthusiasts, however, were typically passive spectators at the speedway. While they were extremely passionate and dedicated to the sport, racing enthusiasts typically lacked a high level of understanding of the technical minutia of racecar design and operation. All racing insiders were enthusiasts, but there was a technical threshold that prevented all racing enthusiasts from being insiders.

Regular attendees of racing events, including insiders and enthusiasts, make up the core of the dirt track automobile racing subculture. In his study of postwar English working class youth culture, Dick Hebdige defines a subculture as “the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups.”16 Dirt track racers developed a specific vocabulary to describe racing spectacles and devised an accepted set of rules and behavioral codes for both drivers and participants at racing events. Similar to Hebdige’s punk rockers, racing enthusiasts also developed a stylistic code to express their membership within the dirt track subculture. Participants and crew men initially began wearing specific team colors in the 1920s developing more elaborate uniforms with embroidery and patches by the 1950s. Today, both spectators and pit crew members adhere to a specific clothing preferences of jeans, sneakers or work boots.

race t-shirts and baseball style hats. Clothing preferences reflect the conditions at the track, while allowing individuals to outwardly express their driver allegiances on their clothing. Throughout the twentieth century, racing insiders and enthusiasts who adhered to the series of rules, rituals, and traditions that help to characterize dirt track automobile racing described their subcultural identity as being members of an “auto racing fraternity.”

Members of the general public who did not regularly attend automobile racing events comprise a third subcategory known as “outsiders.” Generally, insiders and enthusiasts viewed outsiders as lacking an in depth understanding of racing rules and customs. Outsiders have historically had a tenuous relationship with the dirt track racing fraternity. Throughout the twentieth century, race fans felt that mainstream journalists stigmatized automobile racing as a macabre and bizarre pastime. Enthusiasts consistently struggled to legitimate motorsports. Outsiders openly advocated for an end to dirt track racing within several communities due to concerns over driver and spectator safety, race day noise and traffic, ecological pollution, and economic development.

This dissertation joins a growing body of literature within the subfield of the history of technology which focuses on cultural constructions of risk-taking.¹⁷

¹⁷ Steven Lubar, “Men/Women/Production/Consumption” in His and Hers: Gender, Consumption, and Technology ed. by Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998): 8-31; Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Arwen
Throughout the twentieth century, Americans constantly debated acceptable levels of risk associated with all aspects of daily life, including work, home, travel, and leisure. Americans from several different backgrounds enjoy fast cars, but most people would never dream of taking their interest in flashy cars and speed to the extreme by participating in dirt track motorsports. For the growing number of automobile racing drivers, competitive automobile racing was worth the risk. The rush of adrenaline, a constant quest for speed and mechanical performance, and a competitive desire motivated racecar drivers to participate in a leisure-time pursuit that had such a well-documented accident rate. Spectators did not share the same level of risk as drivers, but they still faced danger within the emotionally charged environment of the speedway. Fans wanted to be a close to the racing action as possible. They stood along fences or on the edge of the speedway. They were pelted with dust, rocks, and sometimes in racecar parts. Spectators took on added physical risks to watch racecars go around and around in circles.

Chapter One traces the development of automobile racing at fairground speedways. Beginning in 1924, civic boosters throughout the state of Pennsylvania hired Midwestern promoter Ralph Hankinson to host automobile races during their annual agricultural expositions. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Hankinson dominated sprint car racing promotions within the state of Pennsylvania. Early

automobile racing programs drew extensively from horse racing competitions to easily transition spectators to this new form of consumer entertainment. Automobile races quickly became the most profitable form of entertainment at county and state fairs. Racecar drivers in their brightly colored cars zooming around the speedway while attempting to avoid danger at every turn captivated rural Americans. People attended automobile races because they liked to experience the excitement of an automobile race. Motorsports challenged spectators’ conceptualizations of consumer automobiles and the possibilities for human travel and technological daring.

The relationship between automobile racing and risk taking during the interwar period is the focus of Chapter Two. Racecar drivers received a physiological and physical rush from participating in automobile races, and they continued to race competitively despite the high physical risks involved in motorsports. Drivers attempted to manage the risks involved in racing through training, verbal instruction, and first-hand experience on the speedway. When participants did see their peers get seriously injured in racing accidents, most drivers rationalized racing fatalities as an unfortunate yet unpreventable consequence of their pursuit of speed and technological daring. Racecar drivers did rely on both superstition and religion to help them process the large amount of physical risk involved within the sport. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, racing fatalities failed to initiate serious safety modifications to racecar technology and neglected to invest money into track maintenance.

Demographically speaking, dirt track automobile racing is a leisure activity that has historically been dominated by white men. Most of the drivers, mechanics, car
owners, promoters and officials are all white and male. Chapter Three explores how factors of technical competency, personal character, ethnicity, and gender all influenced who was accepted into the pit area. Insiders created a fraternity mentality within the sport, and they systematically worked to identify a shared set of values. Members of the racing fraternity initiated young technical enthusiasts by establishing mentorships, instructing them on racecar set up, sharing equipment, and providing tips for driving success on the speedway. The racial and gender homogeneity of the pit area allowed for the establishment of rules and social practices that worked to openly deny white women and black men from gaining the status of racing insider.

The attitudes and actions of the racing fraternity during World War II is the focus of Chapter Four. The federal government imposed a ban on all auto racing activities in 1942 in an effort to conserve vital war materials, such as gasoline and rubber. While racing enthusiasts vowed to do their part to help end the war, people resented the fact that the government had put a stop to automobile racing. In voicing their protests and complaints about the auto racing ban, racing enthusiasts articulated the personal connections and meaning that they derived from their participation in the pastime. Members of the dirt track racing fraternity continued to meet at duration parties, read racing periodicals, and talk about racing despite the wartime racing ban.

The strong sense of community racing enthusiasts had established during World War II continued throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, as interest in automobile racing flourished throughout the region. Chapter Five explores the popularity and prosperity of automobile racing during the postwar period. National interest in
automobiles and technological tinkering resulted in an expansion of grassroots automobile racing during the 1950s. New racing divisions developed to allow more American men to competitively race each weekend at their local dirt track. Speed enthusiasts continued to view automobile racing as their primary consumer leisure activity, and they celebrated dirt track racing as a family-friendly pastime.

Today, American motorsports is synonymous with NASCAR. What Americans know and understand about automobile racing enthusiasts is learned through media coverage of NASCAR events, corporate advertising campaigns featuring drivers, and cultural stereotypes of stock car racing fans. Academics join most Americans in perceiving racecar drivers and their faithful fans, as beer guzzling, blue collar, rednecks. However, there is a greater level of diversity and complexity within American motorsports that this project brings to light. Dirt track racing cannot simply be equated with NASCAR. Regional cultural patterns, the cost of participation, the level of technical complexity of the racecars, as well as the level of risk to drivers means that racing events and enthusiasts vary significantly throughout the United States. In general, all types of motorsports deserve scholarly attention because they illuminate the historical experiences of several Americans, who because of their educational background, geographic location, or leisure pursuits, have fallen outside the scope of traditional subfields of historical examination.
Chapter 1

HARNESSING HORSEPOWER: THE RISE OF DIRT TRACK AUTOMOBILE RACING

The town of Warren, Pennsylvania looked deserted on the afternoon of September 4, 1924. Businesses shut down shop and released their employees to attend “Warren Borough Day” at the county fairgrounds. After paying the fifty cent admission fee, fair goers crowded the main exhibition hall to inspect the livestock. The carnival-like atmosphere of the midway offered mechanical rides, fortune telling booths, games, and various curiosities. A new entertainment feature also drew crowds of all ages. Racecar drivers in their brightly colored, open-cockpit cars competed for the first time on the fairground’s half-mile horse track. Midwestern promoter Ralph Hankinson organized the event and brought drivers from as far away as Kansas City, Omaha, Nashville, and Jacksonville to vie for cash and glory against a small number of local speed demons. The Warren Tribune reported that “countless feats of skill and daring” performed by this group of men and their machines kept a crowd of over 4,000 local residents “spell bound from 2:00 o’clock until 5:00.” Afterwards, excited spectators made plans to return to the fairground track two days later to again watch the racecar drivers zoom around Warren’s dirt oval during a second series of automobile races planned for the last day of the county fair.

18 “Record Crowd Jams Grounds at County Fair,” Warren Tribune, September 4, 1924, 1.

19 Newspaper articles published in the Warren Tribune chronicle the 1924 fair, including “Record Crowd Jams Grounds at County Fair;” “Household Depart Record Expected,” August 20, 1924, 10; “Warren to be in Gala Dress,” August 28, 1924, 1&11; “Fair Opening Monday Will Attract 25,000,” August 29, 1924, 6; “Opening of
Dirt track automobile racing offered the perfect synergy of new and exciting technology in the pre-existing setting of the agricultural fairground. Automobile racing became a central feature of county fairs throughout Pennsylvania and surrounding states during the 1920s. Mid-Atlantic agricultural societies already had oval, dirt speedways on their fairground properties to host horse racing competitions during their annual agricultural expositions. Early automobile racing programs utilized the existing features of the horse track and incorporated horse racing practices into their racing events. As they worked to initiate a new form of consumer leisure, enthusiasts faced challenges in converting horse tracks into safe venues for high speed racecars. Racing automobiles on fairground dirt tracks created a distinctively American form of motorsports. The popularity of grassroots dirt track racing quickly turned automobile racing into a commercially viable consumer entertainment within Southeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Northern Delaware.20

Fair Here on Monday to Bring 25,000,” August 29, 1924, 1; “Grangers Day Brings County Folks to Fair,” September 5, 1924, 1&7.

20 Fairs located in in Bucks, Berks, Chester, Lancaster, and York counties continued to attract the biggest attendance of all Pennsylvania county fairs. Fairs located in southeastern Pennsylvania also consistently reported huge crowds for their yearly automobile races. For more information on the popularity of county fairs in southeastern Pennsylvania, see: Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life 1840-1940* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1955), 426.
Early Automobile Racing at the County Fair, 1900-1923

Americans struggled to find the ideal venue for organized automobile racing during the first decades of the twentieth century. Promoters initially worked to mirror their European counterparts by hosting automobile races on public roads. Between 1904 and 1906, wealthy industrialist Willie T. Vanderbilt hosted a yearly automobile race, known as the Vanderbilt Cup, on a stretch of public road in Long Island, New
York.\textsuperscript{21} Civic boosters established similar road races in Philadelphia and Savannah.\textsuperscript{22} From 1903 to 1910, Americans additionally competed in automobile racing tournaments held on the beach between Ormond Beach and Daytona Beach, Florida.\textsuperscript{23} Because of the high cost of early automobiles, to an elite group of technical-enthusiasts who had both the money and time to devote to motorsports were the primary participants in these early speed contests. Residents who lived near road courses discussed the inconveniences and physical dangers road races posed to the public. One Pennsylvania reporter raged against the 1904 Vanderbilt Cup race commenting, “the public roads must not be abandoned by the public for individual use of pampered millionaires who are willing to risk their own lives and send public rights and laws to the deuce for the sake of a new thrill.”\textsuperscript{24} Public opposition to road racing combined with a lack of dedicated racetracks prevented early racing enthusiasts from developing road racing into a popular American leisure activity.

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\textsuperscript{23} Dick Punnett, \textit{Beach Racers Daytona before NASCAR} (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{24} "Automobile Racing," \textit{Harrisburg Telegraph}, October 10, 1904, 8.
\end{flushleft}
American automobile enthusiasts adopted a second European racing model by constructing board speedways throughout the United States.25 The lure of speed attracted both participants and spectators to wooden speedways, such as Uniontown, Altoona, and Woodbridge throughout the late 1910s and 1920s.26 Racecar drivers set new speed records on the sharply banked board tracks. Despite their popularity with spectators, wooden speedways were expensive to repair and maintain. Crashes, fires, and general wear to the racing surface necessitated additional financial investments and repairs each racing season.27 Sun damage, rotting, and termite infestations also plagued operators of the board tracks. Because of their high maintenance costs, board speedways typically had a short life span, and the majority of the board tracks closed their doors by the 1930s.28

American speed enthusiasts gradually turned to closed circuit dirt speedways as the preferred venue for organized motorsports. Men who wished to test their

25 In his article, “A Century of Motorsports: ‘Gentlemen, start your engines,’” Rae Tyson explains that wooden tracks initially developed in France and were anywhere from ¼ to 1 mile in length. See, Pennsylvania Heritage Volume XXXIX, Number 1 (Winter 2013): 18.

26 Marci Lynn McGuinness, Yesteryear at the Uniontown Speedway (Shore Publications, 2008).

27 Ray Keech’s 1929 accident at Altoona illustrates the safety risks of board speedways. Newspaper reports indicated that Keech’s accident had been caused by a fellow driver hitting one of the several “holes” in the speedway that were marked with small red flags. Keech spun out of control on the track, and his gas tank exploded towards the bottom of the speedway burning a large whole into the racetrack. See, “Keech Killed As He Sits on Rail,” Altoona Mirror, June 17, 1929, 1.

passenger automobiles identified the flat, well-maintained circle tracks as an easy and inexpensive alternative to road racing and board tracks. While only a small number of roads existed that were suitable for automobile racing, at least fifty northeastern communities already had oval horse tracks at their local fairgrounds. Track preparation and promotion proved easier at fairground horse tracks of one-eighth to one-half mile in length, as opposed to road courses laid out over several miles of public highway. Closed circuit speed contests remained small, exhibition-style races hosted for wealthy, local car owners. Automobile races at county agricultural fairs provided most rural residents with their first opportunity to interact with automobiles and opened the door to a new form of technological play for both participants and spectators.


30 In 1909 census of American roads, over 90 percent of the nation’s roads remained dirt with only 8.66 percent of roads surfaced, typically with gravel. See, Robert Casey, The Model T: A Centennial History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 4.

31 When residents of Northampton and Lehigh counties competed in a series of automobile races at the 1903 Bethlehem Fair, race organizers divided drivers into three groups based on the value of their vehicles. The first group of racers competed in touring cars costing $1,800 or more. The second class of cars were valued at between $1,000 and $1,800. Participants competing in the third class of drivers raced cars worth less than $1,000. “Automobile Races at the Bethlehem Fair,” Allentown Democrat, August 26, 1903, 3.

32 Manufacturers of plows, harvesters, household appliances, and automobiles regularly exhibited their newest product lines to customers at annual agricultural fairs. See, Warren J. Gates, “Modernization as a Function of an Agricultural Fair: The Great
Civic boosters actively debated the merits and drawbacks of racing automobiles on fairground horse tracks. The mayor of Allentown, Pennsylvania, C.D. Schaeffer, voiced his disapproval of automobile races at the Allentown Fair in 1907. Schaeffer believed that the half-mile fairgrounds dirt track was not large enough to race automobiles. He argued that the dimensions of the straightaways and turns made it impossible for two racecars to safely pass each other during a race. While the promoters claimed all proper safety precautions had been enforced, Schaeffer voiced his disapproval, warning that such races were “exceedingly dangerous to life and limb.” Critics expressed concerns that flat, fairground horse tracks were “not banked high enough on the turns to make it safe for high speed.” Racing promoters and fairground operators remained undeterred and hosted automobile races at their speedways without making significant changes to the layouts of their tracks.

Attendees and participants of early fairground automobile races argued that there were several potential technological benefits of closed circuit motorsports. Racecar drivers and their mechanics could compare, test, and improve contemporary automotive technology through racing. When the Reading Automobile Racing Club hosted their first race in 1906, organizers subdivided participants into groups based on


34 “Mayor Opposes Auto Races,” Allentown Leader, October 18, 1907, 1.

the type of car they drove (runabouts or touring cars), the purchasing price of the vehicle, and the power source of the car (gasoline or steam). Since participants' cars were mechanically identical to those purchased from area car dealers, local residents could use data gained from attending fairground automobile races to make informed decisions when buying their own passenger vehicles. Racing enthusiasts argued that motor racing adhered to the longstanding educational missions of their local agricultural societies. Farmers traditionally hosted annual agricultural expositions to compare breeds of livestock and horses, discuss ways to improve their crops, and share the latest techniques in farming. Automobile racing offered similar opportunities for productive leisure, as technophiles intellectually engaged with the scientific method and tinkered with their racecars. Supporters insisted that

36 “First Meet of Reading Auto Club Is Tempered by Fatal Accident,” Reading Times, October 1, 1906, 8.

37 A newspaper article advertising a race hosted by the Reading Automobile Club in 1907 instructed interested participants to remove the lamps (headlights), fenders, and hoods of their vehicles as well as disconnect their mufflers to participate in the race. See, “Reading Autoists Will Hold Carnival,” Harrisburg Telegraph, June 6, 1907, 11.


39 Historian Steven Gelber describes hobbies as being “productive leisure” because people spend a large amount of time and money on these activities while working
competitive racing would advance the quality of life for all Americans by improving the speed and performance of passenger vehicles. 40

The rise of automobile racing at fairground horse tracks paralleled the growing acceptance and affordability of passenger cars within the United States. Rural Americans initially eschewed automobiles as expensive, noisy, and disruptive to farm life and were slow to purchase passenger vehicles. 41 Only seven percent of Pennsylvania farmers owned automobiles in 1914. By 1921, the rates of car ownership among the state’s farming population had increased ten-fold with 72% of the state’s farmers owning cars. 42 The utility and interpretative flexibility of early automobiles increasingly won over farm families, who invested in automobiles before other new farm and household technologies. 43 The introduction of Henry Ford’s Model T also

towards a specific set of goals or measurable outcomes. See, Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 2.


42 Almost all farmers within the state owned at least one automobile by 1940. See, Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 524.

43 Farmers used automobiles to haul and transport their products to market, and they easily transformed automobiles into functional pieces of farm machinery, such as tractors or snow blowers. Rural families also utilized automobiles as free-standing
significantly impacted rates of automobile ownership throughout the United States. When compared to its competitors, the Ford Model T was light-weight, easy to operate, and capable of navigating difficult road terrain. Rural residents also liked the lower price tag of the Model T thanks to Henry Ford’s new assembly-line production methods. By 1925, a reporter for the Harrisburg Telegraph claimed that "nearly everyone owns an automobile these days and nearly everyone craves speed." Americans drove further away from home for consumer entertainment, including automobile races at area fairgrounds.


46 “Auto Race Meet At Pottstown,” Harrisburg Telegraph, August 13, 1925, 17.

47 In Tinkering: Consumers Reinvent the Early Automobile, Kathleen Franz examines the various end-user modifications Americans made to their automobiles during the 1910s and 1920s. Franz contends that consumer tinkering with automobiles declined by the 1930s when manufacturers worked to control car design; however, the history
industry to sell conversion parts to American men who were interested in increasing the power and performance of their Model T engines. Men from lower and middle class backgrounds who had high levels of mechanical aptitude could now afford to build their own competitive racecars. Backyard tinkerers used the rail-frame bodies of production automobiles and modified various parts of commercial vehicles to build streamlined, cigar-shaped racecars. For men who had an interest in auto mechanics and speed, local half-mile fairground speedways were the perfect place to hone their talents behind the wheel of these less expensive, open-cockpit racecars known as “big cars.” By the 1920s, Americans no longer raced production automobiles on dirt tracks, and purpose-built big cars dominated the grassroots racing scene.

Inserting high-powered racecars into the existing landscape of the horse track proved to be an easy money maker for fair organizers. Automobile racing joined a growing list of mechanized consumer amusements at agricultural expositions. Lines of adventurous visitors paid to ride carousels and other mechanically-operated rides that


dotted the fair midway. Rural Americans watched on eagerly, as performers defied
the laws of gravity by riding around steel globes on bicycles and motorcycles. Civic
boosters recognized the economic value of technology-centered amusements and
continued to book new thrilling exploits for their fair programs to keep their
agricultural expositions financially solvent. Fair organizers capitalized on new
entertainment spectacles, such as automobile racing, by charging additional fees for
grandstand seating at their horse tracks, which allowed spectators the best views of the
racing action.

The Rise of the Eastern Fairground Racing Circuit in 1924

By the early 1920s, Pennsylvania state officials worried that the increasing
variety of fair entertainments had denigrated the educational and family-friendly
atmosphere of county and state agricultural expositions. Critics voiced concerns about
the myriad of unsavory elements of the midway. Game operators regularly cheated

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50 Agricultural expositions provided rural Americans with participatory thrills similar
to the experience of attending an urban amusement park. For a history of the rise of
mechanical rides at urban amusement parks, see: Michael Immerso, Coney Island: The
People’s Playground (Camden: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Gary Cross and John
Walton, The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century (New York:
Columbia University Press, 2005); Judith A. Adams, The American Amusement Park
Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills (Twayne Publishers, 1991); John F.
Kasson, Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century, (New York:
Hill and Wang, 1978); and Arwen Mohun, “Chapter 10: Risk as Entertainment:
Amusement Parks” in Risk: Negotiating Safety in American Society (Baltimore: Johns

51 “Directors Arranging Great Program for Coming County Fair,” Lebanon Daily

52 Wayne Caldwell Neely, The Agricultural Fair (New York: Columbia University
customers by using tricks and contraptions to lower patrons’ chances of winning. Huskers worked to sell “dope, narcotics, [and] liquor” to fairgoers and distributed “indecent” pictures and literature. Shows and acts with “immoral or suggestive features” - including burlesque and peep shows featuring female nudity - had become lucrative fairground mainstays.\(^5^3\) Reports of thefts, sexual harassment, and illicit sales within the heterosocial space of the fairground raised calls for changes to the overall atmosphere and focus of county fairs. Gambling had also become the primary attraction of multi-day horse racing events, and fairgoers avidly placed bets on their favorite horses hoping to walk away with cash in their pockets instead of educational tips for farm management in their heads.\(^5^4\) During the winter of 1923-1924, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture vowed to again make county fairs “more of an educational factor in the rural communities.”\(^5^5\) Pennsylvania lawmakers prohibited immoral entertainments and gambling from all state-funded fairs and outdoor events for the 1924 season.

Fair associations depended on state funds to offset the costs of hosting their county fairs, so they searched for acts and events that would adhere to the new statewide entertainment mandates.\(^5^6\) Increased state regulation over agricultural fair


\(^{56}\) Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life*, 431.
entertainments opened new opportunities for organized automobile racing within the state of Pennsylvania. Agricultural committees decided to keep in “pace with the demand of modern times” by hosting automobile races at their 1924 fairs. Civic boosters claimed that the majority of residents within their local communities had “never seen an automobile race,” and they hoped that motor racing events would attract large numbers of newcomers to their agricultural expositions.\textsuperscript{57} Since they were new to motorsports promotions, fair organizers across Pennsylvania booked their 1924 automobile racing events with Midwestern promoter, Ralph Hankinson. In exchange for overseeing the planning, publicity, and the running of the race day program, Ralph Hankinson Enterprises received all profits from driver entry fees and grandstand ticket sales. Fairs still profited from racing events. They gained significant boosts in attendance on auto racing days increasing the overall admission sales for their agricultural expositions without having to do any of the work of organizing the race day program.\textsuperscript{58}

Promoting racing at eastern agricultural fairs was a logical and lucrative expansion of Ralph Hankinson’s racing interests. A natural showman, Ralph Hankinson began his career as a traveling salesman for a Midwestern-based truck

\textsuperscript{57} “Censored Shows For County Fair,” \textit{Warren Tribune}, January 31, 1924, 3

\textsuperscript{58} Fair organizers noted record attendance figures during the 1924 season, as area residents packed the grandstands and infields to watch Hankinson’s field of cars compete on their local speedways. For coverage of Hankinson’s 1924 events, see: “Speed Program For Closing Day of 1924 Reading Fair,” \textit{Reading Times}, September 15, 1924, 3; “Autos Will Race 150 Miles on Dirt Track,” \textit{Kane Republican}, July 5, 1924, 3; “Record Attendance Is Assured At Fair Today,” \textit{Lebanon Daily News}, August 28, 1924, 10.
company. In the early 1910s, he started promoting automobile races at county fairs within his home state of Kansas. Hankinson extended his racing interests as a car owner sponsoring several different drivers on the Midwestern dirt track racing circuit. He also formed close relationships with some of the nation’s most high-profile racecar drivers, including Barney Oldfield and Eddie Rickenbacker, and Hankinson handled both drivers’ racing appearances and publicity. During the late 1910s and early 1920s, Hankinson hosted automobile races throughout the Midwest under the banner of the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), the major sanctioning organization for automobile races held throughout the region. With over two million people attending roughly seventy agricultural expositions hosted each year within the state of Pennsylvania alone, eastern fairs offered a lucrative audience for racing programs and events. Hankinson’s wife, Josephine (Jordan) Hankinson, a native of Lebanon County, Pennsylvania may have also encouraged the couple’s move to the east. Whatever the reasons for his geographical relocation, Hankinson


62 “2,000,000 Attended Fairs in Year,” New Castle Herald, May 3, 1924, 10.

promoted over sixty different race meets at eastern agricultural expositions during the 1924 fair season.\textsuperscript{64}

Hankinson recognized that people were fascinated by all types of technological displays of speed, daring and destruction. He entertained 1924 fair goers in Warren and other Pennsylvania towns with automobile racing as well as an additional form of technological play called “auto polo.” Hankinson claimed he invented auto polo, when hosting a series of matches before intrigued Kansas residents in 1914.\textsuperscript{65} Closely resembling the rules for equine polo matches, auto polo featured teams of men in automobiles attempting to score goals, while out-maneuvering their opponents. Auto polo matches began with a basketball placed in the center of the playing field. Two vehicles, one representing each of the two teams, would charge towards the center of the field in pursuit of the ball. Drivers competed for the ball in an open field, while their co-pilots known as “strikers” used polo mallets to hit the basketball towards a goal post at each end of the field. As the drivers attempted to position their strikers

\textsuperscript{64} Reading Speedway Program, April 24, 1938, EMMR Program Collection: Reading Speedway.

\textsuperscript{65} An auto polo match was played in Boston at the Dedham Polo Club in 1902. Locals in Wichita, Kansas hosted an auto polo match in July 1912. Participants and reporters claimed that this was the first auto polo game ever played not realizing that variations of the sport had been around for at least a decade. It is unclear if Ralph Hankinson had any involvement in these initial auto polo matches hosted in Wichita. For early coverage of auto polo events, see: "Auto Polo" Latest Fad," \textit{The Lima News}, July 15, 1902, 2; "Polo on Automobiles," \textit{The Minneapolis Journal}, August 2, 1902, 8; "The Game of Auto Polo, As Played by Experts," \textit{The Weekly Gazette} (Colorado), Sept 17, 1903, 3; "Wichita to See Initial Game of "Auto Polo,"" \textit{Wichita Daily Eagle}, July 16, 1912, 7; "Rules Adopted to Govern Big Autopolo Match," \textit{Wichita Daily Eagle}, July 18, 1912, 7; and "Find New Use for Motor Car," \textit{Burlingame Enterprise}, July 25, 1912, 6.
next to the ball, they would make a series of sharp turns at high speeds. Auto polo cars often tipped over and spilled out their occupants during matches. One Kansas City reporter commented that the “science” of auto polo came from “knowing when to jump and how to alight.”66 This consumer spectacle highlighted the drivers’ skills behind the wheel as well as the ability of various types of automobiles to make split-second maneuvers. The matches typically consisted of five periods each lasting ten minutes. Auto polo matches attracted large crowds of spectators because the game had the right amount of strategy and daring, as spectators cheered for both goals and tipped cars.

By experiencing technological play and participating in technology-centered hobbies, Americans directly challenged their control over complex and potentially deadly machines. Audiences paid to see traveling groups of stunt men deliberately crash a wide range of technologically-complex machines, such as trains, airplanes, and automobiles.67 Americans of all ages patronized live theatrical shows known as “disaster spectacles” or watched movies that portrayed the dangers of everyday life, such as floods, tenement fires, and automobile crashes.68 Amusements that highlighted the staged destruction of technology provided Americans with an emotional release of

66 “Motor Polo Here this Week,” Kansas City Star, November 22, 1924, 4.


built up tensions and worries brought on by their machine-centric lifestyles.\textsuperscript{69} Audiences gasped as actors and athletes struggled against forces of man and nature and cheered when characters overcame their challenges and obstacles.

Ralph Hankinson claimed that his 1924 fair racing program would be “different and more elaborate than anything ever before seen in the racing game,” but in reality, the auto racing competitions held in Warren and other Pennsylvania communities borrowed extensively from horse racing.\textsuperscript{70} Promoters of early circle track racing copied their equestrian predecessors in the physical orientation of the speedway. Like horse racing, promoters wanted the most exciting action to occur in front of their paying customers, so the start-finish line remained in the middle of the front straightaway directly across from the main grandstands. Racers also piloted their cars in the same counter-clockwise direction around the track. Cars raced through the first set of turns (known as Turn One and Turn Two), before competing down the second straightaway (designated as the backstretch), and finally whizzing through the second set of turns (Turn Three and Turn Four) before arriving back at the start-finish line on the front stretch. Since the basic layout of the oval track remained synonymous for horse and automobile racing, novice spectators knew exactly how to navigate the speedway landscape when attending an automobile race for the first time. People


\textsuperscript{70} “Speed Maniacs of Dirt Track Filling Entries,” \textit{Evening News}, October 1, 1924, 19.
naturally congregated at the start-finish line and other key vantage points along the wooden fences that circled the exterior (and sometimes the interior) of fairground tracks.

Motorsports promoters additionally replicated the language and format of horse racing to easily transition rural spectators to automobile racing contests. Warren County residents were well versed in the auto racing format when Hankinson’s drivers took to the track in 1928. Spectators anticipated the first event - known as “time trials” – to see which star would set the fastest lap time for a single circuit around the speedway. Borrowed from harness racing programs, time trials tested the performance of each individual car along with the skills of its driver.\textsuperscript{71} Drivers next drew for starting positions in the six lap heat races, which pitted racers directly against other cars in a six lap shoot-out. Like the identically named distance races for trotters and pacers, heat races served as preliminary competitions that worked to weed out slower cars. Only the fastest two competitors from each of the three heat races advanced to the main event of the racing program known as the “feature.” This twenty-lap race was the primary attraction of the day’s racing events. The anticipation and excitement filled the grandstands as spectators watched drivers battle towards the finish line in a twenty lap race for the victory laurels and prize money.\textsuperscript{72} The racing format perfected at Warren and other dirt speedways by the late 1920s is still used in grassroots dirt track racing today.

\textsuperscript{71} For an example of how the language of horse racing was incorporated into automobile racing, see “Races a Great Success,” \textit{Reading Times}, May 25, 1903, 3.

\textsuperscript{72} For additional details about the racing format for the 1928 Warren Fair, see "Speed Events Will Start at 3pm Wednes.," \textit{Warren Tribune}, July 3, 1928, 6.
Fair operators and racing promoters succeeded in creating a familiar spectator atmosphere at the speedway, but they failed to foresee the inherent safety implications of treating racecars like race horses. The heavier weight of racecars and the constant pounding of racing tires quickly dried out dirt tracks. Automobile racing events created copious amounts of dust that rose up in constant puffs from the dirt surface of the speedway. Fans at the Reading Fairgrounds regularly held up racing posters to protect themselves from the dust and rock filled mud balls that pelted them each time the racecars whirled around the turns. Reading spectators lowered their posters after the cars passed to watch the racing action unfold on other sections of the speedway.73 While spectators created effective methods of protection against dust, their raised posters prohibited fans for seeing oncoming cars crashing towards the exterior of the track. Drivers also struggled to see through the dust clouds. Veteran racer Bryan Saulpaugh used the direction of the dust spray to help him identify the position of his competitors’ cars on the racetrack.74 Low driver visibility resulted in high accident rates at fairground tracks, and dust remained a constant concern for speedway promoters.75

73 Chris Economaki, Let ‘Em All Go! The Story of Auto Racing by the man who was there (Fishers: Books by David Argabright, 2006), 98.


