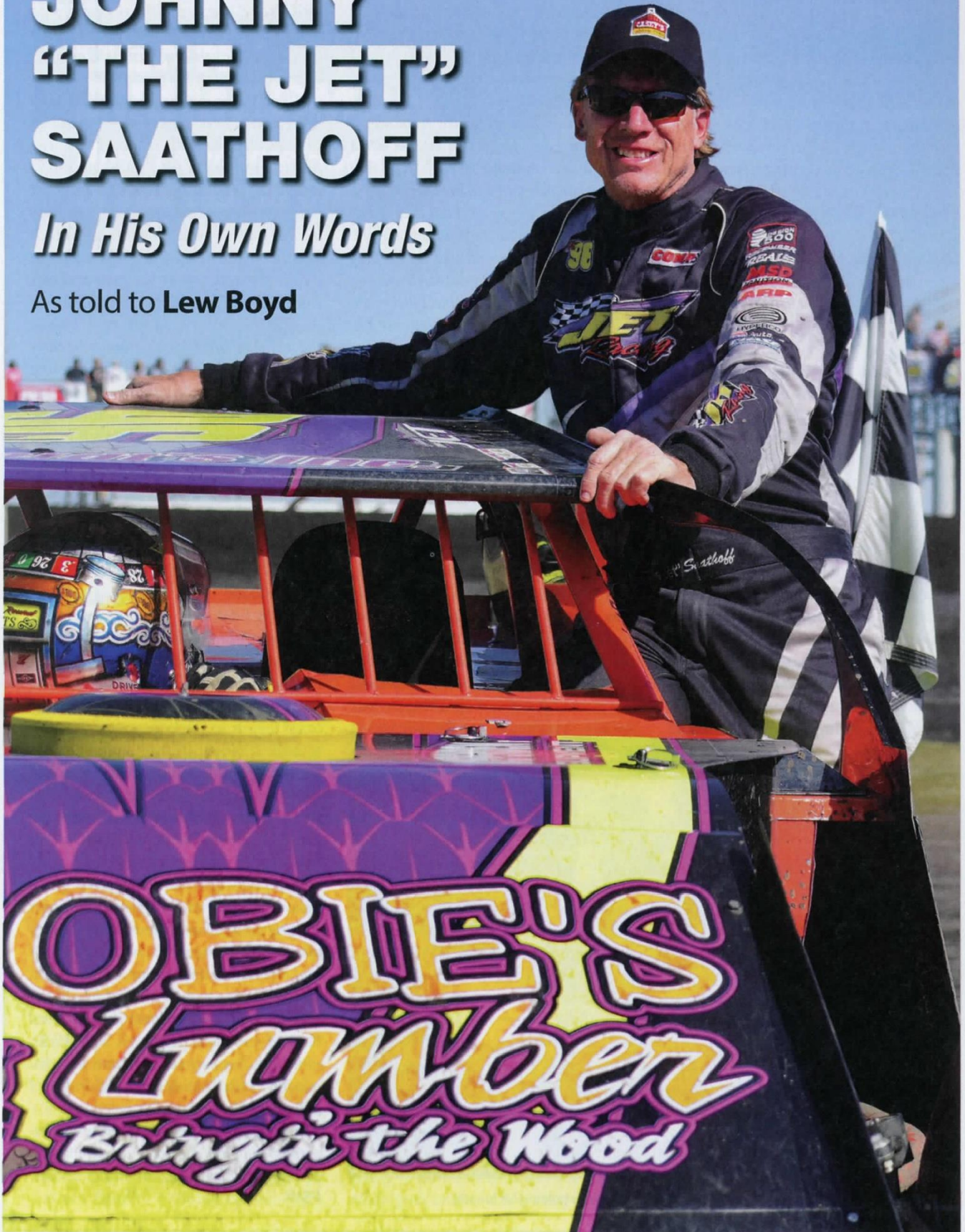


JOHNNY "THE JET" SAATHOFF

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**



KARL FREDRICKSON

• **Born April 13, 1963, in Beatrice, Nebraska**

• **One of the nation's most enduring and proficient dirt trackers in both late models and modifieds, with 454 wins to date, four national titles—and a robust chassis company on the side.**

Truth is, I didn't even want to drive a race car. It's not that racing wasn't part of our family out here in Beatrice, Nebraska. My dad was a busy promoter and race director at a bunch of tracks, and we had one of the biggest salvage yards in the area. We'd often go to four different tracks in a weekend, and guys would come to us all week long for parts. And, although he never raced himself, Dad had a couple of cars that people drove, like his brother and Bob Johnson, Kenny Parde, Stan Woelke and Joe Wade.

