

Heotzler's Car Owner, Al Johns, Is A True Patriot

From the looks of the car that Jeff Heotzler drove in last Thursday night's Advance Auto Parts Modified Super DIRT Series event at Orange County (N.Y.) Fair Speedway, you'd think the team had landed some fresh, major sponsorship.

Plastered prominently across the machine's new body were the words "Small Business Administration" and "New York Small Business Development Center"—two unorthodox race car sponsors, that's for sure.

But Al Johns, who fields the Modified that Heotzler is running this season in SDS shows, said neither entity had signed on as a sponsor. He put their names on his race car simply as a good-will gesture.

"We wanted to do a commemorative car for the Small Business Administration and New York Small Business Development Center," Johns said in the OCFS pit area after Heotzler's third-place finish in the 100-lapper. "It's a way of thanking them for all they've done for my business."

The SBA and NYSDBC merely saved Johns's Pike Underground Inc., an excavation and construction business based in Matamoras, Pa. When cash-flow slowed significantly at the firm last year after Johns, a naval reservist, was called up to active duty by the U.S. military, it was help from the SBA that got it rolling again.

Johns's wife, Dawn, who ran Pike Underground while Al was away on military assignment, applied for a military reservist economic injury disaster loan from the SBA after realizing the company was experiencing financial problems. The SBA, which makes low-interest loans to businesses affected by the absence of a key employee who gets called to military duty, came through with a \$408,000, 30-year loan at 4 percent interest.

"They kept my business solvent," said the appreciative Al Johns, who used the extra cash to pay bills and maintain equipment and property. "The success we're enjoying with the business is all because the SBA stepped in and basically saved my ass. It shows that the government is there to take care of us. The government does help people."

And if anyone deserved financial help from the feds, it's Johns, a proud American patriot through and through. He's a guy who's broken his neck, taken a bullet and gone behind enemy lines countless times to protect the freedoms his country provides.

Johns, 28, enlisted in the U.S. Navy when he was 18. But he didn't join simply to sail the seven seas. Johns went through a highly-specialized training regiment to become a reconnaissance corpsman for the Navy SEALs and the Marines. During his six years on active duty he participated in dangerous, top-secret missions in hot spots all around the world.

After spending three years on inactive duty—during which he began building his excavation business—Johns was ready to return to civilian life fulltime. As the fall of 2001 approached, he was married and had two toddler daughters.

Then came the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Johns was infuriated. Displaying a sign that read "Kill the Killers" outside his home in Matamoras was not enough; he wanted to do more for his country. So a few weeks later Johns enlisted in the naval reserves.

Not surprisingly, the U.S. Navy called Johns up to active duty on Dec. 5, 2001. He had barely three hours to pack, meet with his company's seven employees to explain the situation, and say goodbye to his wife and kids.

Johns spent the next seven months tackling domestic assignments. Stationed at various times at naval supply depots in Mechanicsburg, Pa., and Gulfport, Miss., he headed up an anti-terrorism task force given the responsibility of "augmenting existing security on military bases."

When Johns returned home in the spring of 2002, he plunged into his business to make up for lost time. He also bought a Bicknell race car to run in Orange County's DIRT Sportsman division—before he had ever seen a race there! A friend had suggested that the intense, workaholic Johns get involved in racing as a diversion. Johns's family was all for it when he threw out the idea. "They told me, 'You need to do something to relax,'" he laughed.

Johns climbed behind the wheel to drive the car himself on four occasions last year with limited success. He did visit Victory Lane, however, as a car owner when Billy Dunn piloted his machine to a Sportsman win at OCFS.

This year Johns has stepped up his racing program. He has a Sportsman he'll drive occasionally (he's run it twice at OCFS and once at Rolling Wheels Raceway Park so far in '03), a 358-Modified that Joe Barbagallo is racing in Orange County's small-block series and, of course, a SDS big-block program with Heotzler.

Last Thursday night's show was just Heotzler's third appearance in Johns's car, but you would have never known it. Heotzler, a 45-year-old veteran who has won OCFS's SDS 100 five times in his career, led the first 73 laps before his No. 18 Mod (the car normally sports the No. 17, but it had the doors from Johns's sportsman screwed on for one night only) got loose and caused him to fade slightly to a third-place finish.