75 In an era before the rise of environmental protection and awareness, track preparers regularly applied chemicals to the surface of their speedways in order to control dust during automobile contests. Similar to the techniques used by early twentieth century highway crews, speedway preparers added oil to the dirt surface or mixtures of water and salt (calcium chloride) in an attempt to prevent dust. Since excess oil would spray up hitting drivers’ arms, torsos, and faces during racing competition, drivers preferred the use of calcium chloride to treat speedways. See, “Dust Problem Serious One,” The Indianapolis Star, August 11, 1907, 10; “Construction Work in State is Heavy Now,”
As automobile races quickly began to overshadow horse racing as the main entertainment feature at eastern fairs, tensions arose between horsemen and automobile racers over the shared use of their facilities. One of the main concerns expressed by both horsemen and racecar drivers involved the different techniques used to prepare the speedway surface. Harness racers preferred a loose, powdery, dry track surface for their horses; whereas, speed pilots desired a smooth, moist, compacted clay-like racing surface. The horse racing contingent objected to the use of chemicals to treat dust during automobile racing programs. Jockeys and trainers feared the chemicals would have adverse health effects on their animals. Most fair associations compromised with horse racing participants and conducted their horse racing programs during the first days of the fair allowing racecars to compete on the speedway surface only after the conclusion of all horse racing events.

Daily Republican, June 29, 1929, 1; “Racing Autos At Bloom Fair,” Wilkes-Barre Record, October 6, 1922, 25.

76 Allan E. Brown, The History of America’s Speedways Past & Present (Comstock Park: America’s Speedways, 2003), 39.

77 Tracks reported using anywhere from eight to fifty tons of the salt water solutions before each race in order to make their racing surfaces as dustless as possible. Track operators continued to use calcium chloride as a dust preventive until the cost of such treatments encouraged promoters to find other ways to combat dust, such as hosting night races or importing clay to improve the resiliency of their speedway surfaces. See, “New Race Records Loom at Lehighton,” Reading Times, May 20, 1932, 27 and “Auto Speed Kings Arrive At Reading,” Mount Carmel Item, May 18, 1924, 10.

Automobile racing attendees initially failed to recognize the higher physical dangers posed at speedway events. Spectators consistently walked out onto racetracks during speed contests putting themselves directly in the path of the oncoming field of racecars. Warren Fair Association director, George Sarvis, learned firsthand about the added dangers of automobile racing. At the 1924 Warren County races, Sarvis darted out onto the racetrack immediately after the winning racecar crossed the finish line forgetting about the remaining field of cars traveling roughly thirty-five miles an hour.\(^79\) He may have been overcome with excitement as the checkered flag waved over the successful race. Sarvis likely assumed he had enough time to safely cross the track before the rest of the field reached the finish line. Whatever his reasoning, Sarvis quickly learned the error in his judgment, and he spent several weeks in the hospital with a broken leg and other injuries sustained at the race.\(^80\)

The behavioral customs and etiquette that Americans of every age and social class had established for other forms of entertainment remained in a period of flux on the grounds of the dirt speedway.\(^81\) Sarvis’ actions upon seeing his first automobile

\(^79\) “Grangers Day Brings County Folks to Fair,” \textit{Warren Tribune}, September 5, 1924, 9.

\(^80\) Sarvis’ leg healed improperly and had to be broken again and reset in late September 1924. See, “Live Topics of the Day,” \textit{Warren Tribune}, September 30, 1924, 3. Sarvis broke the same leg less than a year later when he crashed his passenger automobile in April 1925. See, “Car Hits Tree At Starbrick 2 Badly Hurt,” \textit{Warren Tribune}, April 16, 1925, 1.

\(^81\) In \textit{High Brow, Low Brow}, Lawrence Levine discusses the changing norms and mores associated with a variety of nineteenth-century entertainments. Levine argues that “the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable” and suggests that Americans had to openly negotiate appropriate behavior for a variety of cultural activities before they settled on sets of
race were not atypical. Novice speed enthusiasts regularly ran out onto the speedway to inspect accidents, celebrate a driver’s victorious run, or play a dangerous game of chicken with the racecars. Spectators also continued to stand as close to the speedway as possible in order to get the best view of the racing action. People wanted to feel the dust on their faces, and hear the roar of the engines vibrating in their chests. These “fence birds” had the closest view of the track, but they risked personal injury from high speed crashes and other on-track dangers.

norms we now view as static. See, High Brow, Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 8.

Figure 3  
Spectators standing along fence at the 1919 Delaware State Fair  
(Courtesy of Hagley Museum & Library, Delaware State Fair Albums  
(Accession 1991.212))

Spectator experiences at early automobile races illustrates larger tensions within the rapidly developing consumer amusement industry. People used older forms of leisure, such as horse racing, as reference points for new forms of technological play. George Sarvis attempted to sue both promoter Ralph Hankinson and the Warren County Agricultural Association for the physical damages he sustained at the 1924 auto races. 83 Despite the fact that he had put himself in danger by crossing the track during the racing action, Sarvis had an expectation of safety as a mere spectator of the automobile race. Americans avidly paid to watch others take on life threatening risks,

but spectators wanted to remain detached from the real physical risks involved with these pastimes.

“The Garden of Eden for Auto Racing”\textsuperscript{84}

Auto racing programs at eastern fairgrounds expanded and prospered during the 1920s and 1930s. Ralph Hankinson remained a prominent figure in eastern motorsports, and Hankinson’s ability to keep drivers as well as spectators satisfied with his racing programs allowed for the successful development of eastern big car racing. By 1931, Ralph Hankinson Enterprises hosted big car races at over fifty dirt tracks located up and down the east coast from Canada to Georgia each racing season.\textsuperscript{85} Hankinson regularly promoted races at Pennsylvania fairground speedways, including York, Reading, Allentown, Lewisburg, Lancaster, and Bloomsburg. He also hosted speed contests throughout New York in the towns of Altamont, Watertown, Afton, and Middletown. New Jersey speed fans could watch Hankinson’s field of drivers compete at Flemington and Trenton.\textsuperscript{86} Throughout the fair season from August to October, Hankinson also hosted automobile races at major Midwestern state fairs, such as the Wisconsin State Fair held in Milwaukee and the Illinois State Fair in

\textsuperscript{84} Reading Speedway Program, April 24, 1938, EMMR Program Collection: Reading Speedway.

\textsuperscript{85} "Ralph Hankinson Leases Speedway for 1931 Season," \textit{Altoona Tribune}, Feb 11, 1931, 1.

\textsuperscript{86} Racing programs provide data on Hankinson’s race schedules. See programs from the Reading Fairgrounds on June 18, 1933, Ho-Ho-Kus Speedway on July 4, 1936, and Langhorne Speedway on June 11, 1939. Programs from the Henry Ford Museum & Library Collection, #1708 –V Race and Endurance Runs, Folders 1933, 1936, 1939.
When the weather turned cold in the mid-Atlantic, Hankinson’s circuit headed further south offering speed contests throughout Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. By the 1936 racing season, Hankinson was attracting 200 different racecar drivers and over one million spectators to his annual series of racing programs. \(^88\)

Hankinson’s success hinged on his ability to develop symbiotic relationships with outside sanctioning organizations. Beginning in 1927, Hankinson teamed with the American Automobile Association’s Contest Board to promote races on the eastern fairground circuit. AAA had hosted elite racing events at Indianapolis Motor Speedway as well as board and dirt speedways since 1908. Pennsylvanians associated AAA as “the trade-mark of clean, honest and sportsmanlike automobile racing.” \(^89\) In exchange for paying a sanctioning fee to AAA, Hankinson gained the credibility and prestige associated with AAA racing events. AAA also sent a complete staff of officials to each of their racing events to oversee the racing action, enforce AAA racecar and motor specifications, and monitor the condition of each racetrack. \(^90\)

Since AAA took control over race day activities, Hankinson and his team could focus on the promotional and business aspects of the sport. Hankinson actively recruited AAA drivers from across the United States to compete in his eastern

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\(^87\) Reading Speedway Program, April 28, 1935, EMMR Program Collection: Reading Speedway.


\(^90\) “AAA Sanctions Auto Races,” Hot Speed News, August 6, 1937, 2.
fairgrounds racing circuit. Hankinson would travel the country during the offseason and attend the annual Indianapolis 500 in late May to sign up drivers. Hankinson guaranteed nationally known drivers an appearance fee for each race they entered on his fairground circuit. Before the start of the 1932 season, Hankinson was still in negotiations with Fred Frame to bring the speedway star to his eastern circuit. The California driver had become a fan favorite among central Pennsylvanians after his stellar 1931 season. Frame had earned over $20,000 throughout 1931 posting a strong second place finish at the Indianapolis 500, winning seven times at Woodbridge Speedway in New Jersey, and driving into victory lane twice at Langhorne Speedway located north of Philadelphia.\footnote{Hankinson believed that Frame’s popularity among local speed fans would draw an additional 2,000 spectators to his 1932 season opener at the Reading Fairgrounds.} In exchange for appearance money at each race, drivers like Fred Frame allowed Hankinson to use their names in pre-race publicity and participated in meet and greets with fans.\footnote{Hankinson’s appearance money and side deals significantly impacted the caliber of big car racing in the eastern United States. Eastern speed enthusiasts could regularly see the nation’s top AAA drivers and Indianapolis 500 stars compete at their hometown tracks.} 

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\footnote{“Dirt Will Fly Sunday at Speedsters Dash For Glory and Thrills at Fair Grounds,” \textit{Reading Times}, May 2, 1932, 14 and “Motor Maniacs Set for Speed Thrills Tomorrow After Delay Because of Rain,” \textit{Reading Times}, May 14, 1932, 14.}

\footnote{“Dirt Will Fly Sunday at Speedsters Dash For Glory and Thrills at Fair Grounds.”}

Ralph Hankinson’s dominance over eastern racetrack promotions provided a high level of stability to eastern big car racing. By promoting AAA big car races at a number of area speedways, Hankinson standardized rules and car regulations for automobile racing throughout the eastern United States. Hankinson’s publicity team built up rivalries between nationally known drivers and local heroes to create anticipation about racing events. Ralph Hankinson Enterprises also published a regional racing paper, *Hot Speed News*, which advertised upcoming racing events, included stories about individual drivers and mechanics, and published racing results. Drivers and speed fans were well informed about dirt track racing activities and knew what to expect when they arrived at one of Hankinson’s speedway events.

Automobile racing remained a popular consumer amusement throughout the Great Depression. Promoters boasted that automobile racing was a “financial lifesaver” for county and state agricultural fairs during the 1930s.°° Newspaper reporters agreed explaining, “In the East, just as in other parts of the Country, state and county fair boards find automobile races the means of magically changing the figures on the books from red to black.”°°° Southeastern Pennsylvania continued to be the center of Hankinson’s automobile racing empire throughout the 1930s. Hankinson established offices for his entire racing operation in Reading, Pennsylvania due to the popularity of racing at the local Reading Fairgrounds. One journalist noted that Reading had withstood the worst of the Depression and was “situated in the heart of


one of Pennsylvania’s most densely populated industrial and agricultural regions where conditions are said to be better than in most parts of the U.S.A.”

Regional residents who still had money to spend on entertainment travelled from Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and western Pennsylvania by personal car, train, or bus to attend races at the Reading half-mile. In 1932, Reading averaged over 30,000 spectators and 65 racing entries at individual racing events. The track continued to record high attendance figures throughout the decade. Area journalists attributed the speedway’s success to strong promotion as well as the geographic location of the track. Automobile racing continued to be the highest paying spectator attraction for fair associations prior to the Second World War.

**Defining Auto Racing’s Popularity**

Americans experienced a heightened sensory and emotional response from the capriciousness of motorsports that could not be duplicated by other forms of technological amusements. Automobile races were not pre-scripted theatrical performances. Spectators and participants alike recognized that race outcomes were unpredictable. Every time drivers dueled at their local dirt tracks changing track conditions, mechanical failures, and human error played a role in the final race finish.

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96 “Cream of Dirt Track Drivers in Reading Go,” *Shamokin News-Dispatch*, May 6, 1932, 10.

97 “Auto Races Slated For Reading Track on Sunday, June 18,” *Reading Times*, May 27, 1933, 11.


People received an exhilarating adrenaline rush as they watched the racing action unfold on the speedway.\textsuperscript{100} One journalist admitted that the exciting atmosphere of auto races caused “the blood to tingle in the veins of the stoutest and strongest amongst us.” Never knowing who would win the feature event thrilled audiences, and the reporter further explained, “If there is anything that appeals to the average American public, it is the witnessing of a sport that contains elements of danger and uncertainty and they are willing to applaud the daring ones and encourage them to greater deeds of daring.”\textsuperscript{101} People believed automobile racing offered “the greatest number of thrills” when compared to all other available forms of consumer entertainment.\textsuperscript{102}

The ordinary experience of driving an automobile became extraordinary within the high-speed context of the speedway. During the 1920s and 1930s, automobilists averaged relatively low speeds of roughly 20 miles an hour on public roads; whereas, racecar drivers reached speeds of 40-70 miles per hour on oval horse tracks.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{100} Scholar Michael Apter refers to the heightened excitement and adrenaline rush of an automobile races as an example of the “dangerous edge” or the peak emotional response achieved by watching or participating in an event with a high level of excitement as well as anxiety. Racing provides both spectators and participants with an adrenaline rush because all racing attendees recognize the real risks involved within the sport. See, Michael Apter, \textit{The Dangerous Edge: The Psychology of Excitement} (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 37-40.

\textsuperscript{101} “The Dangers of Automobile Racing,” \textit{Allentown Democrat}, September 4, 1912, 6.


\textsuperscript{103} Kline, \textit{Consumers in the Country}, 81.
with tension and anticipation, fans watched the brightly painted racecars blur into bands of color when circling the track at high speeds. They smelled the engine exhaust, felt the dust hit their face, and listened to the choir of whining engines. Racecars were one of several technological inventions that challenged people’s perceptions of time and space.\textsuperscript{104} Reporter and radio personality, Nobe Frank, described how the “small racing automobiles, seemingly catapulted from nowhere” flew “by your spot in the stand[s] with almost incalculable speed.”\textsuperscript{105} A second journalist similarly described his amazement when watching racecar drivers compete at “ninety miles an hour in an open race car no bigger than a bath tub.”\textsuperscript{106} Watching drivers zoom around speedways at incredible rates of speed in their tiny racecars caused spectators to experience extreme feelings of awe and wonder. Motorsports challenged people’s previous understanding of the automobile and automotive technology.\textsuperscript{107} The multi-sensory rush auto racing enthusiasts experienced each time they attended a racing event exemplifies what scholars call the “technological


\textsuperscript{105} Nobe Frank, “It Just Occurred to Me,” \textit{Harrisburg Telegraph}, April 25, 1936, 8.


People attended automobile races to achieve this emersion into the technological sublime and watched on eagerly as racecar drivers in their speeding racecars pressed the boundaries of human travel.

Experiencing the adrenaline rush of the technological sublime motivated people to attend auto racing events. Racing enthusiasts desired to watch competitive races where men pushed their bodies and machines to the limits. Seeing accidents was not the main attraction of the sport. Accidents broke up the speedway action and disrupted a fans’ experience of the technological sublime. Sports broadcaster Chris Economaki explained, “People bought tickets not because they wanted to actually see someone killed, but it was the human element of drama that was always present. Something like a trapeze act; working without a net is infinitely more compelling.”

When analyzing landscape paintings, art historians refer to natural landscapes that inspired awe and wonder among viewers as examples of the “sublime.” Historian of technology David Nye has applied the concept of the sublime to Americans’ reactions to new technologies during the 19th and 20th centuries. Nye argues that Americans responded to machines as examples of the “technological sublime” because they inspired wonder and stimulated the five senses. People’s attractions to the technological sublime helped them to rationalize rapid cultural and political changes in their daily lives. See, David N. Nye, American Technological Sublime (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).


Economaki, Let ‘Em All Go!, 89.
Racing enthusiasts described how a tension would spread quickly through the crowded grandstands each time a serious accident occurred on the track. Spectators rose to their feet or even ran out onto the speedway to try to catch a glimpse of the driver, and they waited anxiously for news that he was okay.\textsuperscript{111} Drivers recognized onlookers’ anxiety over each racing accident, and they would sometimes wave their hands from the cockpit of their cars to let spectators and officials know that they had not been seriously injured.\textsuperscript{112} The emotional energy in the grandstands began to relax only after spectators knew that the driver was not hurt. People cheered and celebrated the fact that the driver had walked away from the terrifying crash.\textsuperscript{113} Racing patrons recognized the tenuous balance between safety and risk on the speedway, and the ability of drivers to avoid collisions also garnered them the praise of the racing faithful.

Motor racing tantalized spectators because it created a narrative of human survival and control over unpredictable technology that was extremely relevant to life in early twentieth century United States. Americans knew the high level of danger

\textsuperscript{111} When Tommy Hinnershitz crashed through the exterior guardrail and tumbled down the embankment at Reading Speedway during a race in the mid-1930s, onlookers immediately feared that this race would be Tommy’s last. One spectator described his emotional response to the crash: Everyone “who saw him careen off the course thought the Reading boy’s days were over, but he came traveling back unscathed to the pits in a tow-truck as if it were all in a day’s labor.” See, “Auto Race Sidelights,” \textit{Reading Times}, April 29, 1935, 12.

\textsuperscript{112} “Sall Drives for 6\textsuperscript{th} Year on Fair Oval,” \textit{Middletown Times Herald}, August 19, 1933, 45.

involved with passenger automobiles, as the number of traffic accidents and automobile fatalities continued to rise each year.114 People’s daily experiences with automobiles led them to instinctively assume that all racing accidents would end badly.115 Seeing their favorite drivers rise from the wreckage of their busted racecars created a second form of emotional release for spectators. After Mauri Rose’s car leapt over the fence during one race at a western Pennsylvania speedway, spectators automatically assumed the driver had perished in the graphic accident. Audiences erupted with pleasure when Rose “climbed out of his wrecked machine unscathed to the astonishment and wonderment of all.”116 Spectators reaffirmed their belief in the ability of human beings to persevere over an increasingly machine-ridden and fast-paced society each time a racecar driver walked away from the mangled remains of a high-speed crash.

Grassroots promoters recognized the multi-faceted entertainment of automobile racing, and they established racing formats that catered to the interests of their paying fans. The average race fan remained uninterested in long-distance endurance races, which focused on the technical minutia of engine function and tire

114 Mohun, Risk, 163-165.

115 Ben Shackleford similarly argues that NASCAR races provide a cathartic experience for fans who celebrate the ability of drivers to use their mental rigor and physical strength to harness the power of their racing machines. See, “Masculinity, the Auto Racing Fraternity and the Technological Sublime,” 247.

longevity that captivated drivers and mechanics.\textsuperscript{117} Fairgoers wanted to see action, such as daring lead changes and dramatic last lap passes, when they attended racing events.\textsuperscript{118} AAA Contest Board secretary, Ted Allen, regularly lectured drivers on their role as showman and entertainers. Allen explained, “The majority of spectators are not familiar with the mechanical elements in the cars…but they pay a fair price and expect to see a fair show.”\textsuperscript{119} Fairground promoters and participants eschewed the endurance races favored by AAA’s Championship Series in favor of a series of shorter, five to thirty lap speed contests. In short track racing, drivers had to quickly get their cars to the front of the pack in order to qualify for the next racing event. The constant competition among drivers to secure one of the transfer spots provided a greater likelihood for minor mishaps and lead changes that entertained the fans.

\textbf{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{117} The American Automobile Association’s Championship Series hosted endurance races on purpose-built speedways of at least one-mile in length racing a minimum of 100 miles or 100 laps at tracks such as Indianapolis, Detroit, Akron, Altoona, Syracuse, and Langhorne. The Championship Series offered roughly eight to ten races per season allowing ample time for the nation’s top drivers to compete in big races sanctioned by AAA, such as Hankinson’s eastern fairground circuit. For more information about the structure and regulation of the Championship Series during the early 1930s, see: Ted Allen, “AAA Bulletin,” Vol. 5, No. 35, November 1, 1930, 1, EMMR Reel #21.

\textsuperscript{118} In a 1926 memo to AAA representatives, Ernest N. Smith explained that at least three speedways on the AAA circuit had received complaints about the long distance races hosted at their tracks. Smith explained, “It is their belief that the competitive element and strategy in racing will more quickly develop in shorter events and result in great public interest.” See, Ernest N. Smith, “Service Report from the American Automobile Association,” No. 6 (May 20, 1926), EMMR Reel # 21.

The rise of grassroots automobile racing on fairgrounds horse tracks expanded the geographic scope and frequency of motorsports within the United States. Racing promoters and fair organizers recognized automobile racing was a highly lucrative and particularly modern spectacle for rural audiences. Promoters, such as Ralph Hankinson, repurposed existing fairgrounds horse tracks for automobile racing. They drew extensively from the culture of horse racing to establish this new spectator amusement. Local fairground horse tracks remained the best place to watch automobile races throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Spectators enjoyed the fast-paced nature of grassroots dirt track racing. Big car competitions provided Americans with an opportunity to contemplate the growing role of technology in their daily lives. People experienced the technological sublime watching the speeding big cars compete at their local dirt speedways. American dare-devils now had opportunities to tinker with automobile technology and race competitively within a short drive of their homes. The technological daring of racecar drivers during the interwar period and the motivations for risking life and limb behind the wheel of a fast racecar is explored in the next chapter.
Chapter 2

TECHNOLOGICAL DARING AND RISK TAKING IN MOTORSPORTS

Twelve of the east coast’s top racecar drivers posed for a photograph at New Jersey’s Woodbridge Speedway during the 1932 racing season. The dynamic dozen were vying for the AAA Eastern Championship crown. Over the course of the racing season, they swapped victories at Woodbridge and other speedways throughout the region. Each man knew that his constant pursuit of victory involved high risks. At Woodbridge’s first race of the 1932 season, two Philadelphia drivers Frank Farmer and Bill Neapolitan died in an on-track collision. Farmer attempted to pass Neapolitan on the inside of the track during a qualifying heat race. The two cars collided at sixty miles per hour, and Neapolitan was ejected from his racecar. Neapolitan died from extensive internal injuries, while Farmer suffered a compound fracture to his skull. Serious injuries sustained by their competitors did not deter men from competing in racing events. The twelve eastern aces raced at Woodbridge in the weeks immediately following the deaths of Farmer and Neapolitan. Racing, however, remained dangerous and unpredictable. By 1938, seven out of the twelve drivers pictured would also perish in automobile racing accidents!

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Auto racing was an extremely risky pastime for American men during the interwar period. Racing historians estimate that over 200 American men lost their lives in dirt track automobile racing accidents during the 1930s alone.¹²¹ Many more racers suffered a myriad of contusions, broken bones, or burns at the speedway. Participation in high-risk speed contests superseded rational desires for monetary or personal

¹²¹ Allan E. Brown, *The History of America’s Speedways Past and Present* (Comstock Park, America’s Speedways, 2003), 50.
gain.\textsuperscript{122} Even the most competent and highly skilled drivers knew that there was no way to entirely avoid life-threatening accidents. Racecar drivers mentally compartmentalized the risks of the speedway. They believed that factors, such as expertly engineered racecars and skillful driving, could help them maintain control over the dangers of the racetrack. Drivers participated in a variety of pre-race rituals believing that luck played an ever present role on the racetrack. Drivers found that the thrill of speed outweighed the risks to their personal safety, financial security, and familial relationships. Even after sustaining serious injuries on the speedway, men willingly climbed back into the cockpit of their racecars. Drivers obtained a satisfying sensory and emotional experience from participating in automobile races that could not be duplicated by any other consumer leisure activity.

\textbf{Learning How to Go Fast}

Newcomers to the sport of dirt track automobile racing quickly realized that unharnessed speed did not equate to fame and fortune on the speedway. Racecar driver Mauri Rose admitted that a lot of his early crashes resulted from a combination of poor judgment and too much speed. Rose mused, “I went through a lot of fences

\textsuperscript{122} Historian Robert Post describes motorsports as a “technological enthusiasm” because the desire to participate goes beyond fame and fortune. See, Robert Post, \textit{High Performance: The Culture and Technology of Drag Racing, 1950-2000} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), xviii.
before I learned there was no money in it when you hung a car on the wall.”

Racing a purpose-built speed machine on a dirt surface required tacit knowledge that differed from operating a passenger vehicle. Men developed a “kinesthetic” or sensory based knowledge at the speedway. Drivers and mechanics depended on their senses to alert them to potential problems with their cars during a racing event. They listened intently to the sound of their motor, while using their senses of touch, smell, and sight to know if they were pushing their machines beyond their limits. George “Doc” Mackenzie explained how his first years of competitive racing had taught him “the feel of the wheel that makes no car a stranger.” Drivers usually spent the early part of their careers kissing the fence instead of the trophy in winner’s circle, until they learned how to maneuver their cars under a variety of speedway conditions.

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124 In *Auto Mechanics*, Kevin Borg discusses the use of kinesthetic knowledge by automobile mechanics throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Borg argues that this tacit knowledge was difficult to teach and had to be learned through experience despite constant attempts by automakers to produce machines and equipment to identify mechanical problems with automobiles. See, Kevin Borg, *Auto Mechanics: Technology and Expertise in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 8-9.


Being able to identify and respond to mechanical failures on the speedway could mean the difference between a driver safely pulling his car into the pit area for repairs or going for a dangerous ride in an on-track accident. Competing in only his sixth automobile race, Leroy Sweigart blew a tire while traveling approximately 50-60 miles per hour around the half-mile speedway at the Latimore Valley Fairgrounds located in York Springs, Pennsylvania. Sweigart swerved from the track at full speed hitting two different trees before his racecar finally came to a complete stop. Veteran drivers who witnessed the accident “stated that they believed Sweigart could have ‘ridden out’ the mishap if he had attempted to make the turn at the eastern end of the loop.” Sweigart suffered a fractured hip, broken arm, and internal injuries. He died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Less than twenty four hours before the Latimore Valley race, Sweigart married his sweet heart. His nineteen year old bride, Mary Kreiser, collapsed at the speedway after witnessing her newlywed’s fatal crash. Sweigart was one of several young speedsters who perished on their local dirt tracks due to their lack of racing intuition and experience.


The ability to adeptly control failing racecars became important badges of honor for racecar drivers often mentioned alongside career statistics of feature wins and recording setting runs. Fred Winnai attracted public notoriety and praise for his quick thinking in 1930, when his car caught fire at the Altoona, Pennsylvania board track. Winnai courageously chose to suffer painful burns in order to steer his flaming car safely off the speedway and away from the crowded main grandstand. Praised for his “feats of heroism,” Winnai required two blood transfusions and spent five weeks in the hospital to recover from his burns.¹²⁹ Speed pilots demonstrated their abilities to think quickly under pressure, take risks, and master automotive technology on the speedway.¹³⁰ One reporter offered his conviction that motorsports “breeds men” who


¹³⁰ Americans increasingly negotiated gender roles through leisure activities and sports at the turn of the twentieth century. White men used physically strenuous activities, such as contact sports, as well as outdoor activities, such as camping and hiking, to promote their gender and racial superiority. See, Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Clifford Putney, Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Donald J. Mrozek, Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); and Susan K. Cahn, Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport (1994).
remain “calm and strong in a vortex of horror and fear.” Racing enthusiasts celebrated racecar drivers as a new type of American hero for the feats of bravery they displayed during dangerous racing competitions.

Similar to the nuanced physical motions needed to successfully swing a golf club or throw a football, driving a racecar required an orchestrated set of body motions and car maneuvers to successfully navigate a racetrack. Racecar driver Ted Horn recalled how California ace Chet Gardner singled him out in the pit area during one of his first races and explained to Horn how to better handle his car on the speedway. Gardner told Horn, “Ted, your trouble is getting out of the turns. Get up off of the pole, let your nose down and when you feel it is going to spin, straighten your wheels.” Gardner explained to Horn how to steer in the corners in order to control his racecar. He further advised, “The faster your speed on the stretch, the higher you go on the turn. Soon you’ll find the groove and then you will get to race.”

All dirt tracks typically developed several lanes or “grooves” throughout the course of a racing program. With each race, the track surface and grooves changed slightly causing drivers to readjust their track positioning both on the straightaways and in the turns. Drivers had to learn how to navigate the “cushion” or the area at the top of the track


that separates the packed down dirt of the top groove and the loose clumps of clay that accumulate around the top of the speedway. While the cushion provided a boost of speed for drivers in the turns, men who “hopped the cushion” typically lost control of their cars in the loosely packed dirt at the top of the track. Achieving consistent speeds, maneuvering through the turns, and passing competitors all required a set of practiced and coordinated, split-second decisions between a driver’s brain, steering wheel, and foot pedals.

Individual tracks varied in banking, width, and surface composition necessitating that drivers master a different driving strategy for each speedway. Designers of Langhorne Speedway located halfway between Trenton and Philadelphia unknowingly built the one-mile dirt track on top of underground springs, which caused deep ruts to develop on the track’s surface. During the opening 1926 season at Langhorne, Delawarean Russell Snowberger became so nauseous due to the bumpiness of the track surface that he vomited out the side of his car during a heat race. Drivers immediately christened the area of the speedway between turns one and two, “Puke Hallow.” Loss of control or too much speed coming into Puke Hallow resulted in several fatal speedway accidents, and this stretch of the speedway was revered as particularly dangerous for the rest of the track’s history.133

Men acquired the know-how to successfully navigate each speedway from a combination of mentorship and on-track experience. 1929 Indianapolis 500 winner and Philadelphia-native Ray Keech emphasized that becoming a top racecar driver required a period of apprenticeship and training similar to any other occupation. Keech explained, “Speed is a trade, just like carpentering or plumbing. You are not qualified as an expert unless you have experience.”¹³⁴ Rookies depended on the advice provided by veteran drivers both on and off the track. Experienced drivers regularly formed apprenticeships with young enthusiasts helping them to gain the technical knowledge needed to succeed within the sport. As a result of these mentorships, novice drivers learned how to sharpen their sensory reactions to track conditions, mechanical failures, and the driving styles of their competitors.

Newcomers who desired to become the nation’s next speed stars also needed quality racing equipment to consistently finish at the front. During his first three seasons racing at Reading, Langhorne, and other tracks on the eastern fairgrounds circuit, Tommy Hinnershitz struggled to keep his car on the speedway during racing competitions. Track announcers nicknamed Hinnershitz the “Laureldale looper” because he “whacked off pilings at every point on the track since 1932 when he made his debut” at the Reading Fairgrounds.¹³⁵ Racing insiders blamed Hinnershitz’s

¹³⁴ “To Muse & Amuse by Sports Editor,” Altoona Mirror, June 17, 1929, 17.
copious amount of crashes during his first two seasons on driver inexperience but also on the inferior quality of his racing equipment. Hinnershitz competed in a “clunker” of his own design constructed from outdated racecar parts and junkyard finds. Despite Hinnershitz’s best efforts to properly prepare for racing competitions, his racecar was prone to breakdowns on the speedway, which increased his chances for an on-track mishap. Hinnershitz abandoned his homemade racecar for the 1935 season and began driving for Allentown car owner, Park Culp. Thanks to the years of experience he had accumulated on the local dirt ovals, Hinnershitz began to run well behind the wheel of the Culp car.\(^\text{136}\) Midway through the 1936 racing season, Hinnershitz was leading the AAA Eastern Championship point standings.\(^\text{137}\) Hinnershitz was one of several drivers who initially struggled to learn how to drive effectively on dirt until they gained the winning combination of equipment and experience.

Racing insiders recognized that racing in outdated equipment could have serious ramifications for young drivers. Promoter Ralph Hankinson secured competitive racecars for promising rookies, and he worked to discourage young men from taking on unnecessary risks to themselves or their fellow drivers by competing in


unsafe equipment. Reading sports reporter, Gordon Williams, similarly cautioned local teens that racing was not all about fame and adventure. Williams warned aspiring drivers that racers received “very little money and often end up in a hospital with broken legs or arms.” He advised racing enthusiasts to pursue “other lines of business which carry much less risk, such as being a sports editor, playing table tennis or becoming a bridge expert – cards, of course.” If young men could not be persuaded from pursuing a racing career, then Williams suggested they should save their money until they could afford to buy a good car. Drivers who willingly competed in poorly constructed or outdated racing equipment risked not only their own safety but also the safety of their competitors.

