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By MICHAEL J. MARRER

NASCAR Modifieds Spend a Weekend in the Mountains

ROC '86

THE RACE OF CHAMPIONS. The name alone conjures up visions of the best the sport has to offer. And for 36 years, the world of asphalt Modified racing has converged every fall to crown a new king, making the Race Of Champions one of the oldest, continuously run races in the country. But the only consistent thing in life is change.

As real estate values increased, tracks began to make way for shopping centers. The ROC found itself migrating from Langhorne's 1-mile circular dirt and D-shaped asphalt layouts to Trenton's kidney-shaped 1½-miler, on to Pocono's 2½-mile superspeedway, and finally it has found its current home on Pocono's ¾-mile infield oval.

More changes took place in 1973, as NASCAR began sanctioning the event. A new wrinkle was added: a good finish was needed if one wanted to wear the National Modified crown.

This year, for the first time since 1971, a driver from a town other than Rome, New York, was going to hold the NASCAR national title. With more on the line at the ROC than just having your name on the winner's trophy, race strategy had to be different. Most drivers said they refused to let the points battle enter their minds or dictate their game plan.

Jimmy Spencer entered the race with a fairly comfortable points lead, and a win would almost certainly lock up the '86



As a tribute to the late Richie Evans, his Daytona Modified was used to lead the pace lap. (Mike Turek photo)



Jarzombeck (#5) fought for the early lead with Jimmy Spencer (#24), but 12 pit stops put Charlie J. in seventh spot at the finish. (Richard Oakley photo)

George Kent (#26) put the yellow-and-black DeWitt car where it's used to being, in victory circle. (Richard Oakley photo)

title. But he was in no hurry to get to the front of the field. "I never charge. It isn't that important to lead these big races until the end of the race. Make a good pit stop on your last stop, then see how fast you really can go.

"I thought that if I kept winning races and finishing well, the points would take care of themselves. And in the last eight races, they have."

Spencer felt that the race could be decided off the track, as was his victory the previous weekend at the Thompson 300. "Our team finally has gotten together and they're working at full capacity. We proved that last week in the 300. Our pit stops were unbeatable and I think that's what won us the race. Your pit stops

have to work out right, your car has to work good all day, and you've got to use your head. And I think I've used my head all year long."

For Jan Leaty, points did have a meaning. But it wasn't the NASCAR variety we're talking about. He was in second place in the CAM2 ROC point fund and intended to stay there. "I have to look at finishing this race and being in the top 15 to clinch the second spot. That pays a lot of money—\$5000 to finish second."



The Pocono show always provides plenty of off-track action. (Mike Turek photo)

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Leaty was impressive during qualifying. He was one of the five heat winners that time-trialed late Saturday to determine their starting position, and Leaty ended up sitting on the pole. (He also proved that it wasn't a fluke by setting fast time the following weekend against many of the same drivers at the Southern Tier 150 at the Shangri-La Speedway in Owego, New York. "Fortunately, this week we seem to be real fast. By grabbing the pole we showed we had the speed. Now we have to show that we have the endurance."

Charlie Jarzombek, the Long Island charger, wanted to do something he doesn't seem to do very often at the ROC—finish the race in one piece. He said the basic strategy is "a case of you're racing but you've got to be riding and not do anything stupid before the 200-lap mark. I've never really made it that far competitively. I've always broken the car. This is an endurance thing."

For Jamie Tomaino, even though he was in the thick of the NASCAR points battle, there was a desire burning much deeper. Two second places in the event proved he was a strong runner, but that and a quarter would buy you a cup of coffee as far as he was concerned. "The points don't mean anything to me. I want to win this race more than anything else."

The sun shone brightly during Saturday qualifying, and brisker weather greeted race fans on Sunday. It was a welcome change from the rain and fog that usually plagues the track, as was the case during the two Winston Cup events that were run this summer.

Starting off the day's events was the 6th Annual National Parts Peddler Street Stock championship. Jack Crosby of Oxford, Massachusetts, took top honors after being pressured most of the way by John Preston. Last year's winner Pete Eriksen made a tremendous charge from his 44th starting spot to take second away from Preston on the last lap.

