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 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.

But Al Johns, who fields the Modified that Heotzler is running this season in SDS shows, said another entity had signed on as a sponsor. He put their names on his race car simply as a goodwill 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 NYSBDC merely saved John’s Pike Underground Inc., an excavation and construction business based in Maranoros, Pa. When cash-flow showed significantly at the firm last year after Johns, a naval reservist, was called up to active duty by the U.S. military, it was hit hard 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 $60,000, 30-year loan at 4 percent interest.

“They kept my business solvent,” said the appreciative Al Johns, who used the extra cash to buy balls and maintain equipment and property. “The success we’re enjoying with the business is all because the SBA stepped in and basically saved my sons. It shows they’re there for us. We’re always there to take care of us. The government does help people.”

And if anyone deserved financial help from the SBA, it’s Johns, a Vietnam War and post-Vietnam war veteran whose right eye was blown out in a battle in 1970. Johns shows the scars of his battle in his bluePTS eye, a bionic eye that has taken a bullet and gone behind enemy lines countless times to protect the freedom 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 joined through a highly-specialized training regimen to become a reconnaissance corporan for the Navy’s special forces. During his six years on active duty he participated in dangerous, top-secret missions in hot spots all around the world.

When he got out of the Navy on inactive duty—during which he began building his excavation business—Johns was ready to return to civilian life full-time. As the fall of 2001 approached, he was married and had a new son.

Then came the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Johns was infuriated.

Displaying a sign that read “Kill the Killers” outside his home in New Jersey was one thing. But 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. 15, 2001. He was overseas and fighting in Afghanistan. During his six years on active duty he participated in dangerous, top-secret missions in hot spots all around the world.

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 Sportman division—before he had ever seen a race car! 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 on his own for 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 DIRT Sportman win.

This year Johns has stepped up his racing program. He has a Sportman he’ll drive occasionally (he’s run it twice at OCFS and once at Pulling), and a Midget (IN-107). He is Modified that Joe Barbagallo is racing in Orange County’s small-block series and, of course, a DIRT 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 returned to full-time racing this year after a 5-year layoff, has been running fast since he returned to the series, 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 sportman stocker behind the doors, for cover). He got loose and caused him to fade slightly to a third-place finish.

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 (Bobb Perrin 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—as many—even more—than any win could have,” said Johns. “I’m just as 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 would go from a 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.

“While this isn’t a neutral track [like Hagerstown],” said Tomkins, “it’s hard for outsiders to come in and win, but we did it. I don’t 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 Al Johns (81-86), Dave Lane (86), Frank Cozez (91), Bob McCready (94) and Jack Johnson (91).

In Johnson’s run-off win he pulled 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 the third driver in 30 years to capture the title after finishing outside the top 12 in the tour’s opening event.

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Bob McCready 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.

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