The men of the pit area used technical guidelines and community pressure to prevent newcomers from creating unnecessary risks at the track. Participants openly censored their peers when they felt that recklessness was to blame for track accidents. Even after he scored victories on the eastern circuit during the 1932 racing season, Mauri Rose’s driving style attracted the ire of his fellow drivers. Bob Carey warned Rose to keep his distance from Carey’s car during a race at Oakland Speedway in

138 Bob Sall won several races during the 1932 racing season in a car secured for him by Ralph Hankinson. See, “Thirty Possible Starters May Qualify for Feature 40-Lap Auto Race Sunday,” Reading Times, April 29, 1933, 10.

139 Gordon Williams, “In the Realm of Sports,” Reading Times, January 15, 1936, 12.

140 Ibid.
California. Carey claimed he had lost an early November race at Oakland because Rose “did a piece of ‘dumb’ driving,” which caused one of Carey’s tires to blow and forced him to retire from the race. Carey openly critiqued Rose’s driving, “If he can’t drive any better in fast company than he did on the 13th my advice to Mauri Rose is that he ought to go east, again where the competition isn’t so ‘hot’ and you can win a main event with a ‘hopped up jeloppe’ [sic].” Carey reprimanded Rose for his on track antics, while simultaneously checking the young driver’s ego. While tempers often flared between highly competitive drivers both on and off the speedway, criticisms made by top racecar drivers towards newcomers’ antics reminded all drivers that racing was more than just a game. Reckless driving could result in serious, life threatening consequences.

Racing insiders focused on modifying the behavior of drivers not the design of their cars throughout the interwar period. Racecar builders constructed open-wheel racecars for speed and not safety. The open cockpit design of racecars meant that

141 For Carey’s remarks on Mauri Rose’s driving, see: “Carey Sounds Warning for Auto Classic,” The Times (San Mateo, California), November 25, 1932, 6. Racing enthusiasts debated and compared the caliber of dirt track competition in all regions of the United States during the 1930s. Carey believed that racing competition was toughest on the west coast. Reading Times sports reporter, Ed Hill, disagreed and stated his belief that Carey was afraid of east coast drivers at Reading and other area tracks. Hill told his readers that Carey had attracted the ire of Ralph Hankinson when he registered but failed to show up for the July 1932 race at Reading. Carey chose to race in Cleveland instead, and Hill claimed Carey had wanted to avoid eastern aces by racing in Cleveland “where the going is soft.” See, Ed Hill, “A Corner on Sport” Reading Times, December 6, 1932, 10.
drivers’ heads and torsos were exposed throughout the racing competition. Racecar drivers did not wear seat belts due to widely held beliefs that it was safer to be thrown from a racecar during a collision. A typical AAA Championship racecar weighed more than 1,750 pounds and carried over thirty-five gallons of fuel.\footnote{Ted Allen, “Bulletin,” (November 1, 1930): 1, “AAA Bulletins 1926-55,” EMMR Microfilm Reel #21.} Drivers worried about being trapped under their racecars during a wreck or a fire. Racers willingly chanced the life-threatening injuries they would sustain from being ejected from their cockpits in order to avoid the almost certain death of being crushed or burned alive, if they remained strapped within the seat of their racecars during a crash.

Contemporary ideas of American masculinity also influenced drivers’ attitudes towards speedway safety. Despite the direct exposure of their heads and torsos during racing action, men often raced in their street clothes with no fire retardant suits, gloves, or racing helmets.\footnote{Jim Wright, “A Horrific Crash Ended Ho-Ho-Kus Speedway 75 Years Ago,” July 3, 2013, accessed July 15, 2016, www.NorthJersey.com.} Unsurprisingly, several of the racing fatalities during the 1920s and 1930s resulted from fractured skulls or other head injuries that drivers sustained when they were ejected from their racecars.\footnote{Billy Winn fractured his skull and never regained consciousness during his fatal accident at Springfield in 1938. See, “Fan Talk,” \textit{Evening News}, August 22, 1938, 9. Other drivers survived skull fractures in racing related accidents and continued racing after sustaining severe injuries behind the wheel of their racecars. For example, Norman Batten fractured his skull at a 1923 race in Flemington, New Jersey. Bryan Saulpaugh fractured his skull in two places during a New Year’s Day accident at}
accident statistics and refused to wear protective helmets during racing competition, because they viewed helmets as an insult to their masculinity. When Wilbur Shaw started to wear a solid crash helmet at Legion Ascot Speedway in Los Angeles during the 1932 racing season, other drivers laughed at Shaw and made jests degrading Shaw’s masculinity for his choice to wear a helmet. His fellow drivers quickly changed their attitude, when Shaw survived a serious racing accident thanks to his crash helmet.¹⁴⁵ AAA Contest Board officials made racing helmets mandatory for all AAA-sanctioned racing events in 1935, but safety regulations within the grassroots level of the sport continued a slow evolution over the next two decades.¹⁴⁶

Technological innovation to racecar design continued to raise the speeds at which racecars travelled, but driver and racecar safety failed to keep pace with the ever increasing speeds of racecars.

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The Grim Reaper Sport

Spectators and participants witnessed several racing accidents each season at their local speedways. Race attendees would shake their heads in disbelief when drivers walked away from gruesome looking accidents without a scratch or suffered serious physical injuries in a seemingly minor crack up. The reasons why some drivers crashed to their deaths and others survived were simply unexplainable. Racing insiders turned to the metaphysical to rationalize the unpredictable nature of motorsports. They discussed the role that luck and fate played in a racecar driver’s career. Participants and spectators also pontificated on the role of God in motorsports. Enthusiasts relied on Christian beliefs to come to terms with the high level of risk at dirt track racing events.
Each racecar driver developed his own superstitions and pre-race rituals in order to psychologically process the inherent unpredictability of motorsports. Sports reporter, Henry McLemore, informed readers of the *Shamokin-News Dispatch* that automobile racers were more superstitious than any other group of athletes. He claimed that almost every driver had “a certain ritual they must perform before stepping into their cars.”¹⁴⁷ Some drivers carried good luck charms in their racecar cockpits believing that a lucky coin, rabbit’s foot, or family memento would provide protection and an extra edge on the speedway. Racing legend Peter De Paolo attached a pair of his son’s baby shoes to the cockpit of his racecar for good luck.¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, African American racecar driver Rajo Jack always competed with his lucky rabbit’s foot securely in his pocket. When reporters questioned the positive karma of Jack’s token after a particularly poor racing season during the late 1930s, Jack remained confident in the power of his lucky charm stating, “The rabbit foot didn’t have a chance to get warmed up [last season], but this year it will be different. I gotta hunch I’m gonna have a GREAT season.”¹⁴⁹ Racing with special tokens boosted


the confidence of racecar drivers on the speedway, which allowed them to continuously push their cars to the limit in search of victories and prize money.

By believing in good luck charms and jinxes, racecar drivers worked to create a greater level of control over the unpredictability of the speedway. Future three-time AAA National Champion, Ted Horn developed a long list of superstitions while racing on the AAA circuit during the late 1930s. Horn would not allow peanuts anywhere near his racecar. He refused to be photographed before a race. And, he never wore green on race day. Horn’s superstitions seemed completely irrational to outsiders, but he connected each of these “jinx’s” with the pre-race antics of a fellow racecar driver before his fatal racing accident. Ted Horn was one of several drivers who firmly believed in the power of superstition. He believed that luck in addition to skill and racing machinery were the keys to speedway success. The superstitious beliefs of Ted Horn and other drivers had long lasting impacts on motorsports, and twenty-first century drivers continue to eschew the color green and peanuts in the pit area.

The pre-race antics and superstitious beliefs of individual racecar drivers became widely known aspects of each competitor’s racing persona. Billy Winn always raced in a red leather helmet given to him by his mentor Bob Robinson. Winn outfitted himself and his entire pit crew in bright red uniforms believing that both the physical

150 Catlin, The Life of Ted Horn, 90-92.
hat and its red color brought him good luck. Other drivers developed similar trademark looks due to their own racing superstitions. Race fans identified Pennsylvania native, George “Doc” Mackenzie by his signature “Van Dyke” beard. As he racked up victories on the eastern circuit during the mid-1930s, Mackenzie and his supporters attributed his success to his signature facial hair. Drivers believed that consistency not only in the preparation of their racecars but in their personal grooming and styling played a role in their ability to succeed at the track.

Figure 6  
Racecar driver “Doc” Mackenzie photographed with his signature beard, ca. 1930s (Courtesy of the Eastern Museum of Motor Racing)


152 “Doc Mackenzie, Racer, is Married in Hospital,” Evening Sun, July 21, 1936, 8.
Drivers’ dedication to racing superstitions could be fickle, however, especially if they felt there was an incentive to changing their race day rituals. Colliding with a disabled car during a July 1936 race at Reading Speedway, Doc Mackenzie sustained a broken thumb, severe brush burns, and a concussion that necessitated a stay in the Reading Homeopathic Hospital.\(^{153}\) From his hospital bed, Mackenzie continued to assert that his beard gave him a positive edge on the speedway. Mackenzie’s decision to shave off his signature look following the Reading accident had to do due with love and not luck. Doc’s fiancée disliked his facial hair and pressured him to shave off his beard prior to their wedding nuptials. The 1935 AAA Eastern Champion told members of the press, “The beard has been my lucky charm, but off it comes if the girl friend says no.”\(^{154}\) On July 20, 1936, George Mackenzie (age 30) married Verna T. Mather (age 22) from his sick bed at the Reading hospital. Friends and relatives crammed into Mackenzie’s hospital room to witness the exchanging of vows, and Lloyd Roberts, who had been injured in the same collision at Reading, fulfilled his duties as best man from his hospital bed positioned next to Mackenzie’s.\(^{155}\) Doc’s decision to shave off


\(^{154}\) “Mackenzie Defies Doctors and ‘Lucky Charm,’” *Pottstown Mercury*, August 24, 1936, 8.

\(^{155}\) “Cupid Catches Auto Racer In Homeopathic Hospital,” *Reading Times*, July 21, 1936, 1.
his trademark beard before his wedding demonstrates that lucky charms played a secondary role in most driver’s psyche.

Racing insiders continuously relied on the metaphysical to explain why so many men died prematurely in racing-related accidents. They discussed the role of lady luck instead of seriously contemplating how speed and poor track conditions put drivers’ lives at risk. Mackenzie’s clean-shaven face seemed to have little impact on his initial return to the sport. He established a new AAA track record at Springfield, Illinois in mid-August, but he was forced to retire from the 100 mile race due to exhaustion. Only days later Mackenzie flipped his racecar over four times and crashed to his death at the Wisconsin State Fair. Insiders emphasized the racer’s decision to shave off his lucky beard as the impetus for his fatal accident. A more likely explanation was the fact that Mackenzie had returned to racing against the advice of his doctor who had instructed the speedster to take the remainder of the season off to recover from the injuries he sustained at Reading. Few enthusiasts reprimanded AAA for allowing Mackenzie to return to racing before he was fully healed. Instead, fellow drivers celebrated Mackenzie’s accomplished racing career and

156 “‘Doc’ Mackenzie, Auto Racer, Killed in Crash,” Reading Times, August 24, 1936, 2.


blamed the racer’s premature death on an unlucky twist of fate – his decision to shave off his trademark beard.

All members of the auto racing community regretted the human cost of racing, but the deaths of their friends and peers did not encourage people to push for greater safety regulations within the sport. Arriving late to a 1938 race hosted at Flemington Speedway in New Jersey, racing reporter Chris Economaki asked the woman at the sign-in desk about the progress of the qualifying events. The woman responded that popular AAA driver, Chet Gardner, had just been fatally injured in time trials. Economaki expressed his sincere condolences about Gardner’s death, but news of the accident did not deter his interest in the racing events as he immediately asked, “Who was fast qualifier?”

Reflecting on changing cultural perceptions towards death during the 1920s and 1930s, Chris Economaki explained in his autobiography how, “People accepted that death was an inevitable part of life, and there was the normal period of grieving and then you went on with life.” Questions, such as “How could this have happened?” and “What can we do to make sure it never happens again?” did not follow every disaster and tragic accident as it would by the closing decades of the

159 Chris Economaki, *Let ‘Em All Go! The Story of Auto Racing by the man who was there* (Fishers: Dave Argabright, 2006), 90.

160 Chris Economaki, *Let ‘Em All Go!,* 90.
century.\textsuperscript{161} Racing insiders mourned the loss of friends at the speedway, but high fatalities rates did not encourage promoters and participants to make serious changes to the safety of dirt track automobile racing.\textsuperscript{162}

Drivers remained callously undeterred by a racecar’s provenance, and racers regularly volunteered to drive racecars previously involved in fatal accidents. Racing equipment remained expensive and highly specialized pieces of machinery. Men willingly salvaged racecars that had been involved in fatal accidents. Car owner Johnny Bagley worked to rebuild his racecar following Doc Mackenzie’s fatal accident in Milwaukee. People often referred to these refurbished racecars as “death cars” due to their unfortunate provenance.\textsuperscript{163} Racing enthusiasts insinuated that the cars themselves were “jinxed” and dangerous to even the most skilled and veteran drivers.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{161} Chris Economaki discusses the different cultural reactions towards accidents and fatalities during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, see: \textit{Let ‘Em All Go!}, 90.

\textsuperscript{162} Lawrence R. Samuel argues that “denial” is the major word to sum up Americans’ attitudes towards death. See, \textit{Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), xi.


\textsuperscript{164} Literary scholar Edna Duffy notes that the term “death car” was used by F. Scott Fitzgerald to describe the car that killed Myrtle Wilson in \textit{The Great Gatsby}. Duffy argues that the use of the term insinuates that the machine and not human error was at fault for the collision. See Edna Duffy, \textit{The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, and
superior to their current rides. Early in the 1937 season, drivers asserted that Bagley’s car was still one of the most competitive rides on the eastern circuit. Competitors claimed “that the wrecks in which it was figured are accountable to its great speed” and not a supernatural hex. Drivers identified “fast” racecars based on a variety of factors, including engine power and quality fabrication as well as the car’s ability to consistently set fast lap times and pass cars during races. Drivers knew that racecars with more power and speed often carried a higher accident rate, but they willingly took the risk in pursuit of speedway victories. Even after St. Louis driver, Frankie Beeder, flipped twice in the Bagley car at the season opener at Reading, Beeder remained “undaunted” by the crash and planned to race the car at Langhorne less than two weeks later. Luck could help drivers on the speedway, but skillful driving in a fast racecar remained the defining features of success at the racetrack.

Modernism (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009), 244. Americans showed a similar mentality towards racing accidents by emphasizing that specific racecars were “jinxed” because they were repeatedly involved in fatal accidents. See, “Drivers Killed in Crash on Speedway,” Lincoln Star, August 29, 1932, 6 and “Billy Winn Heads Reading Stars at Fair Tomorrow,” Reading Times, September 19, 1936, 11.

165 For a May 1932 race at Reading Speedway, three different “death cars” were entered in the race. Zeke Meyer was set to pilot Ray Keech’s former car owned by Mrs. Maude Yagle, Billy Winn sat behind the wheel of Bernie Katz’s former car, and the driver’s seat was still open for the car that Bob Robinson died in at Woodbridge Speedway in 1930. See: “Zeke Meyer Enters Sunday Race Meet.”

166 “Beeder Enters For Auto Race,” Mount Carmel Item, April 30, 1937, 14.

Many racing enthusiasts freely combined superstitious beliefs with religious faith and openly discussed the role of God in motorsports. Following Judeo-Christian teachings, racecar drivers expressed that God ultimately determined when each driver “got the call” to leave earth and enter heaven.\textsuperscript{168} One journalist commented, “Several times in the weeks past the hand of the Master has waved a last checkered to one of our number and the fraternity has bowed in due reverence and respect.”\textsuperscript{169} Racing enthusiasts came to terms with death by conceptualizing the afterlife as a heavenly speedway. Whether men met death on the speedway or by other means, members of the racing fraternity believed that deceased a racecar driver ascended to heaven, where he continuously rode “the golden speedway up above.”\textsuperscript{170} According to devotees, drivers always had the perfect day of racing on the golden speedway allowing them to achieve eternal bliss.\textsuperscript{171} In his eulogy to a fallen friend, one man expressed, “Tonight, he is on the pole of the Golden Speedway, riding with others like himself, the race

\textsuperscript{168} Bill Breitenstein, “Fans Mourn In Memory of Men Who Are Gone,” \textit{Hot Speed News}, April 12, 1934, 2.


\textsuperscript{170} “Daring Drivers At Langhorne,” \textit{Harrisburg Telegraph}, June 5, 1936, 15.

\textsuperscript{171} Racing insiders’ descriptions of the golden speedway resemble the religious connotations used to describe airplanes and flight during the early twentieth century, see: Joseph J. Corn, The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
where everyone wins and the checkered flag is never down." For dirt track racing competitors, the afterlife meant an eternal pursuit of speed and valor through automobile racing. Christian racecar drivers believed that they would spend eternity doing what they loved to do most on earth – racing cars.

**Worth the Risk?**

Automobile racing drivers contended that the controlled environment of the racetrack offered fewer risks than driving on the open road. Former racecar driver turned promoter, Ed Yost said, "I'd much rather drive my racing car on a dirt track in competition than to drive the main streets of some of our principal cities." Yost expressed his confidence in the superior driving skills of his fellow racecar drivers explaining, "It's less dangerous. I am master of my car on the track, but out on the road no man is master of his car because of the simple reason that there are so many reckless drivers that it isn't safe at any time. On the track every driver is an expert, and you know by instinct just what he is going to do." Through extensive periods of

172 The “pole” is the nickname for the first starting position in any race. Starting up from makes the pole sitter the initial leader of the race and provides him with “clean air” and a clear view of the track. Shuck Liddle, “On the Golden Speedway Go Two Fine Boys to Join Former Comrades,” *National Speed Sport News*, July 9, 1947, 2.


training and mentorship, Yost and other racecar drivers confidently asserted a greater level of control over speeding cars on the racetrack than on city streets. Passenger automobiles accounted for a growing number of accidental deaths within the United States. Dirt track auto racing enthusiasts continued to argue that racecar drivers’ expertise behind the wheel far exceeded that of the average American motorist. As journalists regularly reported accidental deaths on the front pages of their local newspapers, racecar drivers contended that the risks of racing did not exceed their chances for an unsuspecting mishap while at home or at work.

Racing enthusiasts asserted that dying behind the wheel of a racecar was an honorable death for American men. Sports writer Alan Ward commented that an auto racing fatality was “preferable to kicking off in bed with cirrhosis of the liver or galloping consumption or softening of the mental process.”175 After one specific racing incident that resulted in the death of two racecar drivers, AAA official Ted Allen expressed his hope that the drivers’ families were comforted by the fact that “these men matched their courage against the risk of the enterprise and had they known it was their time they would have wished rather such a close to an eventful life than to rust unburnished.”176 Nobe Frank of the Harrisburg Telegraph agreed and celebrated that one local driver had “died as he would have wanted to die- with his boots on –


defying death and laughing gaily at its chilly wheezes.”

Americans admired racecar drivers for their active lifestyles and their courageous approach to life. Racing enthusiasts celebrated drivers’ desire to die suddenly on the speedway as opposed to suffering a long period of illness and physical decline.

Racing enthusiasts viewed self-sacrifice by drivers on the speedway as the epitome of masculine daring. Drivers who sacrificed their own lives in order to keep spectators and their fellow drivers out of danger during racing events became instant martyrs among racing enthusiasts. When forty year old Chet Gardner crashed to his death at Flemington in 1938, he was attempting to avoid hitting a young child who ran out onto the speedway in front of Gardner’s speeding car. Gardner saw the child as he rounded turn two onto the backstretch. He “swerved wildly, missing the child but swinging into a skid” flipping several times and died instantly when his car landed on top of him. Racing enthusiasts and members of the press praised Gardner for his heroic decision to face “his own death rather than kill a young spectator.”

177 Nobe Frank, “It Just Occurred to Me,” Harrisburg Telegraph, August 26, 1936, 12.


Sacrificing oneself to ensure the safety of another received the ultimate accolades from the dirt track racing community.\textsuperscript{180}

The adrenaline rush that drivers received from directly participating in oval track competitions enthralled racecar drivers and made racing worth the physical risks. In his autobiography, English driver, Major H.O.D Segrave mused over the sensations of going 200 miles per hour during his land speed trials: “There is – for some psychological reason which I am quite incapable of analyzing – a certain thrill in the element of speed.”\textsuperscript{181} Driver Barney Oldfield similarly described how “there is an ecstasy in the drive that tingles through every fiber of your being” when you racing at high speeds.\textsuperscript{182} Motorists joined racecar drivers in their belief in the exhilarating

\textsuperscript{180} During the 1927 Indianapolis 500, Norman Batten won the admiration of the racing community when he remained in the driver’s seat of his flaming car and brought his racecar to a safe stop, instead of allowing the pilotless car to travel towards the main grandstands at high speeds. Batten suffered severe burns to his arms, legs, and torso, but his selfless determination to stay with his ailing car propelled Indianapolis 500 race officials to devise a sportsmanship trophy to present to one driver each year who worked to prevent accidents on the speedway. See, “Norman Batten, Boro Boy, Burned As Car Goes Afire,” \textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle}, May 3, 1927, 1; “Dramatic Race Won by a Tyro,” \textit{Independent Record}, May 31, 1927, 7; “Hero of Blazing Racer Enters Altoona Race,” \textit{Evening News}, August 19, 1927, 25; “Will Ask Congress to Give Recognition to Race Driver’s Heroism,” \textit{The Bee}, June 2, 1927, 1; “Met Heroic Death at Sea,” \textit{Wilmington News-Journal}, November 17, 1928, 1; and “Hero Awards At Speedway,” \textit{Harrisburg Telegraph}, May 26, 1936, 13.

\textsuperscript{181} Major H.O.D Segrave, \textit{The Lure of Speed} (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1928), 278.

\textsuperscript{182} Oldfield’s quote appears in Kevin Nelson’s, \textit{Wheels of Change - From Zero to 600 M.P.H: The Amazing Story of California and the Automobile} (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2009), 23.
power of speed, and Americans increasingly referred to speed as if it were an incurable illness. People recalled a specific encounter with automotive technology that forever changed their relationship to high-speed travel. Once they were “bit by the speed bug,” Americans developed an insatiable desire for speed that would remain in their blood for the rest of their life. Racecar drivers commented that getting bit by the speed bug “generally lasts until you’re too old to drive or they pull you out from beneath the wreckage of what once was a fast race car.” The passion that men had for automobile racing outweighed the possible physical ramifications of the sport.

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183 Racing enthusiasts and members of the American public used the term “speed bug” throughout the interwar period to describe individuals who liked to drive fast. See, “Speed Bug Causes Babe Ruth to Be on Inside Lookin’ Out,” Indianapolis News, June 8, 1921, 24; “Don’t Step Too Heavy on Gas,” Greenfield Daily Report, April 3, 1923, 1; “What is Our Speed?” Reading Times, December 6, 1924, 3; and “Philosopher Knows Something About Automobile Speed Bugs,” Indianapolis News, August 27, 1927, 18.

Men often refused to retire from racing even after they had experienced serious injuries in racing accidents. Bill Schindler famously resumed his racing career after losing a leg in a racing accident.\textsuperscript{185} Ken Fowler climbed back into his cockpit with silver plates in his arm and shoulder.\textsuperscript{186} Bob Sall also returned to the track after

\textsuperscript{185} “Veteran Fowler to Handle Lucky Teter Mount Sunday,” \textit{Reading Times}, April 21, 1937, 18.

several harrowing crashes. As a result of a 1938 wreck, Sall broke his pelvis and his shoulder, “shattered” his leg, and suffered internal injuries.¹⁸⁷ He spent four months in the hospital and four more walking with a cane. “Undaunted by the limp in his leg and the hook on his shoulder,” Sall emphatically claimed that he would never give up racing and continued to prepare for the 1939 season opener at Reading.¹⁸⁸ Competing in his fourteenth season of racing three years later, Sall was still posting top five finishes on the eastern fairground circuit and remained committed to his racing career stating, “I’ve still got plenty of good racing in me.”¹⁸⁹ The endless desire to improve their racecars, break speed records, and win more races kept men returning to the nation’s speedways.

Drivers’ quest for just a little more speed and performance from their racecars led them to pursue mechanical innovations to their racecars that increased their chances for physical harm at the speedway. Determined to increase his average speed and win the Indianapolis 500 in 1935, Mauri Rose commented, “No one can be sure he is going to win, but I know I can hit the turns faster, maintain higher speed, [and] use

¹⁸⁸ “Bob Sall Will Race at Reading,” *Mount Carmel Item*, April 18, 1939, 4.
less gas and rubber” than my competitors.\textsuperscript{190} Racing enthusiasts stressed the scientific importance of the sport and claimed that the majority of the safety devices and mechanical innovations found on contemporary passenger automobiles were originally tested by racecar drivers.\textsuperscript{191} Fans and participants viewed drivers’ willingness to test new mechanical elements on their racecars as further evidence of their masculinity.\textsuperscript{192} Members of the pit area emphasized that drivers risked their own lives for the pursuit of technical knowledge that directly benefited consumer autoists.

Even after sustaining serious accidents and watching their friends perish on the speedway, racecar drivers continued to climb into the cockpits of their racing machines. When asked how injuries impacted the psyche of a racecar driver, AAA driver Babe Stapp admitted that immediately following an accident he wondered “whether it was worth it.” Stapp mused, however, that serious injuries did not deter his passion for racing commenting, “as soon as you are able to be about, why it’s back to the races and more speed.”\textsuperscript{193} Drivers generally agreed that it was best to return to

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{190} “Rose Lost $569 per Second Lost May 30,” \textit{Franklin Evening Star}, May 18, 1935, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{191} “Fast Time Made in Auto Races on Scranton Track,” \textit{Evening News}, July 5, 1924, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{192} William F. Sturm, “Speedway Notes,” \textit{The Indianapolis News}, May 11, 1928, Part 3, 10.
\end{enumerate}
racing as soon as possible before they spent too much time analyzing the risks involved within the sport from their recovery rooms.\textsuperscript{194} Men also felt strong obligations to the network of people and businesses involved in their racing operations. When they considered abandoning their racing careers after a serious accident, drivers remembered all of the crew men and sponsors who had invested so much time and money in their cars.\textsuperscript{195} Racecar drivers recognized that they were part of a larger racing team, and they felt pressured to continue racing to appease the desires of their car owners, crew, families, and fans.

For the majority of drivers and car owners, racing failed to be a money making venture, and monetary gain was not the main incentive for their participation in the sport. Several drivers and car owners walked away “in the hole” after participating in racing events on the fairgrounds circuit. Racers paid AAA driver and car registration fees plus admission to the pit area in order to compete in the racing program. Most racing programs offered prize money to the top three finishers in qualifying races as well as top drivers in feature events. Drivers who failed to finish “in the money” received no compensation for helping to put on an entertaining show for spectators.\textsuperscript{196}


\textsuperscript{195} Shaw, \textit{Gentlemen, Start Your Engines}, 83.

\textsuperscript{196} A race held at the Reading Fair on Sunday, September 16, 1934 demonstrates the racing format used in eastern dirt track racing during this period. Drivers first completed in time trials. The fastest six cars competed in Heat 1. The top three finishers in the ten lap heat advanced directly to the feature. The three cars who failed
After investing a significant amount of money to build a competitive racecar, drivers had to pay additional expenses including the cost of tires and fuel. Car owners paid for all repairs to broken racing equipment and car damaged sustained during competition. Participants also footed the bill for lodging and gasoline. The passion that men had for competitive racing drew them to the speedway, and they took on financial as well as physical risks in order to participate in the sport.

In addition to the costs of maintaining a competitive racecar, drivers risked financial repercussions each time they suffered a serious accident on the speedway. The nation’s leading racing organizations had minimal involvement providing health and life insurance for drivers throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Most drivers had to pay for their own hospital stays when they suffered serious racing injuries. By the 

197 While car insurance was growing in popularity for passenger vehicles during the interwar period, racecar drivers and car owners personally paid for all damages to their speed machines. Teams could spend all winter constructing a racecar and have it totaled at the first race of the season. The financial risk involved in automobile racing was a major part of the sport, as drivers looked for sponsors and patrons to help fund their racing enterprises. To learn more about the rise of installment buying plans and car insurance, see: Sally Clarke, “No Cash, No Problem Credit and the U.S. Automobile Market,” *Financial History*, Issue 89 (Fall 2007): 28-35.
mid-1930s, AAA began a benevolent program for injured drivers. Each time they participated in an AAA race, drivers, car owners, and promoters all paid a fee marked for the AAA benevolent fund. Drivers who were injured in AAA races could receive up to $250 to help cover their hospital fees. AAA also provided $250 towards the funeral costs of drivers who lost their lives in AAA racing events. Even with the financial assistance provided by AAA, most drivers risked losing their primary occupations during long periods of convalesce after a racing accident. The majority of participants were amateur drivers who depended on full-time jobs during the week to pay their bills. AAA did not provide drivers with any financial assistance, if they were fired or laid off from their jobs due to racing injuries. Drivers who served as the primary breadwinners for their families knew that they put the financial security of their entire family in jeopardy each time they climbed into the cockpit of their racecars.

Family members of the nation’s speed demons recognized the determination of their husbands, sons, and brothers to race in spite of the high risks involved in the sport. Detroit society women and noted equestrian Helene Yockey tragically learned first-hand about the unpredictability of motorsports. Yockey married racecar driver Joe Russo in January 1934. Mrs. Russo only had a few short months to cheer her husband on from the grandstands. Joe died at the age of 35 as a result of injuries he took in a racing accident.

sustained while racing at Langhorne Speedway in June 1934. Her brief marriage to Joe Russo did not deter Helene from admiring men who made their living racing cars. By 1935, Helene had married racecar driver Billy Winn. When asked if she would try to convince her second husband to retire from racing, Helene Winn told the press that, “Billy lives for racing. I never saw anyone so completely engrossed in anything as Billy is in racing. It’s his very life. I wouldn’t – and couldn’t – ask him to give it up.” Helene watched on helplessly when Winn suffered a fatal crash at Springfield, Illinois less than three years after their wedding. Twice widowed by racing over a five year period, Helene Winn had Billy interned in the plot next to her first husband, Joe Russo, at a cemetery in her hometown of Detroit.

Drivers continuously weighed the adrenaline rush of competitive racing against the physical realities of the sport making decisions about acceptable and unacceptable


202 The website [www.racersatrest.com](http://www.racersatrest.com) works to document the final resting places of American racecar drivers, and they have catalogued and photographed the gravestones of Joe Russo and Billy Winn at Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Detroit, Michigan. Site accessed September 26, 2016.
levels of risk-taking at the speedway. Drivers sometimes refused to race, if they felt that the racetrack was not safe or the prize money was too minimal to be worth the risk. Ten drivers including Mauri Rose and Bill “Stubby” Stubblefield refused to participate in a race at Legion Ascot Speedway during the 1933 season unless promoters raised the purse. 203 Reporters referred to the driver’s strike as an act of self-preservation arguing that the payoff “prices do not compensate for danger” involved in racing competition. 204 Mauri Rose continued to assess the risks involved in racing throughout the rest of his career outliving several of his racing peers (including Stubby Stubblefield) who were fatally injured in racing accidents. 205 By

203 Rose had previously been involved in at least one other altercation between drivers and promoters over driver pay. At New Bremen Speedway in Ohio during the 1931 racing season, Rose joined participating drivers when they demanded promoters raise the purse for the feature event. Rose was later arrested and charged with malicious destruction of property and instigating a riot for his involvement in the New Bremen controversy. A judge fined Rose $175 to help cover damages to the track facility, as rioters burned down the flag stand and part of the grandstands during the incident. See, “Race Driver Held on Arson Charge,” Piqua Daily Call, September 25, 1931, 6; “Mauri Rose is Held in Jail in Riot Affair,” Delphos Daily Herald, September 26, 1931, 2; “Race Driver Is Held for Arson,” Piqua Daily Call, September 26, 1931, 4; “Indictments Are Returned in New Bremen Arson Case; Censor Speedway Officers,” Piqua Daily Call, October 9, 1931, 1; and “Mauri Rose is Fined in Speedway Riot,” Delphos Daily Herald, December 3, 1931, 6.