Inside Dirt Modified Racing

Kevin Kovac



THAT'S Al and Dawn Johns (kneeling) posing with Jeff Heotzler (r) and Jeffrey Heotzler (Jeff's teenage son) after last Thursday night's Super DIRT Series 100 at Orange County.

(Bob Perran photo)

The loss didn't phase Johns, who happily greeted Heotzler on the homestretch during the post-race ceremonies. "Finishing third tonight means as much—maybe even more—than any win could have," said Johns. "I'm just so happy that the SBA got as much recognition as it deserves tonight."

ORANGE COUNTY SDS NOTES: Gary Tomkins's victory last Thursday night at OCFS wasn't the first time he came from a mid-pack starting spot to pull off a surprisingly powerful win on the SDS.

Last year, you'll recall, the Clifton Springs, N.Y., driver captured a 100-lap tour event in his first-ever start at Hagerstown (Md.) Speedway.

But while the Hagerstown score will always be dear to Tomkins, he asserted that winning at OCFS is the most important accomplishment of his racing career.

"This isn't a neutral track [like Hagerstown]," said Tomkins. "It's hard for outsiders to come in here and win, but we did it. I mean, I drove around the outside of Jeff [Heotzler] here to win. That's unbelievable! This will take a little while to sink in."

Proving the significance of his performance, Tomkins, 37, became just the seventh true invader to capture a SDS 100 at OCFS in 27 years. Other outsiders who have won the event include Alan Johnson ('81, '85), Dave Lape ('82), Danny Johnson ('83), Frank Cozze ('90), Bob McCreadie ('94) and Jack Johnson ('01)....

Alan Johnson's runner-up finish pulled him within 18 points of leader Billy Decker in the SDS standings after five events. If A.J. can march on to win his second consecutive Mr. DIRT Modified championship, he'll be just the third driver in 20 years to capture the title after finishing outside the top 12 in the tour's opening event.

Johnson, who placed 14th in the SDS lidlifter at The Dirt Track at Lowe's Motor Speedway, would join Brett Hearn ('86) and Danny Johnson ('92) as SDS comeback kids....

Bob McCreadie must be feeling good about his new Bicknell car. After all, he showed up for Orange County's SDS 100—an event he last ran in 1997.

The 52-year-old star appeared headed for a top-five finish until a broken spring rod put him on lap 74 as he ran fifth. The spring rod popped off in turn three and was run over a circuit later by Tim Fuller, who moved into the top five with McCreadie's departure.

"I'm gonna go get that spring if Bob doesn't want it," Fuller joked after coming from the 22nd starting spot to record a career-best OCFS finish of fifth in Bob Faust's Teo-Pro car. "The spring is probably still good."

Considering that the top-four spots in the 100 were swept by Bicknell cars—at a track where Teo-Pro chassis have enjoyed so much success—maybe Tim McCreadie should have gone with his inkling to run his three-race-old Bicknell mount.

Timmy Mac and his Sweeteners Plus crew actually unloaded their Bicknell after running their Teo-Pro No. 39 in time trials, but they opted to stick with the Teo because DIRT officials said a car switch would force them to start the heat from the rear. McCreadie felt it was too risky to give up their pole starting spot in the prelim.

While McCreadie started the 100 outside of his father on the front row—perhaps the first time the McCreadies have led a SDS starting field to the green flag—he slipped to a sixth-place finish. "All I could do was run the cushion," said McCreadie, who

scrubbed the outside wall so many times that the right side of car's rear bumper was worn away by race's end. "Once guys ed passing me on the bottom, I knew I was done."....

Pat Ward celebrated the occasion of his 100th consecutive start by advancing from the 21st starting spot to a seventh-place finish. He slipped by Brett Hearn for seventh during a green-w checked restart scramble....

Hearn's eighth-place finish was a quiet end to a subpar night was never a serious factor in a feature outing that saw him su a significant slap of the homestretch wall on a lap-53 restart.

But Hearn's biggest problem came during time trials bounced so wildly over the track's ample turn-two berm the car's right-side door and body mounts were mangled....

The positive portion of Steve Paine evening began and e with time trials. He was the fast-timer with his one-race-old Pro car, but he drew a dismal 13th-place starting spot for the r He barely got a whiff of the top 10 before finishing 12th.

