

Frank Cozze

In His Own Words

PRESENTED BY:



As told to **Lew Boyd**



- Born September 22, 1955 in Newark, New Jersey

- A self-described “success and failure at everything in racing,” who happens to have wins in modifieds (including at Syracuse) and in sprint cars

Our dad, Dick Cozze, liked racing and got a race car to help keep us three boys out of jail. It worked pretty much.

He had a 100-acre salvage yard with a test track and he got great drivers like Al Tasnady, Budd Olsen, and Stan Ploski. “Tas” would come to dinner when we were

kids. He was God, and I couldn’t stop looking at him. It was so cool.

What Dad didn’t know is that we kids had field cars we’d run on the test track when he wasn’t around. We had a million laps. Finally, I was 18 and old enough to get a sportsman at Nazareth [Raceway in Pennsylvania, now defunct].

Dad would talk racing with the family from the head of our Italian dinner table. It stuck in my mind when he said, "I don't care about someone who has 100 wins at one track. I want to win out on the road." Well later, after I'd won a few at Nazareth, we heard about a 100-lap sportsman race up at Brewerton, New York. I went up there, so nervous I could hardly see, and parked next to this far-out guy, Bob McCreadie. It was quite a race. It took three hours to complete because so many cars got smashed up, but I won. Going home in the hauler, I was counting \$1,428—the most money I had ever seen, thinking of what my dad said, and believing, "I can do this."

But I've always remained a hobby racer—and a busy businessman. Things can go bad—like down at Charlotte [in November]—and I trained myself not to come home miserable and take my hobby out on my family. When I leave my business to go racing, halfway there I am still a businessman and on the second half, I switch over to race mode. Coming home, the first half I analyze what I did wrong and the second half, I force myself back into business mode.

It's really the same when things go well. After I won Syracuse in 2008, they asked me to stay Monday to sign autographs for an extra \$1,000. Even though I had wanted desperately to win there for 35 years, my instinct was to pass it up and go home to work. Fortunately my wife, Janice, persuaded me otherwise.

In terms of the competitors, I would say racing was best for us modified guys here in the Tri-State area [New Jersey-Pennsylvania-New York] in the late '80s and early '90s. The rules were so uniform that I think we ran 120 shows in 1989. And the series sponsors provided gas and so much product that it was financially feasible.

Since then it seems the modified tracks have gone their separate ways. If you want to race more than once a week, you better call ahead and check out the rules. They're all different. It is crazy overregulated and expensive.

Frankly, it drove me to sprint cars for a while at age 56. They are so uniform track to track—and easy to work on—and are they ever fast. The first time was at Wil-

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scored a hard fought runner-up finish. His engine is from Cornett Racing Engines (Somerset, KY) and T&D shaft-mount rocker arms for power, consistency and reliability.

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liams Grove [in Pennsylvania]. I started on the pole in the heat and by the backstretch I was in last. I couldn't believe it, but I was determined to try to excel. In all those years I tried to win Syracuse, Janice would have to tape me to my seat on the way home 'cause I'd be so upset about not being able to pull it off. When I finally did, it was a big monkey off my back. But, I'll tell you that my first win in a sprinter was at Port Royal [in Pennsylvania] and that was even better because I wasn't sure I could do it.

From a spectator point of view, of course my kids would tell you that today's racing is the best ever. I'm glad they think so, and I'm sure glad Frank Jr. is so involved in my racing operation. But I'm also glad that they are not more involved than they are. They have all had the chance to race, but they see it as ungodly expensive—and that the time involved is a real killer. They want to have a fuller life.

I would say that from a fan's point of view, racing was the best in the late '60s. The stands were always full, and the drivers were such heroes. That's what made it so entertaining. I remember that just the sight of our hauler pulling Al Tasnady's ride into Flemington [Speedway in New Jersey, now closed] would make the stands rock. Can you imagine what it was like when all those guys were out on the track?

Today, especially in modifieds, it seems you can't even have a good rivalry. I guess you could say I almost had one. I was leading at Syracuse in 1989, and Danny Johnson got under me in our number 44. We crashed with just five to go. The next week was Middletown [New York]. I won it, and Danny was second. After that, my fun-loving sponsor, Bruce Waite, ran an ad in the paper saying, "Congratulations on your win, Frank, with Danny on your tail and not on your rub rail." The next week was Flemington. I happened to chug out to warmups right behind Johnson, and he'd written on the back of his car: "If you're not satisfied with my driving, call 1-800-CRYBABY44." I laughed so hard my visor fogged up.

It does seem that sprint car tracks do a much better job in building the buzz about their drivers. That's so important. Maybe

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that is why so many older racing people—fans and competitors, whether from dirt or asphalt backgrounds—end up following sprinters.

I worry for promoters these days. It's not easy. Every time I go to a track, I look at the crowd. They are getting smaller, and you have to wonder if the place can keep going. Those old-time promoters, like Jerry Fried at Nazareth, really worked hard for what they got with what they had.

Dad, my brothers, and I took over Nazareth in 1988 to give it a final year. What an experience that was. Near the end of it, I was driving the water truck—full—up the banking, and the ring and pinion broke. Of course, there were no brakes. Soon I was going backwards faster and faster—right towards the concession stands. It was the most scared I've ever been at a race track. I finally twisted the wheel and jumped out. The truck jackknifed, and the cab came flying off.

Then, after the very last show, I went to the pole to shut down the lights. The ground was wet, and I hadn't even touched the switch when I was 10 feet in the air before landing on my ass. That was it for promoting.

It pains me to see things this soft. I do wish that those people controlling modified racing in the Tri-State area would try to address it. Everyone can say how cool it was that there were 50 cars down at Charlotte this fall, but that is not a normal occurrence any more. Fields are just getting too skinny, never mind the stands.

Racing is no cakewalk, but I love it still. I just hope racers in the next generation can have as much fun as I've had. ☘