204 “Kings of Auto Racing Go On Strike on Coast,” Altoona Tribune, January 14, 1933, 8.

205 William H. Stubblefield and his riding mechanic, Leo Whittaker, died during qualifying for the 1935 Indianapolis 500. Both men were 27 years old and lived in the same neighborhood in their home state of California. Stubblefield and Whittaker were interred side by side at Angelus Abbey Cemetery in Los Angeles. See, “Famed Racer, Two More Die In Time Trials,” Arizona Independent Republic, May 22, 1935, 1;
1939, the thirty-three year old driver had obtained a full-time position working for the Allison Engineering Company in Speedway, Indiana.206 While participating in qualifying rounds for the 1939 Indianapolis 500, Rose told members of the press, “I don’t drive any place now but here, the purses at other tracks aren’t big enough to risk busting up yourself or your car.”207 While Rose often competed to win a few hundred dollars for a racing victory on the dirt track circuit in the early 1930s, he had altered his conception of acceptable risk by the end of the decade. Rose had a full-time career and only risked his physical safety for the thousands in prize money at the annual Indianapolis 500.208

Conclusion

Racecar drivers knew that automobile racing was a risky business, but their desire to continuously push the boundaries of speed and win races superseded their concerns over their physical safety. Insiders believed that drivers could actively work to control the risks involved in dirt track racing, through training, top-of-the-line equipment, and by adhering to established safety protocols.


206 “Little Mauri Rose, Columbus Driver, Preps for Big Race,” Sandusky Register, May 7, 1939, 8.


208 A total of $87,050 was up for grabs at the 1939 Indianapolis 500 including the purse and various lap prizes and sponsorships offered by automotive manufacturers and other related companies. See, Fox, Illustrated History of the Indianapolis 500, 23.
racing equipment, and a little luck. The unpredictability of racing continued to make
automobile racing a popular consumer amusement throughout the 1930s, as both
spectators and participants became immersed in a cultural celebration of speed and
masculine daring. The adrenaline rush that drivers received through competitively
racing, setting speed records, winning prize money, gaining accolades from adoring
fans, and perfecting new technical improvements to their racecars made racing worth
the risk. In the process of negotiating the risks and rewards of motorsports, dirt track
racecar drivers established a set of values shared among drivers and their mechanics.
Racing insiders dictated a set of desirable characteristics for racecar drivers that they
used to determine who would be accepted within the pit area. The racial and gendered
boundaries of social inclusion within interwar motorsports is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 3

PIT AREA CULTURE

In July 1924, A.J. Russell was ready to race. He finished building his racecar and hired a mechanic. When Russell’s race team arrived at a Chicago-area speedway, track officials refused to allow Russell to even enter the pit area let alone compete in the scheduled racing events.209 Russell was one of several African American men from across the United States who faced de facto exclusion from automobile racing.210 Drivers, mechanics, promoters, and racing officials agreed that racing technologically complex machines was a dangerous pastime best mastered by white men.211 By closely monitoring who joined their ranks in the technological center of the speedway known as the “pit area,” racing insiders maintained a high level of control and homogeneity over American motorsports.


210 The African American press consistently noted that black drivers were excluded from auto racing events, see: “Hold 100-Mile Auto Derby July 4,” Chicago Defender, May 26, 1928, 9 and “Indianapolis Excited Over Auto Derby,” Chicago Defender, July 22, 1929, 8.

211 For background on the social construction of technology and machines as masculine, see: Michael Adas, Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Carroll Pursell, The Machine in America: A Social History of Technology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Ruth Oldenziel, Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women and Modern Machines in America 1870-1945 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).
Racing insiders controlled access to participation in dirt track racing, and they set boundaries for inclusion and exclusion within the sport. As A.J. Russell quickly realized, racetrack pit areas operated under strict codes of race and gender. Members of the pit area assisted young men from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in starting their racing careers, while consistently denying similar levels of access and help to black men and women. As a result, men of color and women struggled throughout the twentieth century to gain access to the pit area and learn the necessary technical skill sets to succeed within the sport. Within the ranks of white male participants, identity remained malleable at the speedway. Catering to race fans’ demands for a multifaceted cast of heroes and villains at each racing event, promoters altered and expanded the boundaries of participation within dirt track automobile racing whenever it was economically advantageous.

**Learning the Unwritten Rules of Racing**

Dirt track racing insiders depended on a hierarchy of experience and knowledge to control membership within their ranks. By the early 1930s, racecar builders and mechanics published a variety of technical manuals to help interested young men learn how to build their own racecars. While providing detailed explanations on how to construct a competitive car, authors encouraged their readers that the best way to break into the sport was to go to the track and learn directly from mechanics and drivers. One writer stressed, “These things cannot be learned from
books but must be experienced.” Constructing, driving, and repairing racecars required insider knowledge of pit area practices that could not be gained from earning an engineering degree, reading racing magazines, or watching auto racing events.

Newcomers turned to pit veterans for instructions, insight, and guidance on how to pilot and prepare their racecars. Rookies often served several years of apprenticeship with veteran drivers and mechanics before they started their own racing careers. Young men began sweeping the floor of a racecar driver’s garage and slowly took on more responsibilities with his racing team. After a few racing seasons, apprentices served as warm up drivers testing the cars for mechanical problems before racing events. Through their constant presence at the racing garage and pit stall, apprentices learned the technical secrets integral to their future success within the sport. When they showed proficiency both on the track and under the hood of a racecar, rookies constructed their own cars under the guidance of their mentors. Veterans also provided references to newcomers and helped them find rides with established racing teams.


The apprenticeship system allowed white men from various socio-economic backgrounds access to the racing equipment and technical training essential to beginning their racing careers. While helping out in racing garages, aspiring drivers and mechanics learned how to properly build and repair racing equipment. In addition to technical training, mentors provided their interns with garage space, spare parts, and access to machines, such as lathes, that they needed to start building their own racecars.214 Dirt track racers favored smaller, lighter, and more maneuverable racecars constructed from a bricolage of new and used passenger automobile parts.215 Buying products from speed equipment manufacturers, bartering for parts in the pit area, scrounging local junk yards, and rebuilding damaged racecars all required an advanced knowledge of automotive and racing technology. Speed equipment manufacturer, Robert Roof, instructed newcomers to use a salvaged car chassis and motor plus aftermarket parts to construct a competitive dirt track car. Roof estimated that a technical savvy driver could build his own big car for around $700 during the 1930s.216 Men had to know what parts they were looking for to successfully construct a competitive racecar. They needed a keen technical eye to identify flaws in used

214 Bill Betteridge and His “Little Red Racer” (Glendale: Wayne A. Wonacott Franklin Press, ca. 1930s).


equipment in order to avoid mechanical failures and serious injury on the speedway.

Aspiring drivers depended on practical guidance from veteran drivers to purchase parts and build competitive racecars for dirt track competition.

Members of the pit area joined with promoters, track officials, and racing organizations to act as gatekeepers of dirt track racing. Promoters created elaborate sets of rules and technical guidelines for racecar drivers and their racecars. Men could not simply receive the rules in the mail, build a racecar, show up at the track, and compete. Before new drivers could participate in AAA racing action, rookies had to demonstrate their ability to race at competitive speeds in cars that met all the technical regulations of the racing association. Rookies competed in a series of AAA races with a temporary driver’s permit before AAA officials granted them a permanent driver’s identification card. The complex technical rules for each division of

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217 Scholars have discussed the ways that low level officials have historically served as gatekeepers restricting certain individuals on the basis of race and gender, see Erika Lee, At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigrants during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

218 Before AAA officials would accept the registrations of new drivers, applicants had to attend an AAA race and demonstrate their ability before officials at the beginning of the racing program. AAA informed competitors that “no driver is ever registered by this office until we have satisfactory evidence that he is competent to handle a racing car at high speed in competition.” See, “AAA Official Bulletin,” September 15, 1926, “AAA Bulletins 1926-55,” EMMR Microfilm Reel #21.

219 To register as an AAA driver for the 1929 season, rookies at to time within seven seconds of the track record on a half mile course and within twelve seconds of the track record on a mile length track to be granted a AAA driver’s card. See, Ray Kuns, “Perils and Rewards of Dirt Track Racing,” Modern Mechanics (May 1929): 90.
racecars made it nearly impossible to build a regulation racecar without the mentorship of racing insiders. The ability of veteran drivers and mechanics to extend or withhold their help to young drivers allowed pit area insiders to control entry into the sport.

Experienced drivers and mechanics took an interest in newcomers who displayed personality traits that members of the racing fraternity admired. Racing insiders promoted personality traits, such as courage, determination, creativity, and mechanical aptitude, among racecar drivers. When high-schooler Elmer Sefcik built a racecar and entered a dirt track race in his home state of New Jersey, Sefcik’s car failed to get off the starting grid. Local drivers and pit men, however, took an initial liking to the teen. Veteran racing mechanic “Pop” Fisher recalled how “the blonde Swede” had come to the track “as a green country boy with an old pile of iron,” but he quickly had “made the grade the hard way” earning the respect of the men in the pit area.220 Racing insiders provided Sefcik with directions on how to rebuild his racecar. The young driver heeded their advice setting fast time in his rebuilt racecar during his second race. Sefcik had discovered how to tool a fast car, but he needed additional guidance and advice on how to properly handle his car on the track. A crash during this second race left the teen with two broken legs, a fractured pelvis, broken hip, and

injured knee cap.\textsuperscript{221} Sefcik remained determined to succeed in the sport and eventually built up a successful racing career by the early 1940s. Racing insiders readily helped newcomers, such as Elmer Sefcik, who exhibited the right mixture of enthusiasm, technical know-how, and grit at the speedway.

Because of the tendency of racecar drivers to initiate young men from their own families into the sport, dirt track automobile racing developed several racing dynasties. Men passed on their insider knowledge, racing equipment, and love of the sport to their sons, nephews, and grandsons. Young male family members of several leading racecar drivers grew up at the garage and slowly took on more responsibilities and involvement in their family’s racing teams by their early teens. After Peter De Palma won the 1925 Indianapolis 500, his uncle and fellow racecar driver Ralph De Palma claimed he had “seven more nephews that wish to learn to drive racing cars.”\textsuperscript{222} Men generally encouraged and welcomed their male family members into the pit area culture and made racing into a family activity.

\textsuperscript{221} Bill Deasey, “Elmer Sefcik in Fatal Accident,” \textit{National Speed Sport News}, March 1943, 6.

Figure 8

Fred Frame and his son pictured in a Langhorne Speedway Program from August 13, 1932 (Courtesy of the Eastern Museum of Motor Racing)

Once rookies passed the technical and social thresholds for entry into the sport, they gained acceptance within the culture of the pit area and developed a high level of
comradery with their peers. Shared experiences on the racetrack and in the pit area bound mechanics, drivers, and officials together in a self-proclaimed “auto racing fraternity.”  

Indianapolis 500-winner Wilbur Shaw described how members of the pit area shared a bond that was reminiscent of nineteenth century fraternal organizations. Racecar drivers had a shared interest in the success of both individuals and the sport as a whole. Men would often loan extra parts to their competitors during racing events. Shaw explained, “Any race driver will tell you that it’s no fun beating someone who is handicapped by inferior equipment. If one driver has a spare part he isn’t going to need on a particular day, it’s common practice for him to lend it to some rival who needs it and then go out and try to beat him anyways.”

Men additionally helped other drivers and teams with last minute

223 The earliest references to a “racing fraternity” can be traced to the mid-19th century as a term used to express horse racing enthusiasts. See, *The New York Times*, August 31, 1853, 2. The term has been applied to automobile races since their early twentieth century when stars, such as Barney Oldfield and Ralph De Palma, began competitively racing on dirt, brick, and board tracks. See, “Auto Racing Plans,” *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, December 12, 1903, 13 and “Barney Oldfield Will Have Rival in Aitken,” *Indianapolis News*, April 5, 1910, 12.

224 Historian Ben Shackleford has argued that NASCAR pit members exhibit the main characteristics of fraternal orders by their shared rituals, proprietary knowledge, male membership, and corporate idiom. My argument of the fraternal ties between dirt track auto racers builds upon his work, see: “Masculinity, the Auto Racing Fraternity, and the Technological Sublime” in *Boys and Their Toys: Masculinity, Class and Technology in America*, ed. Roger Horowitz (New York: Routledge, 1991).

repairs, if cars blew a tire or had a minor crash during the qualifying events. Insiders also shared necessary practical information, such as offering tips on the best garages and restaurants to patronize during long weekend treks to racing events. Working alongside their peers in the pit area, competing in speed events, and caravanning to races created life-long friendships among male racecar drivers, mechanics, and pit men.

**Showmanship and Social Inclusion**

Each time they climbed into the cockpit of their racecars, men gained a level of anonymity at the speedway. Characteristics that defined a driver’s daily life, such as occupation, income, ethnicity, religion, and physical appearance, disappeared when they sat behind the wheel of a racecar. Individual men turned into a cast of characters, as spectators identified drivers by their car number, paint scheme, and driving performance. Technological play at the nation’s dirt speedways provided American men with an opportunity to reinvent their personal identity and create a new persona each time they raced.

Racecar drivers had several practical motivations for altering their identities at the racetrack. Men adopted aliases to keep their employers, bill collectors, parents, wives or racing associations from finding out about their racing exploits. Family members and bosses recognized the high level of physical risks involved in the sport, and they attempted to deter colleagues and loved ones from participating in racing events for fear of serious injuries. Men also registered for races under false names to circumvent the rules of their racing organizations. The American Automobile
Association and other leading racing organizations prohibited their drivers from participating in races hosted by competing racing associations. Drivers who participated on the American Automobile Association’s racing circuit often registered for non-sanctioned races under false names. Men used pseudonyms to avoid penalties in starting position or fines for racing in unsanctioned events. Drivers regularly embraced new identities at the speedway in order to participate in racing events.  

Racing officials and participants recognized the elements of melodrama taking place both on and off the racetrack. Promoters worked to increase ticket sales and heighten the fan experience by stimulating a theatrical narrative among various racecar drivers during racing events. They encouraged announcers to emphasize, exaggerate, or alter drivers’ names and backgrounds for the amusement of spectators. Promoters increased the theatrics of each racing event by highlighting ethnic differences among drivers. Promoter Bill Pickens convinced newcomer John Wilson to drive under an assumed name and pretend to be French, while racing at Ascot Legion Speedway in 

226 For a list of over one hundred different dirt track drivers who used aliases throughout their racing career, see: Buzz Rose, *The Eastern Bull Rings* (Ben Franklin Press Inc, 2005), 74.

227 In his study of American drag racing, Robert Post argues that drag racing was a dual technical and theatrical performance as the drive for increased power created more noise, smoke, and speed for both drivers and spectators at the drag strip. The interconnections between automotive and theatrical showmanship resulting in a “high performance” at the speedway is similarly present in all types of motorsports. See, Post’s introduction, “A New Theater of Speed” in *High Performance: The Culture and Technology of Drag Racing, 1950-2000* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 2001.
California during the 1920s. Pickens believed that the “public wants a French driver who can show ‘em up.” He rechristened Wilson “Leon Duray” and publicized his French origins during racing events. Wilson agreed to this new identity registering for races across the United States under his adopted alias. By the time Wilson entered a 250-mile championship race in early June 1925 at Altoona Speedway in Pennsylvania, his racing career was firmly associated with his false ancestry. Prerace press coverage described Duray as one of France’s “most gallant sons” and claimed that he only raced in the United States because American speed contests offered larger prize money than European automobile races. Wilson continued to play the part of a French racecar driver throughout the rest of his racing career appeasing promoters’ desires for international rivalries on the speedway.

Racecar drivers also chose to race under pseudonyms to hide their ethnic backgrounds. During the interwar period, recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe struggled to achieve social inclusion within American culture.

228 “Duray Comes From Behind to Win Culver City Speed Classic; Hartz Is Second,” Santa Ana Register, March 7, 1927, 17.


George Viola was one of several Italian American drivers who anglicized his surname when registering for racing events. Viola competed as “Georgie Rice” at the speedway.\footnote{Joe Heisler, “The Ascot of the East,” in The Eastern Bull Rings: The History of the Eastern Big Car Championships 1945-1960 by Buzz Rose (Ben Franklin Press Inc, 2005), 72.} Viola and other Italian American drivers may have wanted to distance themselves from prevailing ethnic stereotypes that associated Italian Americans with criminality during the interwar period.\footnote{The ruthless, Italian American gangster was a popular trope in film during the early 1930s, see, Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, “The Depression’s Human Toll Gangsters and Fallen Women,” in Hollywood’s America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film, ed. Steven Mintz and Randy W. Roberts (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 82-90.} Racing officials and announcers might also have altered Viola’s surname. Track announcers often created nicknames or shortened the surnames of newcomers that proved too challenging to pronounce during the fast-paced racing action. Racing newcomer Zenon Bardowski received the nickname of “Bud Bardy” during his first racing season on the eastern circuit.\footnote{H.B. Overstreet, “Bardy’s Racing Courage Wins Army Honors,” National Auto Racing News, April 2, 1942, 3.} Similar to actors, musicians, and other entertainers, racecar drivers often chose to stick with these self-created or bestowed monikers throughout their racing careers.

First and second generation Americans participated in sports, such as automobile racing, in order to achieve greater social acceptance within their communities.\(^{234}\) New Jersey native Bob Sall attracted the respect of the racing community after he won races at several area tracks, including Woodbridge (NJ), Ho-Ho-Kus Speedways (NJ), Hughesville (PA), Rhinebeck (NY), and Hamburg (NY), during the 1932 racing season. His ethnic and religious background as an Italian Jew had no major impact on his racing career. By the following spring, a local reporter viewed Sall as a “great figure in Jersey racing” and told fans that the “Italian-Jewish petrol prince” would be hard to beat at the Reading season opener.\(^{235}\) Sall remained extremely popular among New Jersey race fans who travelled throughout the region in order to watch him compete.\(^{236}\) Sall’s fan club respected his natural talent as a racecar driver and mechanic, and his ethnic identity as a Jewish immigrant was inconsequential to his admiring fans.

Promoters and announcers, however, consistently highlighted ethnic differences among drivers to attract added interest and publicity for their racing


\(^{235}\) “Bob Sall to Speed at Sunday’s Races,” *Reading Times*, April 29, 1933, 20.

\(^{236}\) Sports reporters noted Sall’s large fan following during the 1930s, see: “Bob Sall Will Race Against Great Field,” *Bristol Daily Courier*, July 20, 1938, 4; and “Bob Sall Will Race at Reading,” *Mount Carmel Item*, April 18, 1939, 4.
events. While there was a growing acceptance of Jewish athletes during the interwar period, the limited participation of Jewish Americans in activities such as auto racing, swimming, and bowling continued to draw outside attention.237 Mauri Rose was a talented racecar driver, but promoters often reminded race fans that Rose was one of the nation’s only Jewish drivers.238 A 1930 newspaper advertisement informed local residents of Dawson, Pennsylvania that four nationally known drivers, Bob Carey, Mauri Rose, Carl Keppler, and Bill Cummings, would be participating in the 100-mile race at their local fairgrounds. Rose’s image was the only photo to include a caption informing readers that Rose was “Jewry’s Only Racing King.”239 The rising careers of Jewish drivers, such as Bob Sall, did not deter promoters or spectators from continuing to emphasize Rose’s Jewish heritage throughout the remainder of his racing career.

Drivers generally accepted the theatrical elements of the sport actively taking on the nicknames and identities bestowed on them by savvy announcers and publicity men in their pursuit of fame and fortune on the speedway. The auto racing fraternity’s definition of whiteness remained malleable during the interwar period, and racing


insiders accepted first and second generation immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe into the racing fold. As long as racecar drivers proved their merits on the speedway, the ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, and socioeconomic status of white men did not serve as impediments to their racing careers.

**African American Racing Organizations**

Social inclusion at the speedway did have its limits, and racing insiders excluded men of color from participating on the speedway and in the pit area.\(^{240}\) Racing was one of several consumer amusements that denied African Americans full access and participation during the interwar period.\(^{241}\) Skin color determined the level of participation a racing enthusiast could have within motorsports. Several racing


facilities designated specific “colored only” sections of their grandstands for African American spectators.\textsuperscript{242} White officials regularly turned away black drivers who attempted to register for racing events in their local communities.\textsuperscript{243} African Americans who had the technical aptitude to construct and drive their own cars were consistently denied the opportunity to compete against white drivers.

Technically-inclined African Americans developed several strategies to push for greater inclusion and acceptance within interwar motorsports. Some aspiring black race drivers and mechanics worked to subvert the color line in dirt track automobile racing by hiding their true racial identities at the speedway. Drivers pretended to be white, Spanish, or Native American in order to participate in segregated racing events held throughout the United States.\textsuperscript{244} African American racecar driver Bobby Lee Wallace worked as a chauffeur and also drove an ambulance for the Indianapolis Fire Department before getting involved in the local racing scene. Wallace participated in


\textsuperscript{244} Professional baseball scouts used similar tactics to circumvent the de facto ban on African American plays and worked to get black players into the major leagues by claiming they were white, Cuban, or Native American, see: Neil Lancotot, “A General Understanding” Organized Baseball and Black Professional Baseball, 1900-1930,” in \textit{Sports and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America} ed. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004): 63-79.
AAA races as a pit crew member and riding mechanic for top Indianapolis drivers, such as Deacon Litz and Louis Chevrolet. Racing officials identified Wallace as white due to his light complexion, which allowed him to freely enter the pit area. A second African American driver, Dewey Gatson, registered under the false name of “Jack De Soto” at AAA racing events held throughout California during the 1930s. When officials directly questioned Gatson about his racial identity, he claimed to be of Portuguese decent. By hiding their racial backgrounds at the speedway, some determined African American men did successfully participate in segregated racing events across the United States. Black drivers who took part in segregated events took on great personal risks, if their African American heritage was discovered by white pit men or spectators.

Other African American racing enthusiasts openly challenged the overt racism at the nation’s speedways during the 1920s and 1930s by forming racing associations exclusively for black competitors. African American community activists and businessmen in Savannah, Birmingham, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Pittsburgh all

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worked to promote automobile races for African American participants. Harvey E. Johnson of the *Pittsburgh Courier* explained that these races were “an effort to give the young men of the group the opportunity to build and race cars of their own, since our boys are practically barred from all the big speed events throughout the country.” African American speedway associations succeeded in promoting technology-centered hobbies for African American men and brought together men from varied backgrounds who shared a common interest in motorsports.

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247 The earliest documented automobile race for black drivers took place in Birmingham, Alabama on July 4, 1919. During 1921-1922, African American residents of Savannah, Georgia formed the Negro Men’s Racing League and hosted a series of at least eight different racing events for black automobile drivers and motorcyclists at the local fairgrounds. Racing organizations formed in Indianapolis and Chicago, and they hosted their first races in 1924. For races taking place in the South, see: “Negroes Speed Demons State Auto Races,” *Savannah Tribune*, July 12, 1919, 2; “Negro Auto Races,” *Savannah Tribune*, June 11, 1921, 4; “The Auto Races,” *Savannah Tribune*, July 9, 1921, 4; “Dick Neely Wins Auto Races,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 1, 1921, 1; “Auto Races Monday Afternoon,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 22, 1921, 6. Racing taking place in Indianapolis and Chicago are widely discussed in the *Chicago Defender*, see: Alvin D. Smith, “Drivers Are Headed For Indianapolis,” July 26, 1924, 9; Alvin D. Smith, “Malcolm Hannon Winner in Big Auto Derby,” August 9, 1924, 10; “Change 100-Mile Derby to 100-Miles of Auto Racing,” August 30, 1924, 10; and Frank A. Young, “2 Killed in Chicago Auto Race: Driver and Spectator Who Ran Across Track Dead From Collision,” September 20, 1924, 1.


249 In his discussion of African American athletics and leisure in Pittsburgh, Rob Ruck argues that sports allowed Pittsburgh-born residents and more recent black migrants from the south to overcome their economic and regional differences during the 1920s. See, “Sport and Black Pittsburgh, 1900-1930,” in *Sports and the Color Line*, 21.
The participation of African American men in automobile racing resulted in an early push for integrated consumer leisure venues within the United States. African American racing associations rented existing dirt ovals – traditionally identified as white leisure spaces - to host races for black drivers. They raced in the same cars as local white competitors. By setting nearly identical speed records and lap times during racing events, African American drivers proved that their abilities behind the wheel of technically-complex racecars were equal to that of their white peers. By holding their own racing contests, African Americans also demonstrated their consumer power. Wealthy black car owners regularly drove their passenger automobiles to African American racing events as an additional visual reminder of the technical competency and accomplishments of African American community members.

Americans recognized Indianapolis, Indiana as the epicenter of American motorsports, and the city also became the heart of the African American racing circuit. African American and white residents of Indianapolis formed the Indianapolis Colored Speedway Association in 1924. From 1924-1936, the Indianapolis Colored Speedway Association sponsored a 100-mile race for black drivers at the half-mile dirt track located at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis. Known as the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes, this annual race became the premier racing event for African American participants.250 The fast speeds and competitive racing of African American drivers

attracted the attention of Indianapolis’ white racing fraternity, and white residents regularly attended the Gold and Glory race to watch the African American aces compete. The Gold and Glory Sweepstakes succeeded in bringing together white and black Indianans who shared a passion for motorsports and helped to breakdown racial stereotypes about the technical abilities of African American men.

Figure 9

Figure 9 Founding members of the Indianapolis Colored Speedway Association, ca. 1924 (Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society)

In order to achieve full integration at America’s speedways, African Americans believed that they first had to demonstrate their abilities as both daring drivers and competent mechanics. Popular African American driver, Charlie Wiggins, told the *Chicago Whip*, “We have the desire and skill to compete with the nation’s best. The AAA folks just don’t want to see that. That’s why we must work to prove our ability within our own ranks, so that we can show the rest of the world we belong.”

Founding member of Chicago’s Afro-American Automobile Association, Lucius A. Headen agreed that black drivers could break the color line in racing by distinguishing themselves on the African American racing circuit. An avid technophile, Headen was one of the first African Americans to receive his pilot’s license, and he also manufactured his own line of automobiles during the early 1920s. Headen argued that black men could gain the respect of white drivers “once you are able to convince people that you know your business.”

African American racing enthusiasts advocated for a gradual integration of motorsports. They hoped


254 Headen claimed to have worked as a mechanic for Barney Oldfield. See, “Negro-Built and Foreign Autos to Be Featured in Election Day Auto Races,” *New York Age*, October 25, 1924, 6.
white racing associations would eventually recognize the talent of black drivers and chose to integrate their organizations.

African Americans used their active participation in automobile racing to promote racial collaboration and acceptance throughout the interwar period. In 1924, a Chicago-based racing organization hosted one of the first races held for African American participants on the east coast. They promoted a race at Ho Ho Kus Speedway located in Ridgewood, New Jersey. From a promotional standpoint, the speed contest was less than optimal. Dust quickly consumed the track during qualifying resulting in a serious accident that delayed the racing action and necessitated a shortened feature race due to encroaching darkness. The local black press, however, celebrated the speed contest as a victory for regional race relations. Black organizers prided themselves that, “There were no razor fights, no intoxication, no profanity nor the slightest signs of boisterous behavior” during the racing event.\textsuperscript{255} Organizer were also pleased by the positive response that the race received from white community members. Unfortunately, eastern aces only had one other opportunity to participate in auto races at Ho-Ho-Kus Speedway. African American drivers living in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey had to haul their cars further

\textsuperscript{255} The $2.20 admission fee - equating to roughly $30 today - probably prevented working class African Americans from attending the race. See, “Plan Eastern Auto Races on Election Day in Jersey,” \textit{Pittsburgh Courier}, October 18, 1924, 12. Inflation of American currency from 1924 to 2014 calculated at \url{http://www.westegg.com/inflation}. 

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west in order to participate in racing events throughout the rest of the interwar period.256

As a result of their shared interest in speed sports, some black and white racecar drivers did create strong friendships and collaborate over racecar technology. White driver, George Beck, hired African American, William Carson, to serve as his mechanic and warm up driver during the early 1920s. When the Indianapolis Colored Speedway Association formed, Beck allowed Carson to compete in his racecar and accompanied Carson to the track to help him prepare for the event.257 Beck sometimes participated in biracial match races against top African American drivers during the Colored Speedway Association’s events. The willingness of some white members of the racing fraternity, such as George Beck, to race black drivers and work side by side African American technophiles demonstrated national potential for integrated motorsports.

256 Black racecar drivers did have at least one other opportunity to participate in races hosted in the Mid-Atlantic region. In August 1931, the Elks hosted a national convention in Philadelphia and promoted an auto race for black drivers at Langhorne Speedway located between Philadelphia and Trenton, New Jersey. The race attracted stars from Western Pennsylvania as well as Indianapolis, including Bill Jeffries, Bill Carson, Quinn Banks, and Toots Washington. See, “Interest High In Auto Races Aug. 26,” Pittsburgh Courier, August 1, 1931, 15; “Ace Auto Drivers to Vie,” Pittsburgh Courier, August 15, 1931, 14; and “Drivers Tune Motors For Elk Derby,” Pittsburgh Courier, August 22, 1931, 12.

Some African American racing enthusiasts directly challenged their limited access to the nation’s speedways by hosting integrated speed contests during the late 1920s. An African American racing organization, the Tri-State Amusement Company, promoted a series of races open to both black and white competitors at Arden Downs Speedway located near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In order to attract white drivers, the Tri-State Amusement Company partnered with the American Automobile Racing Association, which approved and recorded new speed records set at speedways throughout the state. “The fact that this is the first time in local racing history that an all-colored group are promoting a mixed race, and that the event is sanctioned by the American Automobile Racing Association is significant,” exclaimed the Pittsburgh Courier.258 For the first time, African American drivers had the opportunity to have their track times documented in racing record books alongside the lap speeds of well-known, local white racecar drivers. Similar to other black racing associations, the Tri-State Amusement Company wanted to prove the technical abilities of African Americans, but they advocated for immediate interracial competitions and were not willing to wait for a gradual integration into the white racing fraternity.

The integrated speed contests hosted at Arden Downs provided black men with an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities as competent technophiles. African Americans living in Pittsburgh during this period faced daily incidents of humiliation

and abuse at a wide range of segregated public and private recreational facilities located in and around the Steel City.259 In the weeks prior to the first biracial competition at Arden Downs, members of the black press assured Pittsburgh’s African American community that, “they need have no fear of our colored drivers not making a creditable showing against the nationally known white drivers,” and these journalist remained confident that black drivers would “uphold the honor of the race.”260

Spectators who turned out to see the 1928 Labor Day races watched more than forty black and white drivers compete side by side on the Arden Downs dirt track. Local African American undertaker, Quinn Banks, took an early lead before he crashed into the fence allowing white driver, Tony Boyle, to win the contest. Even though Banks failed to win the race, members of the black press considered the race a success and praised the driving skills of Banks and the other African American participants.

Chester L. Washington commented in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, “Competent colored

259 Facing de facto segregation in public recreational facilities, African American children in Pittsburgh were often forced to play on the streets or in abandon lots. A YMCA was constructed on Centre Avenue across the street from the *Pittsburgh Courier* offices in 1923, and this YMCA became the primary recreational facility for black residents of the city. See, Rob Ruck, “Sport and Black Pittsburgh, 1900-1930,” in *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004).

drivers matched their wits, skill and courage against autoists of the other group and the comparison was favorable.” 261 African American and white drivers competed in at least one more racing contest at Arden Downs throughout the 1929 season. The biracial speed competitions at Arden Downs, however, were short lived, and there is no record of similar races held at Arden Downs after the 1929 racing season. 262

African American racing associations made positive advancements towards the integration of American motorsports, but they could not withstand the economic turmoil caused by the Great Depression. The nation’s black racing organizations all closed their doors by the mid-1930s due to low car counts, poor promotion, and dwindling spectator attendance. 263 As members of the African American community focused on keeping their families and businesses financially solvent during the Depression, few African Americans had the time or the capital to organize entertainment features, such as automobile races, for black technophiles.