In the ROC, Jarzombek beat Leaty at the drop of the green, and swapped the lead with Brian Ross and Jimmy Spencer throughout the early laps. Tomaino, who had started fifth, worked his way to third, only to spin on lap 45. He managed to continue without losing a lap. After the reshuffling of early pit stops, Tomaino assumed the lead on lap 84.

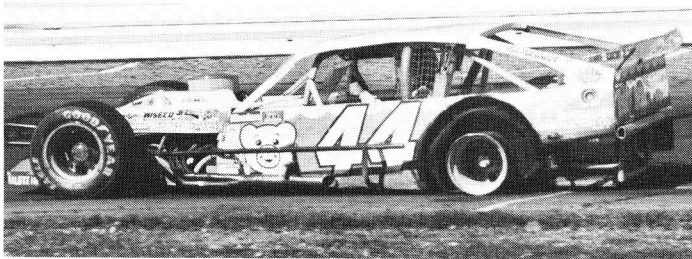
After most of the field had made their pit stops, Winston Cup star Greg Sacks had the lead, which he held until pitting on lap 167. That set up the trio of George Kent, Tomaino, and Spencer that continued in that order through numerous cautions until the checkers fell.

The closest those three came to a lead

change occurred on lap 203. Tomaino finally got under Kent in turn three just as the caution was waved for a spin in turn two. Despite being told that scoring reverts to the position held at the time the yellow is thrown, both drivers raced back to the line. Neither driver was going to second guess the flagger and scorers. For Kent, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Gene DeWitt (left) is no newcomer to a Modified winner's circle, and he's there again with his new driver, George Kent, and race promoter Joe Gerber.

(Mike Turek photo)



Pocono is a hard place as Mike McLaughlin proved when he climbed the turn-two wall.

(Mike Turek photo)

The granite stones in the infield were the downfall of several cars during the weekend, including the one driven by Greg Sacks.

(Mike Turek photo)

"I'm not taking any chances. I've had a problem or two before. He was trying to go and I was going to go along with him. They told us at the drivers' meeting that when the caution comes out, that it's where you're running. Now sometimes you have to be careful just where a scorer sees you running at that point."

Spencer was right on the tail of the two, but was unable to make a move. One reason was his losing a header pipe sometime in the first 100 laps. The team estimated that that contributed to a loss of about 30 horsepower.

However, with his third-place finish, Spencer managed to keep whatever ground Kent gained to a minimum and held on to the National point lead.

Kent's win came with a brand new motor which engine builder Ron Hutter had just finished and delivered to Pocono Friday morning. A two-year-old engine came with the team and was used to scuff in tires until the new one arrived. That the team was depending on Hutter was evident as Kent jokingly told the crowd "we can take the noose down."

Talking to the drivers both before and after the event, it seemed that their biggest nemesis was the track itself. Over the years, very little has been done to improve the infield oval, and many drivers were openly critical and frankly worried about driving the course. The 3/4-mile oval utilizes the superspeedway for the

front straightaway, and temporary barriers were used to outline turn one in the past. This year, pylons were used. 'Dangerous' and 'expensive' were the terms that often came up.

"It's all crushed gravel through the infield," said Charlie Jarzombek before the race. "You'll see a million flat tires here today. There's no way to avoid it. One fellow spun out yesterday in our heat and before the cars got around behind the pace car, there were three different cars with flat tires."

Does he categorize the track as dangerous? "Yes, I think it's very dangerous, because of the lack of an outside retaining wall. If you go out on the first turn, you tell me where the wall is. It's treacherous."

Charlie J. preferred the previous method of using temporary barriers or D.O.T. concrete blocks. "At least it was something to stop a car or have a car glance off of. You didn't have the end of two barriers. You never want the end of a wall sticking out. Some of these guys better start thinking about it."

Even race winner Kent was less than enthused with the track conditions. "It seemed that [after] every wreck, the stone situation was terrible. I can't believe that all of us kept going through that many stones and didn't get a flat tire. My hat's off to Goodyear."

Turn four probably gave Kent his

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greatest worries. "The track actually slopes off there. It's bad when your car is a little bit loose. Even though the car was working well at the end of the race, I still could not get into it hard there. I drove through that turn in sort of a strange pattern."