When I was 16, Dad said, "We're gonna build a car for you to drive." I said, "No way." I just wanted to work in the yard and do what he did. I was having too much fun drag racing and raising hell on the streets in the background. But he insisted.

I got in the car—a Sportsman Late Model with a '72 Nova Body, the top class at Beatrice Speedway—with my T-shirt, jeans and tennis shoes, and, oh yeah, did that green flag ever scare the hell out of me. But something in my brain clicked. I knew I wanted to try it again the next week.

Shortly after that, I won my first qualifier over at Beatrice. I started out front and went and hid. Afterwards Dallas Parde came by and carried on: "Man, you were jettin' around like Johnny 'The Jet' Rogers," Nebraska's first Heisman Trophy winner. The nickname just stuck, and so did an obsession in me, now going on for five decades.

I soon graduated from high school, picking up my diploma before jetting off to run Eagle that night. I never, ever stopped. First to local tracks, 60 miles away. Then, as we moved into more advanced late models,

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

it was places like Omaha, 100 miles away. Then it was into series such as the Busch All Star, MLRA, and other tours—often 300 miles each way, and later to places like Las Vegas, over 1,000. I can't even think about all the blown motors along the highway, the breakdowns, and trailer lights ripped off by shredding trailer tires.

We were winning, though, and, as I worked up into late models, guys like Bob Hill, Gary Webb, and Willy Kraft were helpful to me. But really it was all possible because of my dad. I realized I had actually been born into racing heaven. Unfortunately, Dad was hit by a race car in 1978 and eventually had to retire from his officiating in 1983. But that also meant he could come on the road with me as much as he wanted.

The salvage business was actually pretty good, but we always lived like we had nothing. Typical of Dad, we were usually a couple of years behind with cars back then. He had thought I had to learn to run with junk, so that's what we often had. Running that much, I had all kinds of side gigs to pay for things. I'd pull Chevilles out of the yard, cut out the chassis, and Dad let me sell them to Bob Harris, who was building those up-and-coming IMCA modifieds. Over time, I started a car lot, started a wrecker service, and even bought a limo. While on the road, I sure became grateful for cell phones to keep it all going.

We had at one point built a garage at the yard, and I was able to use it for a couple of months for my race cars before it was taken over for salvage parts. That meant our two late models—our standard weekly NASCAR car and the open aluminum engine tour car—stayed outside, year-round. I built a canvas covering, so in bad weather I could climb under there with a jet heater to prepare them. And to think you can get hurt racing. How about sucking in those fumes...?

By the '90s, however, we were able to upgrade our hauler, and I finally had a garage where I could work. It was a busy time. We won NASCAR Winston 50 events, track championships, and a lot of weekly features. We towed back and forth across Iowa and Illinois for those weeknight Busch All Star Tour events for years, sleeplessly trying to make it to work the next

day. My biggest late model win ever actually came in '93 at the Busch All Star Tour at Burlington, Iowa.

Those were good days. Along the way, I often didn't have a spare tire, but I always had a girlfriend. Then in 1992 I somehow lucked into meeting my significant other, Traci Russell, and today we have our daughter, Sierra Paige Saathoff, and son, Jaxon Jet.

My late model mentor, Bob Hill, had been ARCA racing and invited me to come along as an over-the-wall tire changer. Then, one weekend we went to one of the few ARCA dirt shows, this one over at I-80. The car owner, Larry Clement, let me qualify the car, and I timed 13 out of 52. I ran one lap of the race and pulled it in, making Larry the \$1,000 to start. When Bob retired, I was offered the ride in return for investing some money into it. Much as I wanted to, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Honestly, I still think about whether that was the right decision. The money was peanuts compared to what it would be today.

Otherwise, we were constantly on the road. It meant that we had to carry a lot more spares with us, not just spare trailer lights anymore. So, in '95 we started Jet Racing, selling parts to local racers. And then the plot really thickened. It was clear that these IMCA-style modifieds were gaining momentum, and I built one.