262 “Automobile Races at Arden Downs July 4th” The Daily Note (Canonsburg, Pennsylvania), June 17, 1929, 7.

263 According to Fay Young, the 1937 Gold and Glory Sweepstakes race did not take place due to a disagreement between drivers and promoters over the purse. Drivers refused to race when they learned that the prize money was not on the speedway grounds and demanded to see the pay off before they would compete. An agreement could not be reached between the two sides, and spectators stormed the office demanding their money back after the race was discontinued. See, Fay Young, “The Stuff Is Here….: Past, Present, Future,” Chicago Defender, August, 6, 1938, 9.
The impact that African American racing organizations made on the white racing fraternity during the 1920s and 1930s varied due to geographic location and local community support. While men formed integrated organizations to promote and participate in grassroots level racing, the nation’s leading racing organizations, such as AAA, continued to enforce their policies of racial exclusion. Charlie Wiggins was one of the handful of African American drivers who regularly interacted with leading drivers on the AAA circuit. A talented mechanic, Wiggins owned his own garage in Indianapolis where he fixed passenger cars and constructed racecars on the side.

Wiggins made several technical innovations to his racecar designs that attracted the attention of members of Indianapolis’ white racing community. Indy drivers would bring their cars to Wiggins’ garage for repairs and advice. Top Indianapolis drivers, such as 1934 Indianapolis 500 winner, Bill Cummings, formed close relationships with Wiggins, but these influential friends could or would not sway the racial policies at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Wiggins was forced to pose as a janitor to gain access to the garage area at Indianapolis. He would secretly work on his buddies’ racecars at night when all other pit members had left the track. On race day, Wiggins had to watch the cars he had helped prepare from his seat in the grandstands.

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264 Todd Gould’s biography on Charlie Wiggins provides the most complete history of the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes and African American racing associations during the interwar period. See Gould’s chapter on “Charlie’s Gang” in For Gold and Glory to learn more about Wiggins’ relationship with white racing enthusiasts, 105-130.

265 Gould, For Gold and Glory, 121-123.
Wiggins’ never received public acclaim or credit for his participation in helping some of the nation’s leading drivers reach victory lane.

The American Automobile Association’s Contest Board constructed an idea of whiteness that excluded African Americans, while allowing men from several other backgrounds into the pit area ranks. Promoters at Indianapolis Motor Speedway admitted Japanese American, Takeo “Tak” Hirashima, as a riding mechanic during the Indianapolis 500 race. The California native started his career as a riding mechanic for Kelly Petillo at Ascot Speedway in Los Angeles. In 1935, the twenty-three year old made his first trip to the Midwest as the riding mechanic for Rex Mays. Hirashima told the press that his parents “were concerned about Indianapolis and thought maybe I’d be the victim of race prejudice since I’m the only Japanese in the crowd,” but he said their fears were unwarranted claiming, “nobody has tried to razz’ me yet and I don’t think the fellows here will.”

As an established crew member for some of the nation’s top speedsters, Hirashima gained entrance and acceptance into Indianapolis’ famed Gasoline Alley pit area. His participation within the dirt track racing fraternity was interrupted by World War II, and Hirashima was one of thousands of Japanese Americans who were forced to relocate to internment camps during the war.


267 In a letter written to the National Speed Sport News, John Baba informed the racing fraternity that Tak Hirashima had been evacuated to Manzanar Relocation Center and had enlisted in the military. See, “Readers Say,” National Speed Sport News, August 1943, 7. See also, “Takeo Hirashima,” in the Japanese-American
officials continued to define the racial boundaries for participation within their ranks, and they accepted men from various ethnic backgrounds while continuously excluding African Americans.

While de facto segregation continued at speedways throughout the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic, some West Coast promoters did begin to allow African American drivers to compete directly against their white contemporaries during the 1930s. Dewey Gatson raced in open wheel and stock car races held for white drivers up and down the California coast by the late 1930s. He captured racing victories in San Diego, Los Angeles, San Jose, Oakland, and Fresno participating in speed contests hosted by regional racing groups. California gear heads recognized Gatson’s skills as a both a driver and mechanic and accepted him as a member of the local auto racing fraternity. He earned his nickname, “Rajo Jack,” for being one of the top salesman of Rajo Motors and racing supplies on the West Coast. Rajo’s success worked to challenge white stereotypes about black mechanical and driving abilities. Due to the fraternal structure of initiation that remained firmly entrenched within the sport, few


other African American technophiles succeeded in breaking into motorsports throughout the next several decades.\textsuperscript{270}

Racing promoters continued to use drivers’ racial identity as an effective marketing ploy to increase their tickets sales at the speedway altering the racial parameters for pit area participation when it was financially advantageous. Promoters recognized that Americans from several different ethnic backgrounds enjoyed motorsports. In an attempt to expand their spectator demographic, promoters of White Sox Stadium in Los Angeles hosted a speed contest for three men of color in 1936.\textsuperscript{271} Spectators of several different ethnic backgrounds packed the grandstands to watch African American ace, Dewey Gatson (Rajo Jack), take on Japanese driver, Oolie Sey Sugie, and Hispanic racer, Celso Gomez. This highly publicized “international” race was won by Celso Gomez.\textsuperscript{272} African American movie stars and entertainers attended the event and sponsored additional dash races for black racecar drivers. Spectators were treated to an extra thrill when movie star, Bill Robinson, challenged fellow actor

\textsuperscript{270} For histories of other African American drivers and their pioneering racing careers during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, see: Patrick Sullivan, \textit{Brick by Brick: The Story of Auto Racing Pioneer Joie Ray} (American Scene Press, 2008) and Leonard T. Miller, \textit{Racing While Black: How an African-American Stock Car Team Made Its Mark on NASCAR} (Seven Stories Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{271} White Sox Stadium was a former Negro League Baseball stadium that had been converted into a midget racetrack, see: “California Stages Midget Auto Derby February 2\textsuperscript{nd}” \textit{Chicago Defender}, February 1, 1936, 14.

Clarence Muse to a match race to determine which man was the superior driver. Muse won the race and the $50 side bet, and both men further entertained race attendees by performing a dance on the front stretch between races.\textsuperscript{273} Events such as this one provided minority men with an opportunity to participate in organized sporting events, but they made a spectacle of drivers’ racial identities emphasizing racial difference as one of the many facets of entertainment offered during these speed competitions.

Promoters continued to blur racial lines whenever it was economically advantageous during the 1930s and 1940s. Born in Texas to Caucasian parents, George “Joie” Chitwood began racing in 1934. At the bequest of Norman Witte of the Central States Racing Association (CSRA), Chitwood willingly donned an American Indian headdress during the driver introductions at one of the early races of his career. Announcers introduced Chitwood as a member of the Cherokee tribe and a native of Pawhuska, Oklahoma. Witte succeeded in attracting curious spectators to his races by publicizing the growing success of a Native American driver on the CSRA circuit.\textsuperscript{274} Chitwood’s false ethnic identity took on a life of its own in the press. Journalists further publicized and romanticized Chitwood’s Native American heritage. One

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reporter referred to Chitwood as “Chief Wahoo” a “full-blooded Oklahoma Indian.”\textsuperscript{275} Journalists regularly used stereotypical identifiers and racial tropes when referencing Chitwood throughout the rest of his racing career. One newspaper article stated that Chitwood had “swapped the war bonnet of his ancestors for a crash helmet and discarded a horse in favor of a high-powered Offenhauser [engine].”\textsuperscript{276} When announcers, reporters, and fans referenced his Native American heritage, Chitwood failed to explain that he was neither an Oklahoman nor an American Indian. By the late 1930s, spectators who watched Chitwood fully believed that the talented driver was Native American. Chitwood continued to perfect his showmanship throughout the postwar period, and he supervised a successful traveling group of automobile stuntmen called the “Hell Drivers” who performed on the fairgrounds circuit. While men from a variety of ethnic backgrounds were trying to shield their identities in order to participate in the sport, Chitwood did the reverse, and he took on an ethnic persona in order to advance his racing career.

\textbf{Women & Wheels}

Racing insiders sometimes overlooked racial differences at the speedway when men of color demonstrated a high level of mechanical mastery and technical skill. Gender, however, served as an impermeable boundary for much of the twentieth

\textsuperscript{275} “Chitwood Favored In Saturday Auto Race,” \textit{Indiana Gazette}, May 24, 1939, 7.

\textsuperscript{276} “Chitwood among Auto Drivers at Lebanon,” \textit{Evening News}, June 24, 1939, 9.
century. Female racing enthusiasts continuously struggled to gain acceptance among the close-knit fraternity of male racecar drivers, promoters, and officials. Racing insiders viewed the speedway and the pit area as a male domain and formally banned female admission to the pit area at tracks, such as Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Several male racing enthusiasts shared the sentiments of reporter, Claude Wolff, who expressed in 1929 that the Indianapolis 500 would lose “its identity” the minute women were allowed into the machine-centric pit area. Ideas that the presence of women inside the preparation area at a speedway was not only unwelcome but bad luck further encouraged promoters from across the nation to restrict female entry at every level of the sport.

Members of the racing fraternity used contemporary gender stereotypes of the period to argue that women, as members “of the fair and supposedly highly nervous sex,” were incapable of handling the stressful environment of the speedway. The press consistently highlighted how women, especially racecar drivers’ wives, were unable to control their emotions during racing events. When Norman Batten


279 The arguments used against female racecar drivers were identical to that of female motorists, see Georgine Clarsen, Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) and Virginia Scharff, Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).
crashed through the fence during a 1925 race at the New York State Fair, newspaper reporters emphasized that, “Mrs. Batten, sitting in the grandstand, fainted when she saw the accident and was carried from the scene.” Reporters celebrated the ability of racecar drivers to remain calm in the face of danger, while sensationalizing the details of their accidents and the emotional outbursts of their wives at the track. One reporter explained: “These spectacular fellows receive real thrills in payment for the risks they take, but the wives they leave behind… are left with little to do except watch and wait in fear.” American racing enthusiasts continuously used conventional gender stereotypes to justify their bans on female participation within the pit area and argued that women could not handle the psychological pressures and physical strains of competitive motorsports.

While they were determined to keep women off the track and out of the pits, racing officials did allow women to serve as car owners. In most cases, female car

\[\text{280} \text{ “De Palma Wins Race: Norman Batten Hurt,” Altoona Tribune, September 21, 1925, 8.}\]

\[\text{281} \text{ “Keech killed, Woodbury Is Hurt in Crash,” Altoona Tribune, June 17, 1929, 1.}\]

\[\text{282} \text{ “Give a thought to Dare-Devil Wives,” Ogden Standard-Examiner, April 27, 1928, 4.}\]

\[\text{283} \text{ Europeans had moved towards greater acceptance of female involvement in motorsports by the late 1920s. For more information about female automobile racers and their participation in European motorsports, see: Todd McCarthy, Fast Women: The Legendary Ladies of Racing (New York: Miramax Books, 2007).}\]
owners were also racing widows. As men met untimely deaths in automobile racing, widowed women took control over their husbands’ racecars as part of his estate. A racing widow, such as Helene Russo Winn, had to make the decision between liquidating her husband’s collection of tools, spare racing parts, and racecars upon his death or hiring a racecar driver to continue the family’s racing enterprises. AAA’s pit area ban meant that female car owners could not directly oversee their racing team from the pit area. Female car owners watched their cars compete from the grandstand. Because women remained excluded from all technical aspects of the sport, female car owners did not directly threaten the sense of fraternity within the pit area.

Racing widows who chose to assume the role of car owner generally gained the support of the racing community. Fraternity members felt an obligation to assist racing widows and their children who struggled financially after the death of their family patriarch. In November 1928, eight of the nation’s leading racecar drivers and several of their wives set sail for Buenos Aires in an attempt to organize a series of international dirt track races during their winter offseason. Nationally known racecar drivers Norman Batten and Earl Devore had survived several serious speedway accidents, but they perished onboard the Vestris when the ship sank in route to South America.284 Both of the drivers’ wives, however, survived the harrowing shipwreck.

Throughout the early months of the 1929 racing season, promoters hosted benefit races to raise money for the two widows and their families.\textsuperscript{285} Racecar drivers volunteered to pilot Norman Batten’s racecar on Marion Batten’s behalf at speedways including Indianapolis and Altoona.\textsuperscript{286} Mrs. Batten registered her car in several AAA races over the 1929 racing season.\textsuperscript{287} Members of the racing fraternity supported Mrs. Batten and other female car owners who continued their involvement in motorsports after the death of their husbands.

Other racing widows chose to discontinue their participation within the sport and sold their racecars and equipment to fellow racing enthusiasts. Ella Lockhart witnessed the death of her husband, Frank, during a 1928 land speed trial at Daytona Beach, Florida.\textsuperscript{288} Fellow driver, Tony Gulotta, offered to race one of Lockhart’s two racecars at the 1928 Indianapolis 500 and promised to share any prize money he earned with Mrs. Lockhart.\textsuperscript{289} Her experience as a car owner at the 1928 race did not

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\textsuperscript{285} “Drivers’ Wives Reach New York,” Altoona Tribune November 15, 1928, 1.
\textsuperscript{286} “Miller Special Brings Memories,” Harrisburg Telegraph May 17, 1929, 16.
\textsuperscript{287} “Miller Special Brings Memories;” “Three More on Altoona List,” Harrisburg Telegraph, June 5, 1929, 17; “Altoonan Driver,” Altoona Mirror, August 26, 1929, 12.
\textsuperscript{288} “Frank Lockhart Killed Trying For New Record,” Circleville Herald, April 25, 1928, 1.
convince Ella Lockhart to continue the business venture. She sold Frank’s two racecars as well as his racing equipment shortly after the Indianapolis 500. Racecar driver Louis Meyer purchased Lockhart’s primary Miller speedster appraised at a value of $3,000.290 A couple from Philadelphia, Edward and Maude Yagle, purchased Lockhart’s second Miller racecar as well as a variety of tools for an estimated $14,700.291 Over the next four years, the Yagles entered the Lockhart car in the annual Indianapolis classic as well as a series of other dirt races across the east coast with Maude Yagle as the car owner.

While women were taking on greater involvement behind the scenes on some race teams as car owners, racetrack officials and newspapermen continued to reinforce the gender barriers within the sport. Maude Yagle watched from the grandstands as her car driven by Ray Keech took the checkered flag at the 1929 Indianapolis 500. While the press had noted Yagle’s ownership of the Keech car in pre-race publicity, reporters focused on Keech’s average speed of 97 mph and his “steady, consistent and nervy driving” in their postrace coverage.292 The fact that a female car owner claimed


291 Morgan-Wu, 21. Also see the complete appendix of Lockhart’s estate inventory, 238–240.

292 The Yagles collected around $40,000 for Keech’s win at the 1929 Indianapolis 500. The payoff broke down to $20,000 for finishing first, $5,100 in lap money, and
the $40,000 in race day prizes did not make the newspaper headlines. Yagle may have actively participated in the subterfuge by consistently registering her car under her initials of “M.A. Yagle.” Whether they automatically assumed all car owners were male or actively worked to undermine Maude’s involvement with the car, multiple reporters used male pronouns to refer to M.A. Yagle and “his” racecar throughout this period. Ray Keech became an overnight sensation following the 1929 Indy 500, but his female car owner remained in relative obscurity.

The presence of female car owners, such as Maude Yagle, challenged contemporary claims that women were too emotional to withstand the high-level of risk involved in the sport. Maude Yagle regularly attended racing events from 1928 to 1932 to watch her car compete. She took an active role each race day “constantly clocking her car and keeping a complete, detailed record” of her car’s performance around $15,000 contributed by accessory manufacturers and other race sponsors. See, Charles W. Dunkley, “Ray Keech Wins Indianapolis Classic,” Altoona Tribune, May 31, 1929, 1.


from her seat in the grandstands. Mrs. Yagle watched Ray Keech crash to his death at Altoona, but she persevered and had the car rebuilt after Keech’s fatal accident. Maude continued on as car owner, attending races to watch a variety of drivers from her home state of Pennsylvania, including Zeke Meyer, Freddy Winnai, Jimmy Gleason and Frank Farmer, pilot her racecar.

Women enjoyed the adrenaline rush of the speedway and wanted to take an active role in the racing action despite insiders’ beliefs that they had no real place at the track. The wives of the nation’s top racecar drivers often attended their husband’s racing competitions and accompanied them to major racing events, such as the Indianapolis 500. By 1931, two other female car owners in addition to Yagle and Batten were registering cars in the Indianapolis 500. Mrs. Bessie Decker of Staten

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296 Maude Yagle also witnessed Jimmy Gleason’s serious accident in New York in September 1929. Her ownership of the car seems to have ended shortly after Frank Farmer’s fatal accident at Woodbridge, New Jersey in 1932. See, “Mrs. Yagle’s Racing Car Again Wrecked,” Shamokin News-Dispatch, September 23, 1929, 1 and “Frank Farmer and Neapolitan Killed in Auto Race Crash,” Reading Times, August 29, 1932, 10.


298 Maude Yagle and two other female car owners had entries for the 1931 Indianapolis 500. Bessie Decker of Long Island entered a car driven by her husband, Cliff Decker. Indianapolis native Anna De Baise also had a race entry driven by F.W. Sparks. See, John Carroll, “Sports in Shorts,” Logansport Pharos-Tribune, May 1, 1931, 8.
Island served as car owner for her husband Cliff’s racecar. Decker also took a mechanical interest in the sport helping her husband work on their racecar between races.299 Other wives also served as informal pit crew members for their husbands. June Meyer, wife of Indianapolis 500 winner Louis Meyer, worked side by side her husband in their garage tearing down engines, renting out batteries, and hand-building pieces for her Louis’ racecar.300 Through their familial connections to men who were accepted into the racing fraternity, some female racing enthusiasts did succeed in taking a more active role in the sport.

Conclusion

A racecar driver’s sex and skin color remained defining factors for acceptance within the auto racing fraternity. Men without previous familial connections to the sport gained acceptance among their fellow racing enthusiasts through a process of mentorship with racing veterans. Newcomers proved their abilities by deftly handling a racecar, demonstrating bravery in the face of danger, and mastering the unspoken technical rules that governed the sport. Initial reservations due to a driver’s ethnic or socio-economic background could be overcome, if veterans believed a rookie had the abilities and personality to become a star. Those novices who showed potential talent

299 “Three Women Own Race Cars,” Kokomo Tribune, May 7, 1931, 10.

caught the attention of veteran drivers and mechanics who offered newcomers advice and pointers to help their racing careers flourish.

By regularly going to races and following their favorite stars in the press, African American racing enthusiasts and white female fans became as well-versed in the rules and traditions that governed the sport as their white male peers. White men, however, utilized several aspects of the pit area culture to act as gatekeepers over the sport, and racing insiders consistently worked to exclude women and black men from direct participation within the sport. African Americans challenged their exclusion from the speedway by hosting their own racing events for black drivers throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Female racing enthusiasts took on secondary roles at the speedway serving as car owners, speedway staff members, or simply as race day spectators.

Racing enthusiasts were relatively unsuccessful in pushing the boundaries of inclusion within the sport until World War II. Wartime restrictions forced racing insiders to defend the positive benefits of motorsports. As racing enthusiasts travelled around the globe during the war, men and women continued to bond over dirt track motorsports, and insiders began to expand their definition of the “racing fraternity” to include spectators as well as participants.
Chapter 4

A RIGHT TO RACE: THE WORLD WAR II AUTO RACING BAN

In the days immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, racecar driver Ted Horn met with multiple recruiting officers hoping to join the US military. Horn’s attempts to enlist were unsuccessful. The US military declared the dirt track star physically unfit for military service, due to the series of physical injuries he had sustained from his racing career. Horn worked to hide his disappointment after his rejection from the armed forces by focusing his attention on the coming racing season. In January 1942, he claimed to have about $25,000 invested in his five car racing team. He believed he had enough tires, fuel, and spare parts on hand to continue racing for two to three more seasons. Horn was shocked when the federal government issued a national ban on motorsports halfway through the 1942 racing season. While packing away his racing gear, he scrambled to find a new source of steady income for the remainder of the war. Through his racing connections, Horn secured a sub-contract to make parts for the aviation industry at his Paterson, New Jersey racing garage.


Racing periodicals reported that Horn worked over 70 hours each week to fulfill his war contracts and spent his free time designing new parts for his racecars.304

The crisis of World War II challenged Americans to articulate the benefits of consumer leisure activities. People had varying opinions in regards to the wartime continuation of motorsports. Grassroots participants and spectators felt that racing had an integral role to play in the war effort, and they argued that racing should continue as a technical testing ground as well as civilian morale booster throughout the war. AAA officials and other prominent figures within the sport disagreed. They stressed that the technical expertise of racecar drivers and mechanics was directly needed in defense plants and on the front lines. Outsiders failed to distinguish motorsports from motor cars, and members of the public felt that racers should face the same rationing restrictions as consumer motorists.305 Ultimately, the federal government intervened implementing a national ban on all motor racing activities due to wartime shortages of rubber and gasoline.

The racing ban from July 1942 to August 1945 forced racing insiders to devise new ways to satisfy their passion for speed sports. Some men traded the adrenaline


rush of the speedway for the intensity of the front lines. Those who remained on the home front continued to make dirt track automobile racing an integral part of their daily lives. Race fans attended social functions hosted by members of their local racing communities, sent letters to fellow speed enthusiasts fighting overseas, and subscribed to racing periodicals. World War II solidified automobile racing as more than just a casual pastime but as an essential marker of identity for the men and women who patronized dirt track auto racing events.

The 1942 Debate over Automobile Racing

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, race fans pondered the future of motorsports in the United States. The Japanese had swiftly taken control over the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), including the plantations that supplied over ninety-five percent of the United States’ natural rubber. The Roosevelt administration initiated the first wartime


consumer rationing measure in January 1942 limiting the sale and consumption of rubber tires.\textsuperscript{308} The efforts of the Japanese to disrupt supply chains in the Pacific compounded with increasing German submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean. German submarines interfered with the ability of ocean tankers to supply the eastern United States with petroleum.\textsuperscript{309} Eastern automobile racers feared consumer tire rationing and growing concerns over gasoline consumption would interfere with the 1942 racing season, and they hoped that there would be enough available supplies to continue racing throughout the remainder of the war.

President Roosevelt publically expressed his encouragement for wartime recreation giving racers’ hope that motorsports would continue for the duration. During the early months of 1942, Roosevelt outlined his “Economic Bill of Rights” for the American people in a nine point declaration to Congress. Roosevelt argued that American citizens had the right to fair pay, free enterprise, education, and equality before the law. Roosevelt additionally quantified economic freedom in terms of “the right to rest, recreation and adventure, the opportunity to enjoy and take part in an advancing civilization.”\textsuperscript{310} Longer shifts at defense plants, Roosevelt argued, 


necessitated opportunities for Americans to take part in “recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before.” Automobile racing promoters and participants widely supported the President’s directives as justification for the continuation of motor racing events throughout the war.

Racing insiders argued that they were making a vital contribution to the war effort by providing entertainment to lift American morale. Watching racecar drivers zoom around their local dirt ovals provided war workers with a chance to relax and blow off steam after long shifts at the defense factory. Chairman of the AAA Contest Board, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker discussed the importance of sports with reporters in early February 1942. The celebrated racecar driver and fighter pilot recalled the anxiety and fatigue Americans had experienced during World War I. Rickenbacker argued that men and women needed constructive outlets for built up stress. He celebrated sports as the ideal tonic for the overworked American stating, “When the spectators leave their favorite sports at the conclusion of the program they are relaxed, and if their particular favorite has won they are very happy about it.” After attending an automobile racing event, Rickenbacker argued that Americans were

311 Rosenman, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 62.

“fresh for the daily grind” and ready to devote their full energy to their war work.\textsuperscript{313} Rickenbacker and other proponents of wartime sports believed that recreation helped to boost the mental health of defense workers and ensured a maximum output from civilians working on the home front.

Rickenbacker and other leading racing insiders became increasingly divided over the role racecar drivers and mechanics should take in the war effort throughout the winter of 1942. The nation’s leading promoters felt that the mechanical knowledge, time, and supplies men were putting into their racing teams should be directly applied towards defeating America’s enemies abroad.\textsuperscript{314} Officials at Indianapolis Motor Speedway were the first to take action, and they suspended the Indianapolis 500 for the duration of the war.\textsuperscript{315} The executive committee of the American Automobile Association’s Contest Board quickly followed suit reaching the unanimous decision to immediately halt all their racing activities in the United States.\textsuperscript{316} The American Automobile Association claimed they were adhering to “the

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Government admonition to use rubber only for essential purposes.”\textsuperscript{317} Rickenbacker and other AAA officials believed that racing helped civilian morale, but they feared a public relations backlash, if motorsports continued during wartime rationing. AAA encouraged “all elements of the automobile racing sport to subscribe whole-heartedly” to the self-imposed racing ban and focus their mechanical skill sets on defense work.\textsuperscript{318} AAA Contest Board officials acted as intermediaries between several branches of the U.S. military and the racing fraternity to inform and assist competent drivers and mechanics on how to find work as aviation mechanics and factory inspectors.\textsuperscript{319} They directed the talented technophiles of the pit area on how “to find the job where your qualifications are needed and where your individual help will be most effective.”\textsuperscript{320} The racing establishment argued that the nation’s top racecar drivers were directly needed on the front lines and the factory floor.

Promoters and participants at the grassroots level of the sport failed to see the necessity for a self-imposed racing ban, and they pressed for the continuation of


\textsuperscript{320} Allen, “How to Assist in Defense Program,” 3.
motorsports. Drivers and mechanics believed that they could make significant discoveries to automotive technology through racing that would help the Americans win the war. Drivers and mechanics prided themselves on a long history of innovation in the fields of consumer automobile and engine technology that was now central to the war effort. Racing insiders believed that decades of speedway innovation and testing had already contributed significantly to advancements in transportation technology. Mr. Von Hambach, a trained engineer and racing official argued, “Aircraft engines are only as successful as they are today because the super-charger or blower which provides their tremendous horsepower, was proven on the racing tracks.”

In addition to the supercharger, race fans traced the origins of front wheel drive, four wheel drive, front wheel brakes, and the rear view mirror to innovations pioneered in speedway garages and pit areas. Without men who had given their lives to test out new technical innovations on the nation’s speedways, racing insiders claimed the United States “wouldn’t have the supremacy in the air, land and sea.” Enthusiasts directly credited the racing fraternity for several of the key technical advantages of the United States military’s wartime arsenal, and racecar drivers wanted to continue racing and contributing to technological innovations during the war.


Grassroots participants believed they could best assist the war effort by continuing to put their lives on the line to test new wartime technologies at their local speedways. Insiders believed that the racing community would achieve additional breakthroughs with synthetic rubber tires and substitute fuels, if they were allowed to continue to race. Promoter Ralph Hankinson voiced his opinion that testing synthetic rubber at local speedways would be “auto racing’s contribution to the emergency.”

Racing participants experimented with new materials during the early part of the 1942 racing season. Race drivers at Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania tested retreaded tires and new substitute fuels. Insiders argued that the continuation of testing and innovation at America’s racetracks would strengthen military technology and would be a key element towards an Allied victory.

Members of the racing fraternity emphasized fundraising at racing events as an equally important part of auto racing’s contribution to the war effort. During the early spring of 1942, racing associations showed their united support for the war effort by donating the proceeds from several racing events to nonprofit organizations, such as the Navy Relief Fund, the U.S.O., and the American Ambulance Corps.


of the subculture united in support of the war effort. Landlords waived the rental fee for their facilities, which allowed promoters to donate all profits from both admission fees and concession stands to nonprofit organizations. Employees agreed to officiate races without pay. Car owners and drivers additionally turned over their entire payoffs to military or aid organizations. The racing community also supported wartime fundraising efforts by encouraging racing attendees to purchase war bonds and make blood donations to the Red Cross. East coast racing ace, Joie Chitwood, even sported a new red, white, and blue paint job for the 1942 racing season. Chitwood had the phrase, “V for Victory: Buy More War Bonds,” painted across the entire side of his racecar. Some promoters paid car owners and drivers with war bonds instead of


cash to demonstrate the patriotism of their speedways. By helping to fundraise for the war, racing enthusiasts felt that they were making positive contributions to the Allied war effort.

America’s growing involvement in World War II had little impact on the start of the 1942 dirt track racing season. Promoters issued free admission to all men who came to the track in their Army or Navy uniforms, and military personnel who had never before attended auto racing events filled the grandstands of the speedways located near their military bases. Die-hard race fans also continued to patronize their local speedways in high numbers.

The American Automobile Association’s decision to exit automobile racing actually increased competition at eastern fairground dirt tracks. With the AAA Contest Board no longer sanctioning the nation’s top drivers and speedways, open competition existed on the nation’s dirt tracks for the first time in the history of American racing. Top AAA drivers who could previously only race in AAA sanctioned events now competed wherever they wanted to across the United States. Drivers from several


331 “All Drivers Are Eligible for Langhorne Auto Races,” Pottstown Mercury, April 30, 1942, 13; “Eight Events to Be Run On Reading Oval,” Shamokin News-Dispatch,
different racing organizations flocked to the east coast in 1942 to race in the highly lucrative races held at Langhorne, Reading, and Williams Grove Speedways. Race fans crowded their local tracks in a frenzy of excitement during the early months of the season to see how their local heroes would fair against nationally-known speed kings.\(^{332}\)

Not all Americans celebrated the continuation of motorsports, and a growing opposition movement openly chastised racing participants for using scarce wartime resources on frivolous entertainment.\(^{333}\) Critics felt that burning rubber and gas at area speedways directly conflicted with their own efforts to conserve dwindling supplies of both rubber and gasoline.\(^{334}\) Opponents reminded racecar drivers that American men were risking their lives on oil tankers in the Atlantic to transport petroleum to the eastern coast and admonished speedsters for wasting such preciously attained

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\(^{334}\) Fair board members of some communities, such as Kokomo, Indiana, outlawed all auto racing on their fairground speedways even before the national auto racing ban due to local protest over racers’ use of tires and gasoline. See, “Legion Fair Board Bans Auto Racing,” *Kokomo Tribune*, May 14, 1942, 19.
resources. Reporters for The Gazette and Daily published in York, Pennsylvania advocated for an end to racing in Central Pennsylvania as well as a national ban on the sport. One reporter stated that seeing racecar drivers “using up precious rubber and soon-to-be rationed gasoline” on area speedways was an example of “patriotic hypocrisy” not morale building. One month later, The Gazette and Daily again commented that roadside signs advertising racing events scheduled throughout May at Williams Grove Speedway in nearby Mechanicsburg “sort of makes one’s blood boil.” Criticism towards racing increased after the federal government announced that gasoline rationing would begin in seventeen east coast states on May 15, 1942.

Growing confusion and fear over eastern rationing caused locals to angrily point their fingers at racecar drivers and accuse speedsters of selfishly wasting rubber and gasoline for unproductive leisure.

In their attempts to defend the continuation of motorsports, racing enthusiasts articulated a growing belief in each American’s right to consumer leisure. Enthusiasts explained that race attendees did not often patronize other sports, such as baseball,


horse racing, or boxing.\textsuperscript{339} Therefore, racing advocates believed it was unfair to deny race fans, who worked at defense plants and bought war bonds, the right to their chosen medium of entertainment.\textsuperscript{340} Ohio race fan, Earl L. Clay explained, “We must not take away the things that each have enjoyed in the past. If a person likes baseball he must be able to see his favorite pastime when he has the opportunity. If one likes racing they must be given the right to see races when and where he desires.”\textsuperscript{341} Clay and others expressed their frustration towards the public backlash on auto racing, since similar opposition was not raised towards other sports. Racing reporter Bill Tuthill explained, “Regardless of whether sports are a necessity in wartime or not, the main point is that they should all be treated alike.”\textsuperscript{342} Technical experts insisted that racecars used less than one gallon of fuel during an automobile race.\textsuperscript{343} Auto racers complained that other groups of American hobbyists wasted larger amounts of

\textsuperscript{339} Whitney Martin, “Memorial Day Race Fans to Be Thumb-Twiddlers This Year,” \textit{Altoona Tribune}, May 30, 1942, 9.

