



JOHN MAHONEY

# Jack Hewitt

*In His Own Words*

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- Born July 8, 1951, in Pleasant Hill, Ohio
- On-the-edge open wheel racer. At 47, the oldest Rookie-of-the-Year at the Indianapolis 500.

**Y**ou ask me what it was like out there for me and what it would be like for some young kid coming up today. I wouldn't change a thing that happened in my career. My first race was in a sprint car at Eldora. That sure made things harder right at the start, but it got easier over time.

The first thing you gotta do is decide how far you'd like to go. My dad always wanted to go to Indy, so I did, too. And I wanted to make sure that was going to happen.

You could decide to just do sprint cars, but it's tough because the money is not that good. Also, realistically, sprint-car careers don't usually last that long. Steve Kinser and Sammy Swindell are definitely exceptions.

Dirt late models do pay a little better, but not a lot of those guys get any national attention.

NASCAR is really the only top rung of the game right now. It wasn't a choice for me. You can tell by the way that people describe my driving style that my sense of "smooth and patient" isn't for asphalt. There's just no excitement there. Owners like Penske aren't looking for racers, they're looking for corporate images. The paved road to get there is wicked expensive, but where does it even take you? Kyle Larson and Christopher Bell are throwbacks. They still step back to the dirt and race whenever they can.

Indy is really off the table now. It's all rich kids from somewhere. You know how to make a million in racing? Start with two. Give me the name of five Indy drivers. No one can. They're all foreigners; no Americans. I don't think the Smith and Jones days will ever come back. Indy racing needs to go back to roadsters. I don't think Penske's buying it will make any difference. It's some kind of happening now, not a race; just like NASCAR. The crowds will never be the same.

In a way all the controversy has actually been taken out of racing at all levels. Our sport needs rivalries. Remember Sammy and Steve battling it out? There's none of that today—and that's what gets fans screaming in their seats. And you know what, along the way we've lost great promoters, too—the ones who would really promote and make sure there is some excitement.

Of course, controversy and rivalries can lead to fighting. And that's become a real no-no, but I was known as a fighter over the years. But the way I see it, it wasn't about fighting, it was sticking up for myself. I just couldn't let you hurt my race or my race car, because I did this for a living and I had to race the next day.

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## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

My deal is that I would address the issue immediately. I would go right down to their pit and do whatever was necessary to make my case known. With me, the problem was dealt with and sealed over immediately. We would start fresh the next week. These NASCAR guys today seem to carry a grudge all season. If someone in my racing is going to continue to be mad, trust me, it's gonna be you.

I would say to a good, serious kid coming up that bravado is okay, even today. You have your rights. But, honestly, so many parents don't teach respect today that sometimes it's not really the kid's fault. So I have to slap the dad rather than the kid. Bottom line, there's a lot of 200-pounders out there on the Internet, but there are a lot of pussies out there on the track.

I think a driver has to satisfy his own justice. There was a big deal at a World 100 at Eldora when Tiny, the starter, put me down for jumping a green. It wasn't right. I went to the office afterwards, took all the money out of the pockets of my fire suit, and handed it to the cop standing there. I asked him to keep it for me while I took care of something. I went into the office and punched Tiny out. Then I came back outside and held my hands up so the cop could cuff me. I told him, "I understand your laws and respect them; now you have seen mine." Out of that incident came my wife's suggestion that we call the book I did with Dave Argabright "Hewitt's Law."

A young driver should be sporty on the PA, too. When you're on, don't just say "yes" or "no," talk about it! Never mind political correctness. Be a standout in the crowd. People like that. Announcers will choose you for interviews because people are talking about you. That's when owners and sponsors start hearing about you.

I was over in York, Pennsylvania, giving a speech, and I worried I might have gotten in a little deep, since some kids like Freddie Rahmer's were in the audience. I told them about how my graduation present wasn't a car or something like that. Instead, my dad took me to an Afro-American house of ill repute. Do you think those folks in York have ever forgotten me?

Another thing. You gotta make sure you *really* want to race. So many guys today parade around the pits in a fire suit looking like a race driver, but they ain't. They're wannabes. You just have to be willing to accept the consequences like a man, like Brad Doty has.

With me, the scarier things get, the more the adrenaline and the more I like it. I'm no drug addict. I'm 100% against them. But, if they ever had an adrenaline pill, I'd never come down.

I really didn't have any muscle cars when I got out of high school. Just a four-cylinder Nash Metropolitan, but I sure gave it some rides. One time I was racing with a sheriff in a fast Buick, but I was getting away from him. Until I flipped, that is. I flew out the window, landed in a mud puddle with the car on top of me, just missing my head. Sure, my ribs talked a little the next day, but I figured, if that didn't really hurt me, what could a little sprint car do?

I was invincible. It's like some of the soldiers coming back from the Middle East who say it was great having all those bullets whizzing at them. You gotta be like that. It's all about what you are willing to do to get your high. With me, it was quite a bit. I would have told you that, after the times I broke my neck. So, just like on the microphone, go for it on the track, but be prepared for the consequences.

There were times when I was hurt that I could get a little blue about racing. But I had a solution. As soon as I could, I would go to work with a friend who had a gravel pit. A couple of days of that sure speeded up my recovery and got me right back to the track.

I'm down near Volusia now in the colder months. When I'm out fishing, I think about how much racing did for me. The moment of winning all the features at Eldora's 4 Crown was incredible. And, to be honest, I was so emotional I cried for two-and-a-half miles on the cool-down lap in 12th spot at Indy.

I've still got fans and I love that. When I lie down on the pillow, I grin every night with a new memory. ♪