Jarzombek also found turn four's flat corner difficult. "Coming off, there's a hell of a hump where you come out to the big racetrack. If a guy's loose, he hits the hump and....," leaving the rest to the listener's imagination. That experience was all too real for many of the drivers who spun at the entrance to pit road throughout the weekend.

Two of the weekend's more spectacular crashes took place in that area. During Saturday qualifying, Tony Hirschman slammed the wall and pirouetted in mid air. The cause was said to be a steering wheel that came loose. Hirschman had the car repaired and was able to start Sunday, due to his guaranteed starting status obtained at the Spencer Speedway qualifier.

Brian Ross, the '84 winner, was less fortunate. Running well and often taking the lead, lap 178 found Ross riding and almost going over the wall after the tie rod broke. "I think the track is so rough here it gives the car an awful beating and possibly that was our downfall," he said.

For Leaty it was a successful day and his conservative approach paid off. Because of his fifth-place finish, "We took the second-place in points, plus whatever the purse is, so we had a good day. Which is what we set out to do when we came here."

Although Tomaino had to be pleased with coming back as well as he did from the early spin, he must feel like Harry Gant in his continual bridesmaid role. What does it take to win this race? Tomaino smiled but just shook his head. "Three seconds in the last five years—two to George and one to Spencer. That one caution maybe cost me the race. The yellow came out when I got by George clean. Sooner or later I guess I've got to win it." But for his efforts, Tomaino also came away with the Wiseco Hard Charger Award.

Jarzombek pitted no less than 12 times, without losing a lap. After leading early, he made the first of many stops on lap 59. That he managed to finish seventh was amazing, considering that he was fighting an ill-handling car. "The panhard bar bolt and nut came loose twice. I could feel the car clunking and banging. The first set of tires were our best set and that's the set we finished the race with.

"The car was going nowhere. We were

getting tires from everybody and they weren't coming out the right sizes for stagger. Finally, I said 'put on the first set and let's go.' It worked until the right rear went flat. The only good thing today was that I didn't wreck the car."

While Jarzombek was playing musical tires, winner Kent kept his tire bill down to the bare minimum—three new shoes on one stop. As Spencer had predicted, pit work was the key part of the day's race. Kent's stops were for gas on lap 81, and tires and gas on 115.

His gas stop was actually planned out pretty close. "I only had a 30-lap spread that I could stop in and I was about 20 laps away from it [on his first stop]. I told [brother and crew chief] Ronnie that this way we could come in and make a chassis adjustment at that point and look at the tires."

His original plan called for changing all four tires but "the left front just looked so super. The car was loose and, of course, when it's loose it doesn't hurt the front tires much, especially the left front. So it was brand new."

The Goody's Headache Award went to an unfortunately deserving Mike McLaughlin. Sunday found him starting in 25th position, but he methodically made his way toward the front. After pitting for tires on lap 148, he very quickly fell off the pace and repitted on 157. Eight laps later found him almost going out of the ballpark in turn one.

"On that last pit stop we didn't get the wheel tightened and lost a couple of laps getting it tightened," he said. "We came back out and going into turn one, the left front spindle broke and the wheel came off and it hit the wall before I did. Fortunately we didn't hurt the car too badly."

Although many things have changed at the Race of Champions, one thing hasn't—the face of Gene Dewitt in victory lane. Dewitt has frequently received the winning owner's trophy through the work of his drivers Dutch Hoag and Richie Evans. With Evans' death, many wondered if Dewitt would again be associated with asphalt racing. After agonizing throughout the winter, DeWitt realized that he was too close to too many people in the sport to walk away so abruptly. He contacted George Kent and they hooked up in May, and many feel that the late start could have cost Kent the national title. But Kent did gather strength throughout the year, taking down several wins and yet another Shangri-La Speedway track title. He also captured the Bud 200 at Oswego using the same conservative pit strategy. On the victor's platform for his second major win in three weeks, Kent praised DeWitt as the reason for this year's successes.

"We've been friends with Gene for a long time—all the time that he ran with Richie. I'm really proud to have Gene backing me at this time. Without him I wouldn't be here today."