\textsuperscript{340} Bill Tuthill wrote several columns in the \textit{National Auto Racing News} advocating for the equal treatment of all American sports during the war, see: April 16, 1942, 6; April 23, 1942, 7; and July 23, 1942.


gasoline transporting teams hundreds of miles by bus to participate in baseball and football games.\textsuperscript{344} If the federal government planned to curtail automobile racing, than racing enthusiasts wanted similar bans on all other consumer leisure activities.

The general public also demonstrated a lack of understanding about motorsports that baffled racing insiders. Members of the racing community wondered if reporters were serious or only joking when they offered absurd comments about the role racecar drivers should take within the war effort. Racing reporters scratched their heads when a Chicago sports editor suggested that racecars should be used to transport defense workers to and from their factory jobs.\textsuperscript{345} Beyond the fact that the open cockpit, single seater racecars would look ridiculous in daily traffic, these racecars did not have automatic ignitions and would need to be push started by another vehicle at each red light or stop sign along their commute. Racing enthusiasts expressed their frustration that the general public continued to conflate racecars with passenger vehicles.

American automobile culture had greatly expanded over the previous decades to become a staple of American life, and people struggled to adjust to wartime restrictions to their personal mobility. Men and women, who avidly supported wartime rationing campaigns, expressed resistance to government restrictions on passenger

\textsuperscript{344} Bill Tuthill, “King Tut’s Topics,” \textit{National Auto Racing News}, April 16, 1942, 6 and April 23, 1942, 7.

When the federal government’s “gasoline limitation orders” were about to go into effect in May 1942, the New York Times referred to the curtailment of driving along the Eastern seaboard as “the greatest program of patriotic self-denial of their accustomed rights and privileges that this nation probably ever has placed before its civilian population.” People had grown accustomed to unlimited automobile travel and resented the impact that national gasoline rationing would have on their daily routines and activities.

Americans increasingly articulated a definition of freedom centered on the right to personal mobility. East coast residents openly contested their gasoline rationing designations and worked to receive supplemental gas tickets for additional


weekly mileage. The amounts of gasoline each person needed varied by occupation and location making the rationing of fuel harder to regulate than other consumer products, such as food, where each citizen received an identical share of the product.\footnote{Fair Play in Rationing,” New York Times, May 9, 1942, 12.} In a letter to the New York Times, Carlton Wells of Ann Arbor, Michigan claimed, “Americans who would instantly resent the slightest slur on their patriotism are behaving like pampered children when it comes to gas rationing.”\footnote{Carlton F. Wells, “Self-Interested Patriotism,” New York Times, November 30, 1942, 22.} Motorists, including automobile racing supporters, jealously critiqued their neighbors’ auto excursions as “unnecessary,” while defining their own daily car trips as “essential” to their lifestyle and war time morale. In a national poll conducted by the Office of Facts and Figures shortly after the gasoline limitation orders went into effect, 73% of Americans said they had not changed their driving habits as a result of the rationing order.\footnote{Letter from Donald Rugg to Hadley Cantril, “Data from AIPO Surveys on Tire Situation and Gasoline Rationing, 1942,” Price Control-Shortages, Rationing Folder, Box 8, Records of the Office of Facts and Figures, Subject Files, P-R, Records of the Office of War Information, Record Group 208, National Archives, College Park.} The federal government remained unsuccessful in eliminating black market
sales of gasoline throughout the war. Americans willingly took illegal measures to ensure they had sufficient fuel for their daily travel needs.352

By allotting only three-gallons of gasoline to each east coast driver under the gasoline limitation orders, the federal government forced Americans to alter their consumer leisure patterns and pleasure driving habits during the war. People began to patronize leisure events located near their homes and accessible by public transportation. Over fifty colleges throughout the United States suspended their football seasons. A larger number of student athletes entered the military and fans did not have the fuel necessary to drive to remote college stadiums on game day.353 Consumer entertainment facilities located in rural areas only accessible by private car, such as fairground racetracks and golf courses, were especially hard hit by the new rationing restrictions.354 Eastern agricultural fairs witnessed a marked decrease in spectator attendance immediately following the implementation of the eastern gasoline rationing program. 


limitation orders. Although the situation with eastern dirt track racing looked grim, promoters and participants remained confident in the innovative genius of the racing fraternity. Members believed that racers would create technical solutions to the wartime shortages that would keep the sport going for the duration and could potentially help the US military win the war.

**The Automobile Racing Ban**

The federal government failed to share the racing fraternity’s optimistic view of the short term technological solutions automobile racers could contribute to the nation’s gasoline and rubber shortages. Citing the increased need to conserve gasoline and collect all available reserves of rubber, the Office of Defense Transportation (ODT) surprised the auto racing community by issuing a national ban on motorsports in July 1942. The ODT cast a wide net over various types of motorsports defining automobile racing as “any contest, competitive trial or exhibition to test or display the relative speeds or performance of motor vehicles.” This meant that eastern circle track racing as well as motorcycle racing, drag racing, and land speed trials all fell under the terms of the racing ban. Individual states also extended the racing ban to


include auto thrill shows in order to preserve rubber tires. From the standpoint of the government, a national motorsports ban impacted only a small number of Americans, and the government estimated roughly 500 big car drivers and 1,000 competitors in the midget division would be affected by their directive. The ODT firmly defended the government’s right to limit activities that threatened the conservation of precious materials. Government officials argued that motorsports jeopardized not only rubber and fuel reserves but also automotive lubricants and replacement parts needed to keep passenger vehicles operating throughout the war. Furthermore, the government did not want competent auto mechanics to waste time and energy repairing and maintaining racecars when they could be working to fulfil essential war work.

Racing enthusiasts voiced their frustration that motorsports lacked a strong national organization to protect and promote the interests of average American race fans. Reporter Vern Fritch lamented, “We should have contributed to a sum to send

357 “Rubber Ban on Thrill Shows Is Upheld by Court,” *Billboard*, September 5, 1942, 42; and “IAFE Government Relations Committee ‘Reviews the Year,’” *Billboard*, December 19, 1942, 40.

358 “All Automobile Racing Called off By ODT,” *Gazette and Daily*, July 4, 1942, 7; and “Auto Races Banned by ODT, Order to Be Effective July 10,” *Billboard*, July 11, 1942, 1.

359 Harold Drewscher to Frank Perrin, May 9, 1944, General: Motorcycle Racing, Box 60, Subject Files, 1942-1945, Highway Transport Department, Records of the Office of Defense Transportation, Record Group 219, National Archives, College Park.
Supporters believed that a national auto racing ban could have been avoided, if motorsports had a powerful lobbying group in Washington, DC similar to that of other national sports leagues, such as Major League Baseball. Promoter Freddie Arrigonì commented that the government was picking on the little guy by banning automobile racing, since “the amount of rubber saved by prohibiting auto racing is only a drop in the bucket towards any effort in the prosecution of the war.”

Racing enthusiasts voiced their disappointment that motorsports lacked a “person in authority who could go to bat for it.” Promoters, drivers, and fans heartily disagreed with the federal government’s decision to ban automobile racing, but they accepted the national directive and patronized their last auto races in late July 1942.

The sudden ban on motorsports put a financial strain on promoters who received their primary income from auto racing. Promoter John Sloan claimed he had $139,000 in signed auto racing contracts with state and county fairs when the racing ban went into effect. Sloan quickly joined the Navy to escape the bill collectors and


361 Ibid.

362 Reporter Dot Snyder claimed she had received several letters from race fans stationed throughout Europe who wished that the government would spend some of their entertainment budget to ship racecars to Europe for the enjoyment of speed fans in the military forces. See, “Through Dot’s Four Eyes,” National Speed Sport News, August 1945, 6.
received a machinist rating due his prior technical knowledge learned through racing.\textsuperscript{363} Fearing that automobile racing would not recover after the war, some promoters made the decision to dismantle their racetracks in the months following the racing ban. The owners of Castle Hill Speedway in the Bronx, New York sold their speedway lights to a local shipyard, while the steel from the guard rail and grandstands were donated and transformed into ships, tanks, and guns for the war effort.\textsuperscript{364} Promoters watched on with growing consternation as vacant racing facilities slowly declined into disrepair throughout the duration of the war.

Speed enthusiasts wanted to do their part to contribute to the war effort, but they remained frustrated with the federal government over the racing ban. Government officials believed racing tires were compatible to bomb trucks, wheelbarrows, and other small vehicles.\textsuperscript{365} The ODT announced plans to collect the national supply of racing tires shortly following the motorsports ban. Racecar drivers openly questioned accusations that they were hoarding tires useful to the war effort. Participants believed that the unique size of racing tires made them incompatible with other vehicles or


pieces of equipment. Their supplies of racing tires represented a significant financial investment for each racing team, and the government’s sudden racing ban had prevented drivers and teams from using or selling their stores of racing rubber. When the government failed to follow through in collecting racing tires, racecar drivers watched on in dismay as their stocks of racing tires deteriorated throughout the war. Technical specialists warned their peers that tires stored for the duration should not be used when racing resumed. Even tires that looked safe could have structural damage after such a long period of storage. Experts warned that the high speeds and temperatures tires underwent during racing competitions could cause pre-war tires to damage easily under the strain of postwar racing. Drivers and mechanics lamented that their expensive racing equipment was going to waste, and they wished that they would have been allowed to continue competing until their supplies of tires and other racing parts were depleted.

**Keep ‘Em Rolling**


Despite their disagreement with the government’s racing ban, the men and women who patronized motor racing events expressed a strong patriotic desire to help win the war. Racing reporter Vern Fritch encouraged his fellow race fans, “although we consider the ban uncalled for, let us all be good sports, and through 100 percent cooperation, place our beloved racing on even a higher plane.” Fritch further motivated racing enthusiasts to do their utmost to end the war claiming, “The sooner it’s over, the sooner we can get back to our business of racing.” The majority of racing veterans agreed that the racing community needed to focus their full attention on winning the war. Enthusiast Phil Mays encouraged his fellow race fans to “be honest and unbiased” in their assessment of the racing ban and admit that motorsports was “not essential to winning the war.” People continued to look on jealously as other sports, such as horse racing and baseball, continued during the war, but they did not let this resentment cloud their resolve to do their utmost to defeat America’s enemies and help win the war.

Since racetracks remained unoccupied after the racing ban, track owners and fair organizations collaborated with the federal government and private corporations to repurpose dirt speedways for the war effort. Former racecar driver turned soldier,


Duke Dinsmore, reported to his army camp in May 1943 to discover that his favorite track in Springfield, Indiana was now a military base and his new home. Dinsmore expressed his disillusionment at the upheaval of his local speedway, which had been transformed from a technical playground to a military barrack. The army had built camps in the middle of the speedway and placed their officers in make-shift offices under the grandstands. The military as well as private defense contractors similarly reutilized east coast speedways. The United States government converted Reading Speedway in Pennsylvania into a prison camp for German prisoners of war. Private corporations also commandeered speedway facilities, and the Babcock Aircraft Corporation organized a defense workshop at the Volusia County Fairgrounds near Daytona Beach, Florida.

The mechanical knowledge and skill sets racecar drivers and mechanics had obtained through their leisure pursuits made them expertly qualified for the war effort. Former racecar drivers easily transitioned into piloting military cars, jeeps, tanks, and fighter planes during the war thanks to their prior experience on the nation’s dirt


speedways. 374 Through racing, men had learned how to operate complex machines, repair mechanical malfunctions, and use a variety of different types of tools and equipment. The Pressed Steel Car Company of Chicago, producer of tanks and jeeps for the US military, credited former racing aces as integral to the success of their test driving program. The company claimed that having a former racecar driver as chief test driver inspector as well as several other racers on their testing staff was the reason for their strong safety record and successful product line throughout the war. 375 One enthusiast exclaimed, “Racing has given the country men with skill and understanding of motors and lathes and machines that turn out gardens and planes and ammunition.” 376 Enthusiasts prided themselves on their technical abilities and worked to demonstrate their advanced skill sets while serving in the military and defense industries.

Racing veterans additionally argued that their prior participation in motorsports had prepared them for the psychological rigors of military combat. Racecar drivers and their mechanics acquired problem solving techniques, courage, and split-second reaction times through their racing experiences that were necessary in modern


warfare.\textsuperscript{377} One racing reporter suggested, “A race driver is a man of grit and muscle, cool-headed, quick-thinking, of singular courage, and nerve, fearless and confident, yet daringly cautious as he exerts his extreme ability to the limit.”\textsuperscript{378} Racing enthusiasts strongly believed few other American sports offered the same level of mental preparation for the nation’s newly enlisted men. The “determination to stay in there fighting until the car came through to a victorious finish” during an automobile race taught young men the value of perseverance in the face of adversity on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{379} Men were also used to taking directions and instructions from their crew chiefs and car owners during racing events. Former racecar drivers had a strong ability to adhere to the directions of their commanding officers and collaborate with their fellow soldiers on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{380} Editors of the \textit{National Auto Racing News} celebrated the accomplishments of racers throughout the war and proudly exclaimed racing did “more towards developing the type and class of experienced fighters than

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\item \textsuperscript{379} KW Angstadt, “Notes from the Penn-Jersey Club,” \textit{National Speed Sport News}, March 1944, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{380} The Observer, “Corn Belt Chatterbox,” \textit{National Auto Racing News}, March 26, 1942, 5.
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any other educational agency.” Participants believed that racing was more than just a hobby and viewed motorsports as an important technical and mental training ground for the nation’s young men.

Throughout the war, racecar drivers embraced new opportunities for technological daring. Planes, jeeps, and tanks all offered chances for mechanically-minded racecar drivers to replicate the adrenaline rush of the speedway. Racecar driver, Ben Emerich, initially took a job in a defense factory. The National Speed Sport News reported that, Emerich’s “restless nature got the best of him and the desire to be there where the going was hottest got him a new job” as a tail gunner in a B-17 airplane. AAA Champion driver Rex Mays claimed flying was “more exciting than auto racing,” and he served as a pilot for the Army Air Force Transport Command flying completed airplanes from the factory to the front lines. By enlisting in the military, some former racecar drivers found alternative forms of technological daring during the war.

Other drivers struggled to achieve the same level of excitement and community acclaim they had achieved throughout their racing careers. Military doctors declared


several racecar drivers, “4-F,” and ineligible for active wartime combat due to prior injuries they had sustained during racing competition. William “Wild Bill” Boyd started racing in Maryland at the age of seventeen. Boyd suffered a broken arm in a racing accident that prevented him from lifting his arm above his shoulder. When army doctors discovered that Boyd was unable to fully raise his arm, he was deferred from the military.384 Members of the racing fraternity expressed their frustration that military doctors only saw the physical scars of their racing exploits and failed to take into consideration the tenacity, daring, and skill that drivers still possessed.385 One racing enthusiast commented, “It looks like Uncle Sam may be missing a bet by not letting a lot of drivers and mechanics join up because they might limp when they walk, or they might have a few teeth knocked out.”386 Previously celebrated for their courage and bravery on the speedway, racecar drivers were among the group of 4-F men who now faced criticism from strangers on the home front. Americans wondered why these seemingly physically capable young men were not overseas fighting alongside their own sons and brothers.387


Members of the racing fraternity motivated their peers throughout the war claiming that each man had a valuable role in the nation’s defense. Racecar driver Bob Bonin was despondent after receiving a 4-F designation due to a prior racing injury. A racing journalist attempted to cheer Bonin up by commenting, “the type of work you do Bob is a lot more valuable to the war than just one more man in uniform would be.” The journalist further reminded Bonin that “two weeks after the war ends no one will care if we were generals, buck privates, or civilians. We are still all Americans you know and that’s what counts.”

Determined to contribute to the war effort, several men of the racing fraternity who were too old or injured to directly serve in the military transformed their racing garages into small war workshops and worked to use their technological skill sets to fulfill defense contracts.

Men with prior experience as racing mechanics and machinists often found wartime employment in defense factories. One member of the racing fraternity joked that a race could be staged with the personnel at Packard Aircraft Factory in


Detroit, who employed several racecar drivers, two announcers, and a timer. Racecar drivers travelled to the front lines as Field Service Representatives for companies such as Packard working to keep military tanks and airplanes inspected and ready for battle. Mechanics and drivers also filled the ranks of the nation’s other leading defense contractors, including Buick’s Aviation Engine plant, Lockheed Martin, and the Firestone Rubber Corporation. The racing fraternity pointed “with pride to the dozens of skilled workers it has made available for Uncle Sam’s factories and machines.” Racing periodicals celebrated the positive accolades racing enthusiasts received from their defense employers and emphasized the positive contributions members of the racing community were making on the home front.

**A Wartime Racing Social Network**

From 1942-1945, patrons and participants of motorsports continued to make automobile racing an essential part of their identity and daily lives despite the national


ban on all competitive motorsports. Men and women adjusted to new jobs and military service, while keeping in constant contact with their racing friends through letters and racing periodicals. People formed new friendships over their shared interests in motorsports. Racing enthusiasts organized “duration clubs” and hosted parties for local racing enthusiasts at parks, restaurants, roller skating rinks, and private homes. In addition to fraternizing with fellow race fans, duration club events often featured movies with footage of pre-war racing events for the enjoyment of attendees. Racing fanatics looked forward to attending duration club events as important sources of relaxation, comradery, and entertainment during the war. The psychological benefits that American racing enthusiasts gained from their participation in the sport continued despite the lack of actual racing across the United States.

Members of the racing fraternity continued to make the racing community a top priority throughout the period of wartime gasoline rationing. Racing enthusiast L.A. Ward mused, “When a fellow doesn’t have the gasoline to go find any excitement or to go visit any of the racing clan and is head over heels in work all the time, life becomes rather dull and monotonous.” Ward contended that members of


the racing fraternity were unique. He referred to race fans as “interesting people” who “thrived on excitement.” Not only did Ward want to discuss racing, he desired to see fellow racing enthusiasts, because he felt that they exhibited specific personality traits that he failed to identify in his neighbors, co-workers, and family members.\textsuperscript{397} Ward and other race fans saved their gasoline rations in order to attend the parties and events hosted by fellow members of the racing fraternity.\textsuperscript{398} These events served as important morale boosters for racing enthusiasts who expressed feelings of deep morose at being isolated for their community of racing peers. Some fans even admitted to tampering with their gasoline rationing booklets or skipped their defense jobs to make special trips to visit racing buddies, review scrap books, and discuss past speed contests.\textsuperscript{399}

By encouraging constant communication with members of the racing fraternity now stationed around the globe, dirt track racing reporters served a central role in keeping the sport alive during the years of conflict. The sports sections of mainstream dailies failed to regularly report on auto racing before the war and continued to ignore

\textsuperscript{397} Ibid.


the sport during the racing ban. Reporter for the *National Speed Sport News* Everett J. Lehmann expressed his belief that periodicals devoted to motorsports served as an important “morale builder to the men in the service” who were hungry for news about their favorite sport. Racing enthusiasts agreed that “no racing news is far worse than any other kind of rationing and harder to take by the devotees.” Since they could not achieve the multi-sensory adrenaline rush of the speedway, racing reporters used story telling as a way to re-live past feats of technological daring. Known as “bench racing” or “hot stove leagues,” talking about past races with friends had always been a popular pastime for racecar drivers and spectators during the off season. Veteran drivers who were too old for the draft, men working in defense factories, and female racing enthusiasts served as regional reporters for the racing fraternity. Reporters kept bench racing alive throughout the war by writing columns in


401 Everett J. Lehmann, “Long Island Auto Racing Society,” *National Speed Sport News*, January 1945, 5. Servicemen regularly wrote to individual columnists or the paper’s editors to express their gratitude. PPC Archie Hamilton wrote the paper in March 1945, “You are doing swell and it lifts up a guy’s morale to get some news that’s not got all war in it.” See, “Communications,” *National Speed Sport News*, March 1945, 13.


racing periodicals that relived past races and updated enthusiasts on the whereabouts of racecar drivers, mechanics, and fans.

Racing periodicals encouraged their readers to take an active role in boosting the morale of race fans stationed around the world through letter writing campaigns. Servicemen wrote to the editors and columnists of racing periodicals expressing the positive mental boost they had received from racing newspapers. Reporters regularly published letters from soldiers within their columns and encouraged their readers to take the time to write to a fellow race fan stationed overseas. Racing enthusiast Bob Heinze wrote to reporter Russ Catlin that he was lonely at his military post and had “read the only race publication to reach him so many times he can recite it page for page.” Catlin encouraged each of his readers to write Heinze a letter with “plenty of racing talk” to help boost his spirits. Another journalist directed followers of his column to write daily letters to men in the armed forces claiming, “A letter to a boy in the service is a five minute vacation from HELL.” Racing enthusiasts who remained on the home front took their role in boosting soldiers’ morale seriously and felt that they could make a positive contribution to the war effort through their letter writing campaigns. Men and women wrote to fellow race fans

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stationed overseas whom they had never met and formed new friendships through their correspondence during the war.

As young Americans left their hometowns for the first time to participate in the war effort, they remained passionate supporters of automobile racing and used their interest in the sport as a coping mechanism against fear and loneliness. East Coast racing fan, Bill Gordon, commented, “I thought I had left the auto racing fraternity behind when I arrived here at Fort Du Pont [Delaware] some time ago, but, the first commissioned officer to interview me turned out to be a racing addict.” Other racing enthusiasts experienced similar meetings with fellow speed enthusiasts within their military units. While stationed at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland, racecar driver Jimmy Trippelett stood in “his nite shirt dumbfounded to see a Major paying a social call at bed time,” but Sargent Trippelett was soon swapping stories of racing on the east coast with Major Stark and Corporal Fred Tomshe. Men from different geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds immediately connected over their shared interests in automobile racing and spent their free time sharing stories about their racing exploits. Iowan native Kid Tucker was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia by January 1943. Shortly after arriving to his military camp, Tucker met a fellow racecar driver from Denver named Ray Tippett. The two men became


408 In and About Chicago,” National Speed Sport News, June 1943, 7.
inseparable for the rest of the tour. Racing friendships helped soldiers adjust to new environments and the stressful experiences of military combat.

Men who had no prior interest or experience with motorsports also became interested in automobile racing during the war. The lack of available news in military camps meant that soldiers regularly swapped magazines and periodicals they received from home. Pennsylvania speed fan, Jimmy Cassidy, testified that men stationed in his barrack were lining up to read his racing newspapers. Since the majority of his fellow soldiers had never attended an automobile race, Cassidy spent hours telling stories about his racing experiences and answering question from his fellow troops about the sport.\textsuperscript{409} Motorsports periodicals offered half priced subscriptions to soldiers and men with military postal addresses.\textsuperscript{410} Many racing enthusiasts stationed in the military shared similar stories of passing around racing pictures, scrapbooks, and periodicals to the men in their units who had no previous involvement with dirt track racing. Learning that former pit crew member Edward Giguere was now a private with the 399\textsuperscript{th} infantry unit, one reporter joked that “the 399\textsuperscript{th} infantry will become well versed in auto racing before long if Eddie really starts going to town about his favorite sport.”\textsuperscript{411} Racing reporters encouraged enthusiasts to talk about racing in their military

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\textsuperscript{410} “Reduced Subscription Rate for Men in the Service,” \textit{National Auto Racing News}, May 7, 1942, 8.
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barracks. One enthusiast commented, “We’ve got the greatest sport in the world, it has color, thrills, drama, and comedy, every element that goes to make up a good show and yet the average person knows less about it than Hitler does about mercy.” Enthusiasts hoped that new interest in the sport would help to expand the ranks of the auto racing fraternity following the war.

Racecar drivers and mechanics wanted to do more than just talk about racing, and they continued to crave a direct interaction with automotive technology. While serving in the military, auto racing enthusiasts found every opportunity to interact with machines. Soldiers stationed in countries, such as England and Italy, sought out racing garages to inspect European racecars and engine technology. Sargent Charles MacLeod claimed Europe was “heaven to a person who likes motors,” because technophiles could easily find Ford V-8 and other parts. MacLeod used discarded parts to fix up an English BSA motorcycle. He and his friends also attempted to fix a small one man Italian tank. MacLeod joked that if they ever found an airplane in good shape, they were “apt to fly the darned thing home!”

Men continued to cultivate an interest in speed sports and automobile technology, and they learned valuable insights


about European racing and transportation technology that helped to influence postwar racecar construction.

In the process of tinkering with available military technology while stationed abroad, servicemen helped to teach their fellow soldiers about racecars and engine construction. By May 1943, the Navy had shipped Ray Tippett and Kid Tucker to the front lines in the Pacific. Despite their military duties, the two young soldiers decided to build a racecar in their spare time. They spent over a week trying to locate a power plant for their vehicle and finally stumbled upon a Lincoln Zeffer engine sunk in the bay. Under the direction of Tucker, who was known around Iowa racing circles as a “V-8 specialist,” they began overhauling the engine after its salt water bath. Several soldiers became interested in Tip and Tuck’s project and joined the two men in their search to help locate spare parts to put together their dream car. With the engine near completion, the men began to search for a jeep frame or other metal to make a chassis for their racecar. However, they could not get their hands on the necessary metal, which officially ended their racecar building enterprises in the Pacific. Tip and Tuck converted the motor to an operational boat motor and gave it away to some fellow soldiers.415 They dreamed of returning home to work on their real racing machines as soon as the conflict ended in the Pacific.

Men of the racing fraternity who remained on the home front continuously prepared for postwar racing action despite the wartime racing ban. With money rolling in from their jobs in the defense industry, Americans could spent freely on consumer goods and entertainment. 416 Racecar drivers across the country invested in used parts or purchased entire racecars to tinker with in their spare time. Walter Reichenbach was employed in a naval defense plant as a welder and worked on his racecars in the evenings. Reichenbach had a long list of orders from fellow racecar drivers at his garage by 1943 and claimed “the way these boys are rushing me you think the war was going to be over next week.”417 In addition to investing directly in their racing careers, enthusiasts continued to financially contribute to the war effort. Racing reporter Vern Fritch reminded his readers, “Don’t forget to help the Red Cross because the guy they help on the battlefield may drive your race car after the war. And don’t turn in those bonds- think of the race cars they can buy in ten years.”418 Enthusiasts made decisions about wartime spending and savings with their future racing careers in mind.


Racing enthusiasts closely watched the progress of the war and continuously worked to prepare their racecars, so they would be ready to compete the minute the government lifted the racing ban. When Kid Tucker returned to the United States after over 15 months in the Pacific, he paid a visit to his parent’s house in Iowa in November 1944. Seeing the general shortage of passenger automobile and racecar parts upon his return to the United States, Tucker lamented the fact that he and Tip had not brought back the Lincoln motor and other automobile parts that had been plentiful on their military base in the South Pacific. Tucker wanted to take his racecar out for an illegal spin. However, Tucker’s father had torn the entire car apart during his absence to resolve a mechanical problem. Kid Tucker claimed his racecar was in a million pieces over the floor of the family’s garage when he returned home on leave. Tucker had to wait until his next furlough to drive his speed machine.

As the war waned on, some racecar drivers took their chances competing in races held outside the United States. When the military sent him for training at Fort Bliss in Texas, Sergeant James Cassidy of Lansdale, Pennsylvania joined his fellow soldiers in attending the International Midwinter Auto Race held in Juarez, Mexico in early January 1944. Cassidy intended to check out the racecars and watch the racing action with his military buddies. When a car owner needed a driver for his car, Cassidy volunteered to compete in the speed contest. Cassidy crashed through a fence

during the race hitting a passenger car that belonged to the Mayor of Juarez.\(^{420}\) Shortly after the race, the military transferred Cassidy to a base in Orlando, Florida ending his short racing career in Mexico.

By 1944, enterprising showman hosted thrill shows throughout the eastern United States. Organizers used 1930s cars, synthetic fuel, and special tires to avoid the stipulations of the federal racing ban. Former AAA big car driver, Joie Chitwood, organized a group of war veterans and former racecar drivers to perform death-defying stunts in front of large crowds of action-starved civilians. Chitwood’s Hell Drivers entertained spectators by rolling over cars, driving through tunnels of fire, and jumping cars over a school bus before crashing into a brick wall.\(^{421}\) In several communities, Joie Chitwood’s Hell Drivers were the first auto-related entertainments to perform on area dirt tracks since 1942.\(^{422}\)

**Victory! And a Return to Racing**

As Allied troops marched towards Berlin in 1944, racecar drivers anxiously waited for the federal government to drop the green flag on racing. The Office of

\(^{420}\) “Soldier Takes Part in Recent Mexican Race Meet,” *National Speed Sport News*, March 1944, 2.


\(^{422}\) “Williad, Magician at Williams Grove Park Sunday,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, June 21, 1945, 23.
Defense Transportation initially announced they would lift the auto racing ban on November 8th. Speedway promoters immediately advertised upcoming races despite the cool November weather. After two years of silence, race fans again heard the gentle hum of racing engines at tracks across the United States. Drivers no sooner blew the dust out of their engines before the ODT waffled and decided to reinstate the racing ban on December 31, 1944. Dirt track racing enthusiasts would have to wait until the conclusion of the war in the Pacific before racing action would officially get underway again throughout the United States.

Men and women wanted to see racing resume as soon as possible, yet the majority of race fans felt that the ban should continue until the Allies had soundly defeated the Axis. The racing fraternity feared public resentment and backlash, if racing resumed before the official end of the war. Racing enthusiasts wanted the government sanctions on gasoline and rubber consumption to be lifted before they returned to racing in order to assuage concerns from Americans who were outside the racing community. Furthermore, several racing enthusiasts stationed within the military expressed their disapproval for racing until every American was safe from the daily danger of war. Expressing the general feeling of the fraternity, one enthusiast wrote, “It was tough news to hear that the ban was clamped on again, but…I’d hate to be crawling thru some jungle infested with Japs and know the boys back home were

roaring around the ovals.” The racing fraternity resolved to continue to do their part to end the war before they returned to racing.

As the Allies marched towards victory in Europe, speed enthusiasts postulated on the success of automobile racing immediately following the end of the conflict. Journalist Bob Bonin commented, “We of the race clan know how the speed bug bites!” Bonin and others believed that soldiers who experienced technological daring piloting airplanes or driving military transport vehicles during the war would struggle to return to their civilian lives. Veterans would continue to seek the same adrenaline rush they had received during battle by participating in technology-centered hobbies such as automobile racing. Corporal F. Brady of the Army Ordinance Company had been an avid race fan prior to the war and served as a mechanic for jeeps and truck during his time in the army. Brady hoped to “realize his dream of becoming a race pilot after the war, as a result of his better understanding of motors” during his time in the service. Racecar driver Jimmy Wilburn predicted that the several other men who repaired or piloted jeeps during the war would join the auto racing ranks after the fighting ended. Wilburn believed that men who navigated all types of terrains on the global battlefield had the nerve and guts to succeed on the


speedway.\textsuperscript{427} Racing enthusiasts further predicted that women motorists of the Women’s Army Corps (WACS) would “never be satisfied to just watch the boys show ‘em the short way around again,” and people suggested that women would press for greater involvement in motorsports during the postwar period.\textsuperscript{428} Racing enthusiasts hoped that military drivers, pilots, and mechanics would join the ranks of the postwar auto racing fraternity.