We heard about the Amarillo Gold Rush 50 down in Texas that was paying \$50,000 to win, so we took that first modified down there, not even numbered. We swept the time trials, heat, and pole dash, only to be disqualified because all I had when I built the car was an aluminum bell housing. Since it was open competition, I thought I'd be okay covering it with a steel blow shield. Not so.

I was not impressed but decided to go back to the next one. We won it fair and square but at the window were paid only \$25,000. Not 50, then that check bounced. You can imagine my state of mind then. We did finally recover the amount of the check only.

Everyone was paying attention now. That little modified was really getting it done,



and almost immediately, we started getting orders for our “Jet Modifieds.”

By mid-season, a buddy said we could conceivably take the national title, so we took a shot at it. It worked out—with 36 feature wins and \$84,000 in purses, a king’s ransom back then.

Despite the misadventure in Amarillo, it was clear that more and more big-money races were popping up for the modifieds, so we began concentrating on those. We ended up sweeping the title for four years in a row. By 1998, we had sold our late model.

It’s a good thing that IMCA races tended to be closer to Beatrice, because my motor was constantly being claimed. When we got home after a race around midnight, my crew chief, Mike Gocke, would have to dig right in to prepare another one for the coming night’s activity.

It was also a challenge for me to gear up to meet the orders Jet Racing was beginning to receive for Jet Modifieds. Sadly, Dad got sick at the end of the ’90s and the salvage yard closed. That meant, though, that I could then concentrate more fully on Jet Racing, my car lot and towing.

What wasn’t so good was that all our winning brought detractors—and resentment. We couldn’t go to a track and not

get flipped off. At times it got more personal than that. My pickup was keyed end to end, and someone drove right through our property at home, cleaning out all our landscaping. It got so bad that in 2000 we decided to move away somewhat from IMCA racing and run USMTS and modifieds in Kansas City against guys like my friend Clint Bowyer, who was aces on both dirt and pavement.

Actually, that time was kind of a satisfying heyday for us, winning 45-50 shows a season, five with an over 56%-win ratio. We were still doing the Busch All Stars and now USMTS. And, even though bypassing some of their shows, between 1996 and May of 2003 we recorded 200 IMCA wins.

We really were fortunate that it all kept going. Sure there were some special nights like the USMTS Fall Jamboree over at Webster City and the Night of a Thousand Stars and Harris Clash, all in the same week. But what really gave me pride were the multiples, like winning seven Spring Nationals and seven Octoberfests here at home in Beatrice. And it felt even better when the wins came in shows such as the four Cornhusker Classics at I-80 and two Vegas Duels in the Desert, with as many as 300 entries.

But, since 2015, I have begun to back down. One reason has been the result of those inevitable crashes. In 1991 at an outlaw late

model race promoted by Billy Moyer’s father, I hit the wall. That was before we had high-back seats and better containment, and I broke my shoulder. Two years later at Grand Island, I went end-for-end in my worst-ever wreck. I was trapped in the burning car with a collapsed cage. My leg was banged up and burned, but, of course, with my racing I had no time for the burn units.

It all came back to haunt me. Hitting my head in the Grand Island crash caused me so much lingering trouble that in 2017, I ran the season with one eye after a detached retina before I could get surgery. And my left leg has become so bad I can’t even push the brake pedal. The doctors are not sure it will support a new ankle, so I’m hobbling around with a \$1,300 boot while designing a hand-throttle system for this year. Last year I ran just 38 times, with three wins. I guess we’ll have to see what happens this year.

But here comes the next generation! We wanted to call him “Jet,” but his grandma said no. So, he’s Jaxon Jet Saathoff—and he’s even more wound up about racing than I was. He’s now 20 and racy, getting it done. He’s already got a CDL, works for Jet Racing and Lineweber Dirt Works part-time and is compiling wins already, including last fall’s Octoberfest \$2,000-to-win at Beatrice.

I’m all for it. I urge him while he is still young to travel as I did. He sure plans to, and I hope that if he takes over Jet Racing, it will give him the means to do so and put food on the table as well. The business has settled down somewhat in recent years, but now has seven employees in the shop and 800 modified chassis, 300 stock cars and 200 hobby cars on the other end of the phone.

As for me, what a time it’s been! What I’ve got is 358 IMCA wins, 454 total, four national championships and five regional. It’s coming down to the end. Age catches all of us. Soon the helmet, suits, and trophies will be on the shelf collecting dust, and all that will be left are the stories you tell.

I just hope Jaxon wants some company on the road. **FSW**