What was wrong with his car? "Depends on what lap," he "It was tight, it was loose. It just wasn't good tonight. We didn the setup."....

Matt Sheppard, who runs Paine-owned cars on the 358-SDS and at Canandaigua (N.Y.) Speedway, made another appa in Jeff Brownell Sr.'s No. 29. He was outside the top 15 i his car ran out of gas on lap 99, perhaps due to a fuel-pickup p lem....

Defending OCFS champion Chuck McKee didn't recaptur magic that brought him a victory in last year's SDS 100. He f on lap 31, forcing him to make a race-long rally to finish 11th.

McKee, who drove the Perino No. 19 he normally runs at O reported that he'll enter Jimmy Baum's machine in the Jun SDS show at New Egypt (N.J.) Speedway....

Danny Johnson and Bobby Varin—who along with I Hoffman now carry the Troyer banner on the SDS—had sir evenings. Both drivers pitted during the 100 after packing cars' right-rear wheels with mud....

Jerry Higbie's Teo-Pro Eliminator car sported a wild l design. It sort of looked like he had an upside-down canoe o front of his Modified.

"We've been running it all year here," said Higbie, who fini 10th in the 100. "We're trying to use bodywork to help the cornering. Brett [Hearn] and I saw something like this on D Lasoski's Midget when we were at the Chili Bowl [in January we're trying something different."

Higbie also reported that Pro2 Machine, the new CNC p machining segment of Bobby Hearn's Teo-Pro shop, is up and nng. The 31-year-old driver heads the satellite business, w produces most of the aluminum parts used on Teo-Pro cars....

Rick Laubach ripped off the fifth-fastest lap in time trials was solidly holding down a transfer spot to the main durin heat race when a burnt piston sidelined his Keith Roussey-ov machine for the night....

Two straight weeks of rain-outs at New Egypt Speedway one of the reasons that four of the track's regulars joined the O field—Ron John Koczon, Ryan Godown, John Romano and l Tranquilli.

Koczon, making his first-ever start at the five-eighths-mile e came closest to making the cut. He finished fourth in a consola one spot short of qualifying.

But despite his disappointment, the trip wasn't a total los Koczon. He relished a rare opportunity to talk setup ideas fac face with his New York-based car builder, Pete Chuckta of P

Godown, meanwhile, ran his first big-block show at OC hopes of getting his frustrating sophomore big-block season t around. "We've been struggling so bad," said Godown, who h recaptured the form that led him to two NES Mod victories year. "One of the problems is that with the bad weather and Windsor not running, I've only raced four times so far this But I'm also trying to learn what to with the car. I knew ex: what to do with my Sportsman, but the big-block is a diffi deal."....

NES's biggest winner this season, Frank Cozze, was a no able no-show. Instead, he participated in last Thursday n CarQuest-sponsored Tony Stewart/Dave Blaney Modified r race at Williams Grove (Pa.) Speedway. It was the first time C has missed Middletown's SDS 100 since 1993....

Penny small-block standout Doug Manniller didn't ex have Thursday's show on his radar. "We decided to come up at 10 this morning," said Manniller, who drove Greg Sarangot big-block.

Manniller performed admirably in his first big-block appa nce at OCFS, timing well (eighth fastest) and qualifying thr a heat. He finished one lap down in 21st.

By the way, Manniller was the only driver in the feature's i ing lineup not running a Bicknell, Teo-Pro or Troyer car. He r a Dirt Wheels mount....

Kenny Tremont made his first start since having his Tec Eliminator reworked with a standard rear suspension setup. He struggled, running well off the pace and finishing two laps be in 23rd place....

Andy Bachetti had a decidedly poor showing: he made the ture only after officials decided to take three cars from each c and ran just five laps before pulling off. But then again, he's n enjoyed much success in Orange County's SDS 100. Since he's had just one good run: a seventh in '00. The remainder o record in the event is downright scary-looking: one next-to-place finish ('01); three last-place finishes ('99, '02, '03); and DNQs ('97, '98)....

Kevin Kovac can be reached by e-mail at kevin@arn.com

TEAM GOEWEY

Tel: (518) 220-9700 DODGE Fax: (518) 783-9916
P.O. Box 1317, 965 New Loudon Rd., Latham, NY 12110

www.teamgoewey.com