Not all veteran racers believed that technological skill sets gained during wartime service would be beneficial to postwar newcomers. Three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Wilbur Shaw commented, “I actually don’t believe that this airplane training will do kids any good at all in the race driving business after the war. It’s a different technique.”\textsuperscript{429} Shaw continued to encourage interested young men to follow the traditional path of apprenticeship and training within the sport and argued that practice under racing conditions on the speedway was the only true preparation for dirt track racing action. Racing leaders wanted to maintain a high standard for racing competition after the war by continuing to use their traditional system of apprenticeship and entry-level divisions to train competent racecar drivers. Racing

\textsuperscript{427} “World War to Produce Dare Devil Auto Racers,” \textit{Wilkes-Barre Times Leader}, February 1, 1945, 13.


technical expert, Pop Green, commented, “to permit any kind of heap with four wheels and no brakes and with a driver of questionable skill to run in fast company is dangerous to the good drivers and good cars.” 430 While racing insiders wanted soldiers to join the ranks of the nation’s racing elite, they emphasized the need for rational order within the postwar organization of the sport.

Upon returning to the United States, former racing car drivers had a strong desire to climb into their racecars and immediately return to dirt track racing competition. Kid Tucker knew that the racing ban was still in effect when he arrived home to Iowa in July 1945. Tucker, however, could not contain his desire to drive his racecar. He drove his racecar around his block before letting loose in a nearby pasture. Tucker joked, “I’ll bet there’s a farmer near Des Moines that would give a little to know what happened to his pasture.” 431 Tucker had to cut his practice session short, because he was attracting a large crowd of farmers and nearby residents to his midday racing exhibition. 432 Tucker and other American speedsters waited anxiously for the government to end the racing ban.

Racecar drivers across the United States finally returned to the nation’s dirt ovals in August 1945. President Truman had decided to use the atomic bomb to end


the war in the Pacific. World War II had finally come to an end with the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945. One day later, the Office of Defense Transportation lifted the driving restrictions for American citizens and ended gasoline rationing across the country. The ODT also issued their approval for all types of organized racing competitions. Central Pennsylvania promoters wasted little time in announcing the reopening of their speedways. Promoter of Williams Grove Speedway, Roy Richwine, secured the first racing sanction from the Consolidated States Racing Association and planned to get racing underway at his Mechanicsburg speed plant within two weeks of V-J Day. Promoters across the country announced similar plans for racing over Labor Day weekend. Men and women of the racing fraternity celebrated the end of the war and made final preparations to return to their local speedways.

After three years of bench racing, dirt track enthusiasts could again spend their weekends competing and socializing at America’s speedways. Central Pennsylvanians waited anxiously throughout September as rainy weather prevented racing from officially getting underway. Fans braved the cold to watch Ted Horn take home the 30-lap feature in the Victory Championship Race held at Williams Grove on


September 30, 1945. Other prewar favorites including Tommy Hinnershitz, Otis Stine, and Jimmy Wilburn vied with Horn for the $4,000 in prize money. Racing continued throughout the region during October with speedways posting large payoffs. Veteran speed fans and newcomers to the sport packed into racetrack grandstands and infield to watch drivers compete in their prewar racecars. After a short few weeks of racing, drivers and mechanics anxiously returned to their garages to prepare their cars for the 1946 season. While the ranks of the racing fraternity were expanding, drivers and mechanics who had participated in the sport prior to the war continued to dominate the line-ups at their local speedways.

During his time at Camp Crowder, Missouri, Lieutenant Joe Williams had emphatically vowed that auto racing was “as American as MacArthur.” Williams remained confident that the sport would withstand the wartime ban claiming that the roots of racing were “buried deep in the earth of democracy and no surface injuries can ever stop us from growing into what is quickly becoming the number one sports attraction” in the United States. Williams’ premonition held true thanks to the strong interest in motorsports that continued throughout World War II. Despite the wartime ban on motorsports, racing enthusiasts remained adamant about the positive benefits of technology-centered hobbies, as proving grounds for new wartime

435 “Horn Winner at Williams Grove,” The Evening News, October 1, 1945, 13.

equipment, training centers for courageous soldiers, and morale boosters for American civilians. The men and women of the racing fraternity continued to make motorsports a wartime priority and stressed the importance of keeping in touch with racing friends through duration clubs and letter writing campaigns despite the national ban on motorsports. Through their wartime experiences on the battlefields and in defense factories, American men took an increasing interest in machines and technology, and motorsports remained a popular American pastime throughout the postwar period. Racing enthusiasts combined their wartime training with new materials to propel open-wheel racing technology forward during the 1950s and successfully expanded dirt track racing divisions with the introduction of stock car racing.
Chapter 5
THE POPULARITY AND PROSPERITY OF POSTWAR DIRT TRACK RACING, 1945-1960

In June 1957, journalist Norman E. Rinehart published an expose about Langhorne Speedway in a regional magazine called the *Bucks County Traveler*. Rinehart claimed that “more people are expected to attend the six racing programs” at Langhorne Speedway during the 1957 racing season “than will attend any other attraction in the County.”\(^\text{437}\) Bucks County residents embraced America’s expanding automobile culture making Langhorne Speedway into a popular local consumer leisure destination. Dirt track automobile racing flourished throughout the United States following the Second World War. Racing enthusiasts packed the grandstands and infield of grassroots speedways to watch an increasing variety of racecars compete for large purses. Big cars – increasingly referred to as sprint cars – continued to be the major draw for spectators. Rinehart claimed that “the deep roar of the big cars is a sound unmatched for excitement” at Langhorne, and he believed sprint cars were “different from every other sport we have” because “every lap is a thrill in itself.”\(^\text{438}\) Despite his partiality towards sprint car racing, Rinehart celebrated the growing


diversity of regional dirt track racing, as various stock cars divisions regularly competed at dirt speedway throughout the postwar period.

Dirt track automobile prospered in the decade of the 1950s and expanded into a lucrative business venture for promoters, participants, and mechanics who all benefited from a growing national interest in technology-centered hobbies. As more and more Americans desired to compete in grassroots motorsports, racing insiders developed multi-divisional racing programs. Cheaper and less dangerous, entry-level stock car classes allowed newcomers to easily join in the racing excitement. As grassroots dirt track racing technologically diversified, promoters consistently attracted high numbers of spectators and participants. Technical hobbyists continued to negotiate gender norms at the speedway, and they emphasized the family values that were prevalent throughout American culture. New purpose-built speedways opened across the United States to meet the consumer demand for grassroots automobile racing. The popularity of racing allowed promoters to successfully operate


outside of a regional or national sanctioning organization. In 1955, the American Automobile Association’s Contest Board ended their almost fifty year reign over big car promotions in the United States. For the majority of racecar drivers and their families, AAA’s exit from motorsports had little impact on their pursuits of technological play. Participants continued to make motorsports a central part of their identity and their major source of consumer leisure as they had done since the rise of the fairgrounds racing circuit in early 1920s.

The Golden Age of Sprint Car Racing

Over 250 speedways located across the United States offered dirt track racing programs during the 1946 season.⁴⁴¹ In some communities, residents could attend racing events several nights each week as well as on the weekends. By 1948, the New York Times declared automobile racing the fastest growing spectator sport in America.⁴⁴² Recognizing a growing national interest in automobiles and auto-centered hobbies, entrepreneurs constructed several new purpose-built speedways to meet consumer demand for automobile racing.⁴⁴³ By the mid-1950s, Penn-Jersey race fans continued to patronize sprint car contests at Williams Grove, Langhorne, and Reading,

⁴⁴¹ “Results around the Nation,” Speed Age, July 1947, 27.


⁴⁴³ For more information on the construction of area speedways following World War II, see, Allan E. Brown, The History of America’s Speedways Past & Present (Comstock Park: America’s Speedways, 2003).
but they could also attend races at a host of new area tracks, including Silver Spring, Selinsgrove, Port Royal, and Susquehanna Speedways.444

The growing success of dirt track automobile racing attracted the attention of the mainstream press, and Americans debated the reasons for the newfound popularity of the sport. As they had done since the early twentieth century, journalists continued to stress danger and death as the major attractions of automobile racing. In December 1947, Life Magazine published a short article featuring seven images of racing action at New York City’s Kingsbridge Armory, an indoor speedway located in the Bronx, New York. Life attributed the rising popularity of automobile racing to “a morbid streak in the sports public” and postulated that people only attended racing events to see accidents.445 Race fan H.M. Wheeler of Grand Forks, North Dakota, wrote to the magazine’s editors and claimed that fans “display a keen interest in racing as a sport

444 The East Coast Maestro of Speed, Ralph Hankinson, who had dominated the promotion of dirt track races at fairgrounds and speedways throughout the Mid-Atlantic had died during the war, but members of his promotional team including Sam Nunis took over promotions at several of Hankinson’s former tracks. Nunis also expanded his racing operations to include recently constructed speedways, such as Selinsgrove Speedway located in Pennsylvania, which was designed by former driver Joie Chitwood and opened in July 1946. See, Gary Ludwig, Tommy Hinnershitz: The Life and Times of an Auto-Racing Legend (Harrisburg: Basket Road Press, Inc., 2009), 64.

and a science.” Wheeler and other racing enthusiasts insisted that technological innovation and close competition were the central attraction of dirt track racing.

America’s rapidly expanding postwar automobile culture is a more likely explanation for the new postwar peak in auto racing. As early as 1945, the *New York Times* anticipated a surge in postwar automobile racing as a result of Americans’ direct participation in World War II. Journalists believed that direct participation in mechanized warfare had increased national interest in technology and technology-centered hobbies. American men had gained valuable news skill sets from their military service and defense work. They had learned how to work with light-weight aluminum as well as weld chrome steel bar tubing for the wartime arsenal of planes, tanks, and jeeps. A postwar surplus of airplane engines, new materials, and military gear further encouraged rising interest in the sport. Military training and the cheap availability of surplus materials provided new opportunities for technophiles to tinker with racecar construction following the war. Men incorporated surplus military materials into their postwar racecars to improve suspension and traction. Steel bar


tubular frames and light-weight aluminum bodies made racecars faster and more successful on unpredictable track surfaces.\footnote{449}

Drivers actively discussed racecar design and performance with their community of racing peers and worked together to improve the overall quality of racing equipment immediately following the war. Participants increasingly depended on a regional consumer network of racecar builders, parts suppliers, and machinists to help them facilitate the construction and maintenance of their racecars. Racecar drivers purchased inexpensive Navy batteries, Polaroid driving goggles, and adjustable aircraft seat belts from military surplus retailers.\footnote{450} Individuals skilled in welding, manufacturing, and engine building accrued reputations for their expertise and began small businesses to ply their specialties to fellow competitors. Speed parts manufacturers provided materials and services to eastern drivers that they could not produce in their own backyard garages, which allowed a greater number of men to own and operate competitive racecars.

\footnote{449}{Prior to 1945, racecar drivers had used the rail frame bodies of Detroit-produced passenger cars as the basis for their racing chassis. See, White, \textit{Kurtis-Kraft Masterworks of Speed and Style}, 43.}

\footnote{450}{One company, Air Associates Incorporated, had stores in New Jersey, Seattle, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Dallas, and Atlanta and sold lightweight safety belts and stainless steel wheels to racecar drivers. See, the Air Associates Incorporated advertisements in the \textit{National Speed Sport News}, July 4, 1946, 9 and July 18, 1946, 13.}
The regional growth of aftermarket speed equipment manufacturers throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey led to the postwar prosperity of eastern motorsports. Paterson, New Jersey became “the hub of auto racing” in the eastern United States by the late 1940s.\textsuperscript{451} Several racing enthusiasts, including Ted Horn and Fred Peters, had established racing garages and machine shops in an area of Paterson known as “Gasoline Alley.” Frankie Del Roy relocated his Speed Parts Distributing Company to downtown Paterson in 1947. Del Roy ran a machine shop repairing racing engines, fixing broken parts, and selling new parts to area drivers.\textsuperscript{452} Drivers living throughout Central Pennsylvania and the surrounding region regularly travelled to Gasoline Alley to purchase parts for their racecars, discuss the latest innovations in racing design, and visit with their racing friends between speed contests.\textsuperscript{453}

\begin{quote}

452 Del Roy also acted as the eastern distributor for Kurtis Kraft selling complete tube-frame racecars to eastern drivers. Southern California designer Frank Kurtis had pioneered the new style of racing frames, and he sold complete cars, kits, and parts under the “Kurtis-Kraft” label from his Los Angeles speed shop. He relied on the large aftermarket of surplus aviation materials to make his racecar design innovations a reality. Kurtis fabricated over 160 racecars for the 1947 racing season and sold his tube frame cars to drivers located throughout the United States. See, White, \textit{Kurtis-Kraft Masterworks of Speed and Style}, 59.

453 Small businesses owners stressed personal relationships with customers similar to that of other rural small business owners, see: Sharon Bird, “Masculinities in Rural Small Business Ownership: Between Community and Capitalism,” in \textit{Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life} edited by Hugh Campbell, Michael Bell, and Margaret Finney (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006): 77-78.
\end{quote}
Sprint car drivers depended on this regional network of retailers and small businessmen in order to keep their racecars at optimum performance throughout the racing season. Popular Reading-area driver, Tommy Hinnershitz, patronized a variety of different area retailers in 1948 to keep his sprint car in top mechanical operation, while he competed in over thirty-five races at twenty-three different tracks in eleven different states.\textsuperscript{454} Hinnershitz spent an estimated $2,700 on repairs to his racecar during the 1948 season.\textsuperscript{455} He hand-fabricated equipment for his racecar, purchased parts from local speed equipment manufacturers, and also outsourced work to area machinists. Hinnershitz regularly patronized Frankie Del Roy’s Speed Parts store in Paterson to purchase new parts, such as valves, fittings, spark plugs, and pistons for his racecar. Hinnershitz had the technical know-how to replace these items himself at his Oley garage. He called on his former wartime employer, Progressive Machine Works in nearby Reading, to fix and repair more complicated parts for his racecar.\textsuperscript{456} Hinnershitz also outsourced his engine work to Ted Nyquist’s motor shop in Reading. In order to receive racing tires from the regional Montgomery Ward distributor located

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{454} A copy of Tommy Hinnershitz’s 1948 racing schedule and finances appears in Buzz Rose’s \textit{The Eastern Bull Rings: The History of the Eastern Big Car Championships 1945-1960} (Glendale: Rose Racing Publications, 2005), 55.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{455} Figures calculated from receipts saved by Tommy Hinnershitz throughout the 1948 racing season. See, “Tommy Hinnershitz Racing Scrapbook,” Tommy Hinnershitz Garage Installation, Eastern Museum of Motor Racing.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{456} Carl Sweigart, “Indy Bricks, Chi Boards, Grave Dirt, All Saw Tommy,” \textit{National Speed Sport News}, March 16, 1955, 12.}
in Lebanon, PA as well as Silverstone Tire of Akron, Ohio and Firestone Tire in Speedway, Indiana, Hinnershitz shipped and receive his tires via train on the local Reading Railroad.

Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, the majority of east coast aces continued to compete in racecars that had been constructed before the war. Tommy Hinnershitz racked up a series of wins driving a prewar racecar during the 1948 racing season. As Central Pennsylvania drivers financially prospered during the late 1940s, they turned to local fabricators to duplicate the newest design innovations of tube frame racecars with aluminum chasses that were increasingly popular on the West Coast. Allentown machinist Hiram Hillegass was one of the first racecar designers to incorporate factory techniques of standardization and interchangeable parts into his racing machines. Hillegass marketed his hand-built tube-frame racecars to Pennsylvania drivers. He would hand shape sheets of aluminum over wooden molds with hammers to create body sections, tails, and front ends for his racecars. Each section of the car could be replaced when it was damaged on the speedway. From his own experience in the defense industry during the war, Hillegass also started to incorporate steel tubing as the main material for his racecar frames. Local drivers

\[457\] A 1946 advertisement for Hillegass’ custom built racecars states that Hillegass sold “shells, cowls and tails in half body section[s], hand formed, also midget, rails with all parts to complete frame.” See, *National Speed Sport News*, June 6, 1946, 8.

could purchase a complete Hillegass sprint car frame for $925 from his Allentown shop.\footnote{Ludwig, \textit{Tommy Hintershitz}, 128.} Hillegass’ sprint cars provided Central Pennsylvania drivers with access to top of the line racing equipment, which allowed eastern drivers to compete head to head against west coast pilots. Racecar designers, drivers, and mechanics continued to innovate sprint car design and increase the technical complexity of their racecars throughout the 1950s necessitating higher investments in order to have a chance to win at the speedway.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Hiram Hillegas in his shop with a sprint car frame, ca. 1950s (Courtesy of the Eastern Museum of Motor Racing)}
\end{figure}

\footnote{Ludwig, \textit{Tommy Hintershitz}, 128.}
As the price of open-cockpit racecars continued to rise, it became increasingly difficult for working class men to afford a sprint car. Talented drivers collaborated with car owners and sponsors to share the financial burdens of racing.\textsuperscript{460} Local businessmen who had an interest in motorsports and a desire to advertise their businesses at the speedway served as car owners. Ted Nyquist owned an engine shop as well as a successful mobile home business in Reading. Several of the area’s top drivers, including Wally Campbell, Tommy Hinnershitz, and Johnny Parson, all piloted Nyquist’s Berks Trailer Sales Offy at some point during their racing careers. Businessman Sam Traylor was a second popular area car owner. Traylor owned a large hotel in Allentown. He was one of the first Penn-Jersey car owners to own a multi-car racing team, and he operated a three car team throughout the 1950s and 1960s. After paying for racing equipment, repairs, travel, and drivers, car owners had few financial rewards to show for a successful racing season. Car owners like Nyquist and Traylor continuously participated in racing for the love of the sport and not a desire for monetary gain.\textsuperscript{461} Car owners received a satisfying emotional experience from the excitement of racing without having to be in the cockpit of a racecar. They invested large sums of money into racing in exchange for a chance to watch their

\textsuperscript{460} Car owners typically paid their drivers forty percent of the purse money they won plus an additional fifty percent of the appearance money awarded to the driver by the promoter. See, John Bryan Gerber, \textit{Outlaw Sprint Car Racer} (Marshall: Witness Productions, 1997), 213.

racecar win. Car owners regularly celebrated when their cars made it to victory lane, posing for pictures on the front stretch of the speedway with their driver and race team and discussing the highlights of the race with track announcers before the a crowd of cheering onlookers.

The Diversification of Dirt Track Racing

The rising commercialization of sprint car racing led to the diversification of American motorsports during the 1950s. Technical hobbyists, who could no longer afford to participate in the sprint car ranks, created new dirt track racing divisions that were more affordable for amateur drivers. A growing national emphasis on automobility and rising passenger car sales throughout the United States spurred the technological diversification in racecar design. The federal government had halted all production of new automobiles during World War II, and Americans rushed to purchase new passenger automobiles when production resumed during the late 1940s. Prewar clunkers filled area junkyards resulting in a surplus of cheap used cars for local racing enthusiasts.462 Men began to form stock car racing leagues and raced 1930s factory-produced cars that had been only slightly modified for racing. Speed enthusiasts with limited financial means and no prior racing experience could easily field a 1930s “jalopy” car at their local dirt speedway. Amateur drivers devised a series of stock car racing divisions at their local dirt tracks based on the age, make,

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and technical alterations made to passenger sedans. Stock car drivers regularly shared the same pit areas and speedways as the regions sprint car racing teams.

Stock car drivers experienced technological daring without the same level of financial and physical risks involved in sprint car racing. Stock cars had roll cages, which protected a driver’s head and torso during a collision. The larger size and weight distribution of stock cars also made them harder to flip upside down during a crash. Finally, stock cars failed to reach the high speeds achieved by sprint cars. While stock car drivers could still end up in the hospital after an on-track crash, racers had lower accident rates when they competed in the jalopy racing divisions.

Entry-level stock car racing divisions created an affordable outlet for men who had an interest in automotive technology to participate in competitive racing. Silver Spring Speedway opened in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania in 1953. The three-eighths mile dirt track attracted local technophiles from neighboring communities. Most participants had full time jobs during the week and invested modest racing budgets into their stock car “jalopies” racing each weekend. Participants sometimes drove their prewar jalopies directly to the speedway. Drivers’ family members and friends filled the grandstands and pit area creating strong social bonds between area racing enthusiasts who met weekly for Saturday night racing events at Silver Spring. Car counts remained high with over sixty jalopy drivers meeting at the track each weekend. Promoters boosted local interest by devising rules that kept the cost of
participation well within the reach of local working class men. One reporter explained, “these races feature ‘do-it-yourself’ boys who in most cases build their stocks, maintain and repair them then get out there every Saturday night and do their best to get that checkered flag.” The rising popularity of jalopy racing in Central Pennsylvania provided a new outlet from novice racecar drivers to compete, and area speed fans now had a variety of opportunities to see both sprint cars and stock cars race within a short drive from their homes.

The success of stock car racing divisions following World War II challenged the existing hierarchy of American motorsports. Open-wheel racing had dominated dirt track racing since the 1920s. As sprint car racing became increasingly technical and more expensive with each racing season, drivers continued to professionalize. Aspiring young drivers chose to join stock car racing leagues at area dirt tracks because they could race regularly within their local communities without seeking outside sponsorship or monetary support. Racing insiders noted the rising attraction of stock car racing among both drivers and spectators claiming that late models, modified stocks, and jalopies were “usurping the lofty position in the minds of race fans”

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traditionally held by open-cockpit racecars. Fans could no longer understand the technical complexities that enthralled sprint car participants. They identified with stock car racing because these racecars closely resembled their passenger automobiles. People could easily pick out the various automobile brands and models competing in local stock car divisions and avidly cheered for drivers who competed in specific makes and models of cars.

The rising postwar popularity of auto-centered pastimes, such as stock car racing and hot rodding, impacted the ways that Americans conceptualized automobility and risk. People failed to make an accurate distinction between the nation’s hot rod craze and stock car racing. They criticized auto racing for encouraging high speed and reckless driving, especially among teenage boys. Racing fans openly contradicted claims that auto racing contributed to juvenile delinquency and reckless driving. Recalling his own teenage adventures as a racing mechanic, Joseph F. Scanlon commented, “racing left me no time for crime, but promoted quick thinking, fast co-ordination, mechanical perfection and spot


decision.” Scanlon emphasized that involvement in motorsports encouraged young men to apply their excess energy to the pursuit of mechanical knowledge, which was becoming more and more essential in the machine focused, postwar age.

**Masculinity and Femininity on Display at the Speedway**

The rising popularity of stock car racing at the nation’s dirt tracks tested the traditional demographics of the pit area. Since drivers competed in racecars that closely resembled passenger vehicles, racing enthusiasts viewed stock car racing as less technical, costly and dangerous than open-wheel racing. American women regularly participated in the nation’s automobile culture driving on a daily basis to work, shop, and care for their families. The growing cultural acceptance of female automobilists challenged the gender exclusion of the speedway. NASCAR mastermind, Bill France Sr., was one of the first promoters who allowed female drivers to directly participate against men in races during the late 1940s. France used female drivers as a marketing ploy to attract novice race fans to his NASCAR promotions. He emphasized female racecar drivers as a novelty and exciting diversion for speed enthusiasts.

When stock car racing debuted at the New York State Fair in

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468 “Stock Car Races Draw Big Crowd,” *Times Herald*, September 8, 1949, 6

1949, fans cheered on two female participants, local Syracuse resident, Dorothy Baldwin, and Sara Christian of Atlanta. Christian regularly competed on the NASCAR circuit dirt track circuit. She beat out twelve male competitors to win her preliminary heat race at Syracuse and finished in fourth place in the feature event.\textsuperscript{470} Less than a week later, Christian competed in NASCAR’s 200-mile National Championship race at Langhorne Speedway again placing in the top ten.\textsuperscript{471} A second female stock car driver, Louise Smith of Greenville, South Carolina also participated in the Langhorne race.\textsuperscript{472} Christian and Smith were among a select group of less than ten female drivers who regularly raced on the stock car circuit throughout the decade.


\textsuperscript{471} “Stock Car Races Draw Big Crowd,” \textit{Times Herald}, September 8, 1949, 6; “Fifty Drivers to Go to Post In Big Stock Car Classic,” \textit{Bristol Daily Courier}, September 10, 1949, 4; and “All Stock Car Racing Records Due to Be Topped this Season” \textit{Times Herald}, February 22, 1950, 15.

Female stock car drivers challenged traditional cultural constructions of technology-centered hobbies as masculine pursuits. In a photomontage of female stock car drivers that appeared in *Speed Age* magazine, editors provided visual evidence that female stock car drivers followed traditional gender norms in order to participate in racing events. The article heavily emphasized the femininity of female drivers.

Postwar culture increasingly stereotyped female athletes as unfeminine in demeanor, mannish in their appearance, and incapable of maintaining heterosexual relationships.
with men, so *Speed Age* worked to assure their readers that female stock drivers could maintain traditional tenets of femininity at the speedway.\footnote{Susan K. Cahn, “From the “Muscle Moll” to the “Butch” Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women’s Sport,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 1993), 343-368.} A picture of a smiling Ethel Flock Mobley playing with her daughter in front of her racecar was captioned, “Even a lady race driver must take time out to care for her offspring.” Despite their participation in dirt track racing events, the female stock car drivers continued to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. Female drivers were further portrayed as being heterosexually attractive and fastidious about their physical appearance. Each of the three women pictured appears in fashionable, clean clothing with perfectly styled hair and make-up. The photographers pictured Mildred Williams in the seat of her racecar applying lipstick with a hand mirror before a race. They joked, “Many a race has been held up by a driver making some last minute mechanical adjustment, but now we have Mildred Williams who must make sure her lipstick is on straight.”\footnote{L. Boyd Stanford and Tom Aldred, “The Weaker Sex?” *Speed Age*, August-September 1948, 13.} In their portrayal of these female stock car drivers, *Speed Age* emphasized female racecar drivers as nonthreatening women who continued to adhere to traditional female gender roles as attractive sexual partners as well as attentive mothers.

Women struggled to gain acceptance into male-dominated pit areas of eastern dirt tracks, as men continued to use well established methods of gatekeeping to


\footnote{L. Boyd Stanford and Tom Aldred, “The Weaker Sex?” *Speed Age*, August-September 1948, 13.}
monitor participation within the sport. Drivers intentionally sought out female competitors on the track unnecessarily hitting and blocking their cars. Louise Smith recalled how one male driver pushed her car into a ditch “just to put me in my place when I started.”\textsuperscript{475} Male drivers and crewmen also ignored female participants in the pit area offering them little assistance with their cars. Some racing organizations worked to restrict female participation within motorsports by mandating that women conduct all work on their racecars in the pit area without the assistance of male crew men.\textsuperscript{476} Racing promoters and officials rationalized that few women would be able to compete without the technical assistance of male mechanics in the pit area. Such restrictions exemplified larger societal beliefs that attributed men with technical know-how and an innate connection to tools and machines.\textsuperscript{477} Most speedways relegated women to all female racing divisions, due to beliefs about their low level of technical mastery and fears that a female driver would be seriously injured when racing men on the speedway. These all-female racing divisions were often referred to as

\textsuperscript{475} Wise, “Fast Women: Female Racing Pioneers,” 47.


“powderpuff” leagues, a nonthreatening moniker indicating that female drivers would not let their racing careers get in the way of their physical beauty. Through special restrictions, limited communication, and gender segregated racing divisions, male drivers and pit men continued to limit female participation within the sport and downplayed women as serious competitors at the speedway.

Many racing organizations adhered to postwar gender norms by conceptualizing different acceptable levels of risk for men and women within technology-centered hobbies. While some women did participate in stock car racing divisions, open-wheel racers continued to be limited to men. Promoters and participants believed that sprint cars were too dangerous and technologically complex for women. In their 1949 rulebook, one California racetrack stipulated that female participants “must be unmarried, or if married and have no children, must have the husband’s consent to drive and must be 21 years of age.”

Restrictions on married women’s participation in motorsports reflected postwar dialogues that emphasized a

478 Steven Gelber discusses the popularity of do it yourself hobbies and household home improvement projects for American men during the postwar era. Gelber argues that men viewed their workshops and garages as important male meeting places. Men were hesitant to let their wives participate in household projects because they believed women could not use the tools necessary to complete such tasks. See, Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 256-294.

married women’s primary role as housekeeper and mother. Promoters may have feared public backlash if a racing injury to a female participant deprived young children of their mother. Despite the continued high fatality rate among male racecar drivers, similar edicts were not implemented for married male participants. The death of Penn-Jersey racecar drivers regularly meant the loss of the primary provider and income for his wife and children. The ability of women to fully participate in the dirt track racing subculture remained confined by traditional gender stereotypes, while men remained unencumbered in the pursuits of technical hobbies.

Women struggled to competitively race due to decades of gender stereotypes that had denied female racing enthusiasts access to technical mentorships within speedway pit areas. Promoters and participants had actively prevented women from gaining the insider knowledge about racecar construction and rules that they needed to succeed within the sport. The women who climbed into racecars and competitively raced during the postwar era had advanced mechanical knowledge that allowed them to achieve success with in the sport. For example, Louise Smith helped in her family’s automobile parts store in Greenville, South Carolina. Female drivers relied heavily on male relatives who were already accepted as racing insiders to help jump start their


racing careers. Male family members shared mechanical secrets, tools, and equipment with aspiring female drivers. While women did gain access to grassroots speedways during the 1950s, the identification of the pit area as a masculine domain remained firmly embedded within the top levels of American motorsports. Officials at Indianapolis Speedway continued to prohibit women from even entering the pit area of the racetrack until 1971. Most grassroots dirt tracks continued to deny women drivers access to the speedway throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.

482 While promoting New Atlanta Speedway, Bob Flock allowed female drivers including his sister Ethel to practice on the track and taught them driving tactics such as the power slide. See, Wise, “Fast Women,” 52.

483 The decision to allow women into the pit area of Indianapolis was mandated by the Marion County Superior Court after a female reporter for Women’s World magazine filed a lawsuit against the speedway. See, Nelson Price, “A Woman at the Brickyard: Bettie Cadou And Indianapolis Motor Speedway,” Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History, Volume 19, No. 2, 7.
Since women faced widespread exclusion from sprint car racing during the 1950s, male racing enthusiasts continued to conceptualize the dirt speedway as a technical playground for men. The racing fraternity used cartoons, such as “The Hero – But Not At Home!” by illustrator Frank Hill published in the November 1951 issue of Speed News, to stress that technology-centered hobbies offered men an important escape and release from the pressures of their families and occupations. 484 A male racecar driver is seen zooming along the speedway and manages to win the

484 The cartoon “The Hero-But Not At Home!” by Frank Hill appeared in Speed Age magazine in November 1951 on page 45.
competition despite a mid-race flip. The driver proudly poses for a photograph in victory lane standing in front of his racecar holding his large trophy. In the last frame of the cartoon, the racecar driver appears behind the wheel of his passenger car presumably driving home from the race with his wife and young child. The racecar driver has none of the masculine bravado he demonstrated on the speedway. With his shoulders slumped, the racing hero drives home with an expression of fear and consternation as his wife angrily berates him from the passenger’s seat of the family’s sedan. While he may be a confident, assertive hero on the speedway, the driver did not hold this same level of respect within his own family. The cartoon insinuates that this fictitious driver - and male auto racing participants more generally - depended on racing as an important masculine outlet for adventure and self-esteem. Magazines, television shows, and popular literature during the 1950s emphasized the growing pressures placed on American men to maintain authority and financially provide for their families, and they argued that men needed hobbies and sports as outlets from their daily obligations of bosses, wives, and children.


Racing insiders celebrated racing garages and pit areas as masculine spaces for homosocial bonding. The majority of postwar racecar drivers continued to be “weekend warriors” working full time jobs and making automobile racing their all-encompassing pastime.\textsuperscript{487} Race team members congregated at local garages working several evenings a week to prepare their racecars for racing events. Most garages were located in driver’s backyards or attached to their small businesses. Crew men and mechanics typically lived nearby easily commuting between their place of employment, house, and team garage during the racing season. Racecar drivers, such as Tommy Hinnershitz, Johnny Thompson, and Mark Light maintained a strong social network regularly visiting each other’s garages sharing gossip as well as racecar parts and technical know-how.\textsuperscript{488} As racecar drivers and mechanics established a network of garages throughout the region, they created spaces for men to socialize and interact with like-minded technical enthusiasts.

Sprint car drivers demonstrated a masculinity that appealed to both postwar corporate sponsors and American consumers. After winning the AAA National


\textsuperscript{488} Ludwig discusses the development of regional garages and technological exchanges in his biography of Tommy Hinnershitz, See, Chapter 5, “A Neighborhood of Pioneers” in \textit{Tommy Hinnershitz}. 
Championship in 1946-1947, Ted Horn attracted the attention of automotive-product companies who paid Horn to endorse their products. Horn appeared in print advertisement campaigns for both Burd Piston Rings and Champion Spark Plugs.\textsuperscript{489} He excelled at the art of self-promotion. After a feature win, Horn always went back to his pit area to wash his face and change into a clean uniform before appearing before cameramen and fans in victory lane. Horn only endorsed products that he used directly in his racecar or in daily life, and he eschewed all product endorsements that conflicted with his personal morals and lifestyle.\textsuperscript{490} Horn refused to endorse alcohol and cigarettes explaining, “I don’t use either you know, but I felt there were too many youngsters who look up to me now, and I would be setting a pretty poor example for them, advocating liquor and smoking.”\textsuperscript{491} Horn and other top sprint car drivers recognized that they served as role models for several boys and teenagers who attended racing events. The racing fraternity constantly self-policed its members

\textsuperscript{489} See advertisements republished in Russ Catlin’s \textit{The Life of Ted Horn}, 185 and 201.

\textsuperscript{490} Horn’s adherence to middle-class gender norms during the postwar period contrasted with the rough and tumble pit area antics of early NASCAR drivers, see: Pete Daniel, Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 116-117. Horn’s emphasis on family values also set him apart from the growing movement among middle-class, urban men who celebrated being single, dating women, and consuming a variety of products marketed to men. See, Elizabeth Fraterrigo, \textit{Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{491} Catlin, \textit{The Life of Ted Horn}, 178.
emphasizing cleanliness, strong sportsmanship, and morality as key tenets of an auto racer’s creed. Editors of the National Speed Sport News lectured racing enthusiasts, “Fellowship is good brotherhood and we cannot countenance any person in the midst of our gentlemanly sport who lack face, character, and integrity.” Men took their local celebrity status seriously and wanted to demonstrate their high moral character for impressionable youngsters and corporate sponsors alike.

Racing provided men with a masculine escape, but drivers consistently stressed that their families were as equally important to them as their racing trophies and records. Several drivers worked to make automobile racing a family pastime and actively included their families in their racing careers. Tommy Hinnershitz’s wife and two daughters regularly accompanied him to local races at the nearby Reading Fairgrounds and Williams Grove Speedway. Racing families typically followed the gender segregation of the speedway with wives and young children cheering their husbands on from the grandstands, while teenage boys and other male relatives assisted the driver in the pit area. All family members, however, shared the same experiences at the speedway actively discussing the major events of each racing program throughout the week following a race.


494 Ludwig, Tommy Hinnershitz, 135.
Figure 13  Racecar driver Tommy Hinnershitz photographed with his two daughters, ca. 1950s (Courtesy of the Eastern Museum of Motor Racing)

Sprint car drivers adhered to middle class family values of the 1950s emphasizing fatherhood as a key aspect of their identity.\textsuperscript{495} Postwar racing papers

\textsuperscript{495} The family values upheld by the sprint car racing community diverged significantly from the masculine values of early stock car racing. Stock car racers created personas that emphasized a masculine bravado which included drinking, fighting, and bootlegging as key characteristics of a successful NASCAR drivers’ resume. For further reading on the ways NASCAR drivers have created a mythic lore around the early days of NASCAR and created a masculine identity of drinking, bootlegging, and womanizing, see: Pete Daniel, “In their own words: NASCAR in American Through Oral History,” \textit{Atlanta History: Journal of Georgia}, Vol. 46, Issue 2 (2004), 8.
increasingly published pictures of drivers with their children before or after racing events.\footnote{496}{“Notes from Here and There,” \textit{Speed Age}, July 1948, 25 and Len Duncan, “Hatfield Winner Likes Kids,” \textit{National Speed Sport News}, June 24, 1953, 4.} When Hinnershitz broke his leg in a racing accident, local newspapers highlighted pictures of Hinnershitz recovering at home in the company of his two daughters.\footnote{497}{“Tommy Hinnershitz Newspaper Clippings Collection,” Tommy Hinnershitz Garage Installation at the Eastern Museum of Motor Racing.} Like other postwar American men, sprint car drivers determined their personal success in terms of not only their occupational and pastime accomplishments but in their roles as husbands and fathers.\footnote{498}{Michael Kimmel, \textit{Manhood in America: A Cultural History} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149; C. Wright Mills, \textit{White Collar} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 161-166.} Racecar driver Ted Horn’s second wife, Gerry, announced the 1949 birth of their daughter, Gayeleen Pamela Horn, in a cheeky birth announcement that exemplified the couples’ love for motorsports. All of the traditional details of a birth announcement - including the weight, height, time and place of their baby’s birth - were described as if Gayeleen herself was a brand new racecar. Gayeleen had a “wheel base” of 19.5 inches. She “tires – sometimes,” and her “amount of displacement – plenty.”\footnote{499}{\textit{The Decatur Herald}, February 27, 1949, 14.} The family’s decision to announce the birth of their new baby in such a unique way is particularly noteworthy, since Ted Horn died
in racing accident four months before Gayeleen’s birth. Despite the loss of her husband to motorsports, Mrs. Horn showed little animosity towards dirt track racing. The birth announcement paid tribute to her late husband’s racing career and was presumably widely circulated among their many racing friends and acquaintances.

The itinerant lifestyle of the nation’s top speedsters as well as the physical hazards of the racing profession did challenge racecar drivers’ family-first mentalities. The grueling racing schedule that had drivers traveling almost constantly from May to October meant that drivers had to spend several weeks each year away from their families. Loved ones also recognized the dangers of the sport and constantly feared for the safety of their driver. Racing reporter H.W. Luther explained that racing wives’ “lot is the waiting, the hoping, and the praying as their men-folk engage” in speed contests. Sometimes the psychological stress created by the sport strained racecar drivers’ marriages. Ted Horn’s first wife, Theresa Weber Horn, claimed that Ted’s endless quest for a victory played a significant role in her decision to end her marriage to the racing ace. His desire to win the nation’s major racing event became an all-consuming passion that took him away from his family. Likewise, Mitzi Cherle


Nalon divorced racecar driver Duke Nalon crediting the emotional and financial stress of Duke’s racing career as the major reasons for her decision. Mrs. Nalon “testified that Nalon’s racing exploits made her so nervous that she was hospitalized for 2 ½ months.”

Mrs. Nalon also charged that she had suffered several financial ramifications from Nalon’s racing career, and she claimed she had to sell her personal belongings including jewelry, furnishings, and a house to pay for Duke’s medical bills after he was burned severely in a racing accident. Constant traveling, injuries, and racing-related bills put serious strains on racecar driver’s marriages, but participants continued to adhere to postwar gender norms and took their responsibilities as fathers and husbands seriously both on and off the racetrack.

For the majority of racecar drivers, maintaining racecars during the work week and commuting to area racetracks every weekend occupied the majority of their free time. Racing was more than just a hobby. It was an all-encompassing lifestyle. Drivers formed close friendships, which extended beyond racecar set ups to double dates and family outings. In fact, Mark Light introduced Tommy Hinnershitz to his future wife


504 Mrs. Nalon asked the California court to grant her $600 per month in alimony during the divorce proceedings. She later claimed that the ten time Indianapolis 500 competitor had disappeared to Mexico to avoid paying her hefty alimony. See, Walt Woestman, “Looking Back,” National Speed Sport News, November 18, 1953, 10; “Nalon’s Wife Wins Divorce,” Anderson Herald, October 23, 1953, 26; and “Duke Nalon Divorced,” San Bernardino County Sun, October 24, 1953, 3.
Betty. The friendships racecar drivers formed throughout their racing careers with fellow drivers, mechanics and car owners continued to serve as their primary social and professional relationships.

Racecar drivers, car owners, and fans solidified their strong ties to regional dirt track automobile racing throughout the 1950s by forming automobile racing fans clubs. These grassroots organizations celebrated drivers’ accomplishments, discussed contemporary racing topics, and advocated for increased safety at speedway facilities. Racing clubs were a continuation of the duration clubs that had formed during World War II and provided racing enthusiasts with comradery and another outlet for their racing interests. Meetings held during the winter months gave members a chance to see friends, discuss racing, and watch racing movies during the off season. Over 200 racing enthusiasts living throughout central Pennsylvania formed the Checkered Flag Fan Club during the winter of 1951-1952. Checkered Flag Fan Club members recognized Williams Grove Speedway as their home track and hosted an annual race at the Grove each season. They also hosted a yearly banquet to honor local drivers and

505 Ludwig, Tommy Hinnershitz, 34.

506 “Big Car Auto Races At Grove Next Sunday,” The Evening Sun, September 1, 1952, 8.
pit crews, show racing movies, and display amateur photographs taken by racing
enthusiasts.  

**The 1955 Exit of AAA from American Racing**

Members of the racing fraternity contemplated the role that automobile racing
played within American culture after a series of high-profile racing fatalities occurred
during the 1955 racing season. Fans attending Indianapolis Motor Speedway in May
watched on helplessly as popular driver and two-time Indianapolis 500 winner, Bill
Vukovich, flipped upside down during the 500-mile race. Vukovich remained trapped
underneath his flaming racecar despite attempts by fellow drivers to remove him from
his vehicle. He burned to death on the speedway. Vukovich was one of five top
American sprint car driver killed during the 1955 racing season. These deaths were
compounded by the June 1955 tragedy at the road race in Le Mans, France. Driver,
Pierre Levegh, crashed, and his car – filled with nearly a full tank of gas - exploded in
midair as it hurled towards spectators. The accident took the life of Levegh as well as
over 80 race attendees, while several other fans suffered serious injuries and burns.
Race organizers decided to continue the race even though witnessed claimed that “for
100 yards along the track clothing and parts of bodies were scattered” from the

November 18, 1954, 34 and “Checkered Flag Fan Club Plans Event on Saturday

508 Chris Economaki, “Vukovich Death Mars 500 Classic,” *National Speed Sport
News*, June 1, 1955, 3.
People around the world expressed horror and outrage over these highly publicized racing accidents and advocated for immediate changes to the supervision and safety at all types of motor racing contests.

Public criticism of motorsports reached its zenith in the United States during the summer months of 1955. The rising popularity of the sport as well as the series of high-profile accidents had made motorsports into front page news and caught the attention of the nation. Senator Richard Neuberger of Oregon spoke before the United States Senate on July 12th urging President Eisenhower to issue an immediate national ban on all motor racing activity. Neuberger told his fellow senators that he doubted “if there is as much bloodshed in Spanish bull rings as today is occurring on automobile race tracks in this country.” The Oregon Democrat evoked contemporary themes of anxiety discussed among Americans to garner support for a racing ban. Neuberger emphasized a paternalistic need to stop racing in order to protect American women and children. He pointed out that “even women racing drivers” were meeting death on the speedway. Neuberger also intimated that racing contributed to high rates of juvenile delinquency and crime, because children were allowed to attend racing events and witness fatal accidents first hand. The Senator concluded his plea by stating, “The deaths on our highways are sad and tragic, but at least they are not purposely staged

for profit and for the delight of thousands of screeching spectators.” Neuberger firmly believed that automobile racing represented a barbaric display of death for public voyeurism and consumption, and he posited a racing ban as a moral necessity to protect the American public. Senator Neuberger’s call for national legislation against automobile racing failed to gain congressional momentum, but the Senator’s remarks did motivate racing enthusiasts to openly discuss the pros and cons of the sport.

A large contingent of racing enthusiasts placed the blame for racetrack fatalities on speedway promoters and operators who hosted races without regard for the safety of drivers or spectators at their speedways. Art Hoyt of Indianapolis, Indiana had recently lost his son in a racing accident in Oklahoma. After learning of the senator’s speech, Hoyt wrote a letter directly to Senator Neuberger. Hoyt claimed that some speedways failed to spend money to improve their facilities and regularly conducted races on inferior and dangerous track surfaces. He complained that AAA officials failed to sufficiently assess the condition of each speedway before a racing event and allowed promoters to host speed contests on bumpy, rut filled tracks, which

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511 Other speed enthusiasts agreed with Hoyt’s assessment that poor track facilities caused racing accidents. Reporter Henry F. Heald blamed high speeds and “racetracks which are pock-warped with holes, ripples, and just plain bumps” for the fatal accident involving racecar driver Elbert Booker. See, “On the Golden Speedway Go Two Fine Boys to Join Former Comrades,” National Speed Sport News, July 9, 1947, 2.
resulted in deadly accidents. Hoyt believed that track inspectors should be appointed at the state or federal level to examine speedways and enforce safe racing conditions.\textsuperscript{512} Hoyt was not completely opposed to government interaction within the sport, but he did not think a racing ban was the solution to the current problems facing dirt track racing. Hoyt and others advocated for increased regulation of speedway conditions and track safety.

By early August, the AAA Contest Board announced its exit from American automobile racing at the end of the 1955 season, ending over forty years of involvement and control over automobile racing in the United States. \textit{Indianapolis Star} sports editor, Jep Cadou Jr, explained, “The plain fact seems to be that the pressure and heat from certain uninformed newspaper writers has grown so great that AAA can no longer stand it.”\textsuperscript{513} AAA President Andrew Sordoni released a statement stating, “It was the feeling of our Executive Committee that automobile racing … with emphasis on speed, power and human endurance is not compatible with one of the main objectives of the AAA and its affiliated clubs in the day-to-day promotion of street and highway safety.” Sordoni expressed his doubts as to whether “racing contributes in material way to better cars or better parts for cars,” and he concluded

\textsuperscript{512} Russ Catlin, “How to Save Racing in America,” \textit{Speed Age}, November 1955, 13.

that automobile racing was no longer a primary focus for the club’s members. Sordoni’s explanation for AAA’s exit from racing rebuked the racing fraternity’s longstanding argument that motorsports directly contributed to passenger automobile technology. The negative international publicity over racing fatalities was counterproductive to AAA’s image as a leading proponent of automobile safety. The sudden exit of AAA from the sport sent shock waves through the racing community.

“A Okay” Without AAA

Although the American Automobile Association had abandoned the racing fraternity at its darkest hour, AAA’s exit was not a death sentence for American motorsports. Regional racing organizations had outgrown the AAA Contest Board. The rising popularity of racing throughout the late 1940s meant that grassroots promoters could host highly competitive and lucrative racing divisions without the involvement of AAA. By the early 1950s, AAA sanctioned only 10% of automobile


515 Catlin, “How to Save Racing in America,” 14.

racing within the United States.\textsuperscript{517} In the minds of the association’s leadership, AAA’s participation in motorsports failed to make sense from a financial as well as public relations standpoint. Coordinating over 700 automobile clubs across the United States, AAA officials viewed automobile racing as expendable to their organizational operations.

The 1956 racing season commenced without any major disruptions to the traditional pattern of grassroots dirt track racing. The majority of dirt track were already operating racing programs outside of AAA’s jurisdiction. Area promoters and drivers who did participate in the eastern AAA sprint car circuit felt confident that they could take over the duties previously performed by AAA officials. One promoter commented that “the biggest jolt car owners and drivers will feel will be the lack of coordination and scheduling of events.”\textsuperscript{518} With AAA no longer overseeing the scheduling of sprint car races, local speedway owners and operators communicated and collaborated to come up with coordinated racing schedules for the area’s top racing divisions. Most local tracks had already established specific race nights for their speedway making AAA’s exit from the sport a non-factor in their racing schedules. For instance, Williams Grove Speedway regularly hosted races on Friday nights by


\textsuperscript{518} “AAA Quits Racing,” \textit{National Speed Sport News}, August 10, 1955, 1.
1955, while nearby Silver Spring Speedway promoted their race program every Saturday.

Corporate sponsors also remained undeterred by AAA’s exit from the sport and continued to sign lucrative endorsement contracts with top sprint car drivers throughout the late 1950s. Corporate sponsors and competitors in a variety of different racing divisions continued to assert the positive technological benefits of motorsports. The Champion Spark Plug Company openly contradicted AAA’s argument that racing no longer served as a valuable testing ground for their passenger car spark plugs.519 Champion Spark Plug President, R.A. Shranahan, Jr. told readers of Speed Age, “We regard racing as a valuable supplementary lab for our regular research and engineering program.”520 Shranahan explained that the same amount of data from 1,000 hours of lab testing could be achieved from a single 500-mile race at Indianapolis. Other companies such as AP Parts Corporation agreed, and they continued to market their product lines directly to dirt track competitors and their avid fans. During the winter of 1955, Tommy Hinnershitz signed a year-long contract with AP Parts Corporation to endorse their Miracle Power products. By the terms of the contract, AP Parts agreed to pay to paint Hinnershitz’s racecar in the Miracle Power color scheme and provided

519 “‘Racing Valuable Laboratory’ Champion Disagrees with AAA,” National Speed Sport News, August 17, 1955, 4.

their driver with three racing uniforms. Miracle Power paid Hinnershitz two thousand dollars to endorse Miracle Power throughout the 1955 season. They also supplied Hinnershitz with an endless amount of Miracle Power products for his racecar and pleasure car. In order to receive these benefits, Hinnershitz agreed to participate in as many races as possible throughout the season. AP Parts also gained the rights to reproduce photographs of Hinnershitz and his racecar as well as publicize his racing results. Hinnershitz acted as an ambassador for the company attending press events, providing testimonials related to his use of Miracle Power products, and displaying Miracle Power products and literature in his Oley garage.521 Hinnershitz also acted as a regional distributor of Miracle Power products selling their lubricants to his fellow drivers and friends. For drivers, such as Tommy Hinnershitz, the 1955 exit of AAA from the sport had little impact on his racing career and sponsorship opportunities.

During the first half of the twentieth century, some city and municipal leaders had built up a strong relationship with their local speedways, and they recognized the continued economic and cultural benefits of dirt track racing to their communities. In the midst of the 1955 drama over the future of the sport, civic leaders in Reading, Pennsylvania remained steadfast in their public support for auto racing at the Reading Fairgrounds. They planned a special community celebration and race meet at the fairgrounds to honor local racing favorite Tommy Hinnershitz. Reading race director, 

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Russ Moyer, came up with the idea for the special event exclaiming to the press, “Why not give Tommy his just credit now which he’ll appreciate and at the same time enable the fans to show their appreciation?”

In addition to his humble demeanor and local residence in nearby Alsace Township, “the flying farmer” had an aggressive driving style that excited area race fans making him a spectator favorite. On October 9, 1955, local residents and race fans gathered at the Reading track for “Tommy Hinnershitz Day.” Track officials presented Hinnershitz with a check for $250 from the Reading Fairgrounds Association. The Berks County Chamber of Commerce gave him an engraved scroll to commemorate the event. As a result of a local fundraising campaign, supporters also presented the Hinnershitz family with the keys to a brand new 1956 Dodge car. Hinnershitz continuously claimed that the public support he received during Tommy Hinnershitz Day at Reading was one of the highlights of his racing career. Community members recognized the accomplishments of their local racing stars and celebrated them as hometown heroes.

Racecar drivers continued to have a high level of direct interaction with spectators at area dirt speedways, establishing personal bonds with fans that made...

522 Paul Lukas, “Sports Fan Fare,” Reading Eagle, October 20, 1955, 42.

523 Hinnershitz would race on the upper groove of the racetrack near the fence giving spectators a close view of the car, and he would zoom down the front stretch and broad slide into the turns. Ludwig, Tommy Hinnershitz, 149.

524 “To Honor Hinnershitz At Reading Tomorrow,” Gazette and Daily, October 8, 1955, 16.
people feel included within the auto racing community. Unlike the limited access fans had to baseball or football stars, avid speed fans could personally get to know the drivers whose racing styles they admired each weekend. Racecar drivers willingly talked to fans of all ages in the pit area and sometimes spent several hours answering questions, taking photographs, and signing autographs for speed enthusiasts after a race. The open access to drivers made spectators feel like they were integral members of the racing community, and these personal connections kept fans coming back to the racetrack each week.

Racing enthusiasts worked to solidify their status within the auto racing community through a growing number of consumer products and souvenirs sold at the speedway. Postwar spectators increasingly wore hats, t-shirts, or sew-on patches that advertised their support for an individual driver or racing association. During the late 1950s, teenager Ernie Saxton founded the Johnny Thomson Fan Club as a tribute to his favorite driver. Members of the fan club believed Thomson was “the greatest driver of them all,” and they admired his dedication to “clean living, good sportsmanship” as well as his ability to win in a variety of different racing divisions. The club made Johnny Thomson Fan Club t-shirts, which Thomson


proudly sported in the pit area of racetracks such as Reading. Spectators eternalized specific racing victories and events through ephemera and memorabilia. They made scrapbooks containing ticket stubs, pit passes, programs, and newspaper clippings of their favorite drivers. Amateur photographers set up stands at area speedways to sell head shots of drivers, action photographs, and images of drivers and fans in victory lane. Spectators avidly purchased racing photographs as a way to memorialize the racing action and built impressive personal collections as a way to commemorate their involvement within the sport.

Conclusion

During the weekend of the 1960 Indianapolis 500, promoters across the United States hosted an estimated 850 auto racing programs attracting over two million American speed fans. Life magazine reported that Americans had an “insatiable interest in cars, corners, and danger,” which had “made auto-racing America’s fastest-growing spectator sport.”

Automobile racing flourished during the postwar period because of the immense national interest in America’s growing drive-in culture. For rural communities with few consumer entertainment options, local dirt speedways became a place for young adults to socialize, watch races, and discuss passenger cars. Men and women cheered on the various new stock car racing divisions that resembled the automobiles they saw daily on the streets and roadways of their communities.

Sprint car drivers in their open-cockpit cars continued to star on the dirt track racing circuit. Male racecar drivers adhered to postwar gender norms and used automobile racing to display their masculinity both on and off the speedway.

The loss of a national governing organization in 1955 did impact motor racing at tracks throughout the area, but Penn-Jersey dirt tracks persevered due to a resilient local fan base. Racing enthusiasts cultivated a strong sense of community at the speedway. Their passion for motorsports continued on for generations as parents made racing a family pastime and indoctrinated their children into the rules and thrills of the sport from a young age. Racing organizations ensured the continuation of strong local racing divisions by enforcing stringent rules that prohibited the cost of participation from rising above the budgets of local drivers. Weekly racing programs, featuring multiple racing divisions, ensured that interested technophiles with varying racing budgets could continue to participate in local racing events.
CONCLUSION

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Americans converted consumer automobiles into purpose-built racecars. These utilitarian objects of daily transportation were transformed in the context of the racetrack. Men and women who spent their free time at closed-circuit dirt speedways were mesmerized by the full sensory experience of racecars zooming around and around at breathtaking speeds. The pursuit of victory in the tenuous atmosphere of extreme risks appealed to both participants and spectators alike. Racecars took on symbolic meaning for racing enthusiasts as objects of anonymity, technical mastery, masculine daring, human progress, theatrical entertainment, and individual creativity. Members of the dirt track racing subculture further negotiated larger cultural ideas about race, gender, and class through the written rules, unspoken traditions, and physical organization of the landscape of the dirt speedway.

The most common place to see open-wheel racing from 1924 to 1960 was at state and county fairgrounds. Agricultural societies already had oval dirt track on their fairground properties to host horse racing competitions. These tracks lent themselves well to racing purpose-built big cars. In most cases, fair operators hosted automobile racing events once or twice a year during their annual agricultural expositions. Promoters, drivers, and speed fans travelled extensively throughout the region each year to attend auto races at various speedways. While some speedways offered six to eight racing programs each season by the late 1930s, the majority of grassroots dirt
tracks did not host weekly racing programs until after World War II. The postwar popularity of technology-centered hobbies facilitated the expansion of dirt track motorsports into a lucrative consumer leisure industry. Entrepreneurs constructed purpose-built speedways throughout the mid-Atlantic region and multiple tracks offered weekly racing programs for sprint cars as well as a variety of other open-wheel and stock car divisions.

Racing enthusiasts came from a diverse range of backgrounds, and it is too simplistic to assume that all racecar drivers and mechanics were “working class.” Racecar drivers typically held levels of education and occupation associated with blue collar Americans. They raced on evenings and weekends, while holding full time paid employment throughout the week. Racing was an expensive hobby. Constant repairs to racing equipment throughout the racing season meant that participants needed cash to invest in their race teams that often exceeded the amount of money they made through racing. As the price of competition increased by the postwar period, sprint car drivers also relied on car owners to foot the bill for their race team. In most cases, wealthy small business owners financially supported local racing teams. Motorsports brought men from different backgrounds together, and racing insiders formed strong friendships through their shared interests in dirt track racing. Members of the pit area bonded over racing technology and track experiences. Pit members talked racing strategy, car set up, and race highlights with those individuals who shared their status as racing insiders.
Car owners, drivers, mechanics and officials consistently worked to monitor entry into the pit area. While white men from various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds found a sense of brotherhood and community among their fellow technophiles in the pit area, other men and women were isolated or excluded from the speedway comradery. Racing insiders developed a specific creed of behavior that drivers had to adhere to both on the racetrack and in the pit area. Complex rules and technical specifications for racecar design meant that newcomers needed the help of veteran drivers and mechanics in order to succeed within the sport. Racing insiders depended on traditional methods of apprenticeship training and mentorship in order to monitor who entered the ranks of the pit area. Men who violated racing insiders’ unspoken creed of behavior struggled to break into motorsports. While white men needed to prove their merit both on and off the track in order to gain full acceptance as a racing insider, men of color and women had few opportunities to even access dirt track pit areas. Racing insiders consistently relied on cultural attitudes about technological skill and masculinity to deny black men and women participation within motorsports.

Dirt track automobile was an extremely risky pastime for Americans. Injury and fatality rates remained high. The minimal payoff at most grassroots racing events did not seem to be a substantial incentive for suffering severe burns, broken limbs, concussions, or even death at the speedway. Outsiders often wondered why anyone wanted to participate in racing when the risks clearly outweighed the rewards. Racecar drivers struggled to describe their passion for motorsports. Racers discussed racing as
a physical and emotional release – a rush of adrenaline – that could not be replicated through participation in any other sport or hobby. For men with mundane jobs and chaotic family lives, automobile racing also provided them with the opportunity to become local celebrities. Motorsports made ordinary men into heroes. Men do not have to be wealthy or good looking to become speed stars, and their celebrity status within the sport instead depended on what they could do inside the cockpit of a racecar. Fearless driving, consistent victories, and good sportsmanship garnered accolades off the speedway.528

Racing participants and spectators invested a great deal of time, money, and emotional energy in motorsports; however, they recognized that racing enthusiasts represented only a small subsection of American technical hobbyists. Racing enthusiasts defended their favorite pastime to outsiders who criticized motorsports for being a barbaric display of technological carnage. Drivers and mechanics continuously argued that racing had technological implications for the average American consumer. Participants were adamant that the innovations they made at the speedway translated to better performance and safety for the average family automobile. Racing enthusiasts also viewed participation in motorsports as an ideal activity for building character and courage among young men. In a nation where the automobile is central to everyday life, understanding the intricate workings of engines and demonstrating creative

problem-solving under the hood of a racecar meant acceptance into a larger national group of American men who worked on and played with cars.

From 1955 to 1978, no single racing organization oversaw the promotion of sprint car races at the national level. AAA had outlived its usefulness, as a national governing body for American motorsports. Racetracks were teeming with spectators and car counts were high, so promoters did not need AAA or any other sanctioning group to help them attract drivers or fans. Fair associations, promoters, and racing clubs continued to manage all racing actives at individual speedways. Organizers were cognizant of the oversaturation of the racing immediately following World War II, and track managers collaborated with neighboring speedways to coordinate their racing schedules. The majority of sprint cars drivers continued to race primarily at their home track as well as a cluster of speedways located within a 50 mile radius of their homes. Sprint car racing thrived throughout the mid-Atlantic region throughout the second half of the twentieth century, but open-wheel dirt track racing failed to become a mass media sport. Sprint car racing received little to no press coverage in mainstream periodicals or daily sports television shows, such as ESPN’s Sports Center. Americans today primarily associate motorsports with NASCAR due to the success of NASCAR in attracting corporate sponsorships, television contracts, and mass media coverage. Why did sprint car racing fail to follow the same trajectory as NASCAR throughout the 1960s-1990s?

While sprint car racing regionally segmented under a variety of promotional banners, stock car racing consolidated under a single promoter, Bill France Sr. The
strong centralized leadership of NASCAR and its dedicated fan base attracted the attention of automobile manufacturers and corporate investors who provided large amounts of sponsorship money for the NASCAR racing circuit as well as individual race teams. By the early 1970s, NASCAR had dethroned sprint car racing in fan popularity and consumer investments. While NASCAR continued to expand into a multi-million dollar industry, sprint car racing remained splintered into a series of regional racing circuits. NASCAR came to dominate American motorsports largely due to corporate investments and televised racing coverage.\textsuperscript{529} By the time the World of Outlaws formed in 1978 and created a national touring group for the nation’s top sprint car drivers, NASCAR had expanded into a multi-million dollar corporate empire.

The rise of televised NASCAR races further sealed the fate of sprint car racing in the United States. Corporations wanted their sponsorships to have the widest possible viewership and continued to endorse racing leagues that had regularly televised races. While sprint car races at Reading Speedway had been televised as early as 1953, the quick pace of sprint car racing programs failed to achieve high

levels of television viewership. Multi-hour endurance races such as the NASCAR’s Daytona 500 provided opportunities for commercial breaks and announcer commentary that attracted both broadcasting networks and viewers. When the Cigarette Smoking Act of 1969 banned cigarette companies from directly advertising their products in radio and television advertisements, RJ Reynolds signed a sponsorship agreement with NASCAR to become the primary sponsor of the stock car racing circuit, which was rechristened as the Winston Cup Series. Federal laws did not prohibit the display of cigarette names and logos on racecars nor did they prohibit speedway and television announcers from mentioning cigarette companies as their primary race sponsors. For the 1971 racing season, RJ Reynolds provided NASCAR with $365,000 in car sponsorships, point fund, and purse money that helped NASCAR to continue to professionalize and expand their racing operations.

Fair boards and family operated dirt tracks failed to compete with NASCAR for corporate sponsorships and a national fan base throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Sprint car racing lacked a strong national organization to promote the interests of dirt track racers. Without national press coverage or televised racing, participation at most sprint car tracks remained small and regional. Members of the


dirt track racing community enjoy the continued sense of community of grassroots racing. Dirt racetracks maintain a family atmosphere. Families come to the speedway with their lawn chairs and blankets picking a spot in the infield to watch the races, as their kids play with friends nearby throwing footballs or racing toy cars in the dirt. Spectators of all ages still rush into victory lane for photos with their favorite drivers. They enjoy the sense of access they have to the local speed stars and walk the pit area after the races to check out the racecars and met their favorite drivers.

Central Pennsylvania remains one of the nation’s premier locations to watch high caliber weekly sprint car racing. The strength of this regional racing circuit depends on good promotion, top talent, and a loyal fan base. Promoters, drivers, and spectators continue to form a symbiotic relationship, as they had done since the 1920s. Racecar technology has continued to evolve throughout the second half of the twentieth century, but the incentives for participation and emotional energy people receive from watching a dirt track race has remained relatively consistent. As the racecars take their last pace lap before the drop of the green flag, participants and spectators alike feel the flutter of anticipation and agree that oval track racing is “the greatest show on dirt.”
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Appendix A

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- Fred Frame and his son in a Langhorne Program from August 13, 1932.
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- Tommy Hinnershitz with his two daughters on display in the Hinnershitz garage installation.

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Fred Frame and his son inn a Langhorne Program from August 13, 1932.

Hiram Hillegas in his shop, ca. 1950's.

Tommy Hinnershitz with his two daughters on display in the Hinnershitz garage installation.

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