



Kenny Jacobs

by Dana Blair

Kenny Jacobs, who was born on April 24, 1955, grew up with racing all around him. The parking lot that he would ride his little motorcycle in was the parking lot of the racetrack his grandfather, N.E. "Pete" Jacobs, built. Wayne County Speedway, just outside of Orrville, Ohio, was where he spent a large part of his youth. Whether it was working at the track for his grandfather, or watching his dad, Kenneth "Jake" Jacobs, win lots of races on that track, Kenny was always involved in racing. In fact, his mother Marriann even won the "powder puff" late model championship at Wayne County in 1973.

The high school wrestler spent race days driving the water truck from 7 a.m. until race time. He even got to drive the race car from the farmhouse across the road to the track every week. Kenny remembers his first laps in a race car on the track. "I guess I was about 12 years old. After the races one night, I made a couple laps in dad's old race car. I had to look through the spokes in the steering wheel 'cause I couldn't see over the wheel. Grandpa was just beside himself and I never got to do that again 'til I started racing."

Racing and the racetrack was where his focus was in his younger days. Except for one short time when he got involved in another Jacobs family tradition.

"I was just a kid and then I went to showing horses. Then I was riding horses, and showing horses, and training horses. We came home one Saturday from showing horses and they were having one of the Buckeye Classics at Wayne County. True story, we parked the truck and trailer out there by Route 30 (about a mile away) and jumped the horses and rode them home because the road was almost blocked from cars parked down the road. Riding the horse back to the barn and looking at all those people and looking over at that racetrack, I thought, 'I'm in the wrong sport.' So that was the end of the horses and I started racing right after that."

That was the beginning of a career that includes driving over 50 different sprint cars, eight dirt championship cars, 6 midget cars, a few late models, and even a 600 cc midget. He is most well known for being a four-time All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) point champion (1998, '99, 2000, '01) and being the winningest driver with Bert Emick's group with 97 victories. He also has six World of Outlaws (WoO) wins and four WoO preliminary wins. Altogether he has reached victory lane well over 200 times since he first started racing back in 1973 in one of his dad's old number 066 cars.

Kenny "Mouse" Jacobs' major wins include the \$100,000-to-win 1994 Historical Big One at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway in Rossburg, Ohio, the 1988 Williams Grove National Open in Pennsylvania, the 2006 Front Row Challenge in Iowa, the 2005 Canadian Sprint Car Nationals at Ohsweken Speedway in Ontario, Canada, the 1997 All Star-sanctioned Freedom 40 at K-C Raceway in Ohio, the 1995 Jayhawk Nationals at Thunderhill Speedway in Kansas, the 1998 ASCoC Hoosier Fall Classic at Lawrenceburg Speedway in Indiana, and the 1987 United States Auto Club (USAC) Hoosier Hundred at the Indiana State Fairgrounds mile track in Indy.

Back in 1978, Harold "Flake" Kemenah had taken Kenny to California for the first time race in his famed 3x machine. He had been around Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois with the DePalma and the Nickles Brothers teams. In 1981, he ran third at his first-ever Williams Grove National Open driving for Frank Crash. Then in 1982 he started driving for Ed Reno and things really took off. The team started to travel more and they did their fair share of winning. They had already won seven times in 1984, before making their first trip to Knoxville Raceway in Iowa. His first race was the Wednesday night preliminary of the Nationals. He finished sixth in the feature behind Sammy Swindell, Ron Shuman, Bobby Davis, Jr, Rocky Hodges and Jimmy Sills, respectively. Kenny tells the final night like this: "Jac Haudenschild ran ninth and I ran tenth in the big race. I remember getting out of the car and I looked at Jac and said, 'I never ran so damn hard in my life to run tenth place.' Jac ran ninth in Hampshire's car and I ran tenth and we were bumper to bumper and we couldn't see eighth. And we ran hard to run ninth and tenth."

But running against tough drivers was nothing new as it was something that he had done from the start. Ed and Jac Haudenschild were regulars on the Lakeview and Wayne County ovals, as was Kenny. Brad Doty then followed along shortly thereafter. But Ohio in the 1970s was a tough deal. There were a lot of strong locals, plus there were high paying special events that brought in tough outsiders. Rick Ferkel, Jim and Fred Linder, and Jack Hewitt were always around and Steve Smith and Bobby Allen spent a lot of time in Ohio back then, too.

Then in 1977, while running the Pope/Harmon 6x car, Jacobs started venturing into Western Pennsylvania. Back in those days, the Lernerville-Mercer-Tri-City circuit included stars like Lou Blaney, Ralph Quarterston, Gus Linder, "Buddy" Cochran, Ted Wise, Dick Bailey, Ed Lynch Sr., Ed Murphy, and Jack Sodeman. It was as tough of a local circuit as anywhere in the country as these guys had won and ran 'top ten' at places like Williams Grove, Knoxville, Manzanita, and others.

Kenny Jacobs had developed a mindset for going out to run at new places, like Western Pennsylvania. "I didn't know those guys. I knew them, but I didn't know them. Back in the early days when I got the chance to go somewhere, I thought I was not going to get beat. I just had it in my mind, 'I'm gonna leave an impression when I leave this place'. I just had more desire to win at different race tracks than I did at my own home tracks. I just had a lot of desire to win at different race tracks when we went there."

After being out on the road racing for so many years, Kenny has seen a lot of racetracks. Some have been better to him than most and some have been worse than others. Sometimes it didn't work out like he thought it would. One track, years ago, that he just knew he was going to hate. It was the old Rocky Mountain National Speedway in Denver, Colorado. He got there early that day and walked the track and just didn't like it. It just seemed like a track that he wasn't going to like running on for some reason. Then he went out and won the WoO race that night.

Other tracks have gone the other way though. The old family track at Wayne County has had its highs and lows for him. He admits that he has just never had any consistency there, even though he knows it better than any other track. "I've got to be honest with you, of all the race tracks I've raced at, I've struggled at Orrville more than any other racetrack in the country. Even at Orrville when I would win a race, I could come back six times and not even be close. My brother Dean and my son (Lee) are better at Orrville than I ever will be and I have no idea why. I've won races there, and won them pretty handily, then went back and could not keep up. Out of my entire career, the track my grandpa built was my worst racetrack."

Now when it comes to the tracks that have been good to him, everyone knows that Eldora is a place that Kenny has excelled at, as his 23 wins there prove. "Eldora and Knoxville are probably my favorite big tracks. I like Syracuse. I just like the speed. And I like Port Royal. The scariest track in all of Pennsylvania was my very favorite race track. I remember one night there when (65-time All Star winner) Joey Saldana walked up after the heat race and asked me, 'You actually like this place?' I said, 'Joey, there was a time I loved it.' Lernerville, Chillicothe, and Lawrenceburg, those are my favorite little tracks."

One thing that Kenny has not been known for is on-track confrontations, or off-track for that matter. He does take pride in the fact that he hasn't had many altercations with his fellow drivers, although he does recall a few episodes. One year at Syracuse, when Steve Kinser took him out when Kenny was starting on the pole. One year on the Outlaws trail when he and Sammy had a few bad races together in a row, before Ted Johnson put an end to it.

Then there is the famous episode at K-C Raceway in Chillicothe when Australian Garry Brazier tried to crash him. "To this day I still have no idea what he was mad about. We never hit. And then he intentionally tried to take me out and I just checked up and drove completely off the racetrack. Then he tried to take me out when I came around to lap him since they had put him to the rear. So they stopped the race. They red flagged the race and they escorted him and his dad and they whole crew out of the racetrack. I still have no idea what that was about. He seemed to think I cut him off when I passed him or something. I have no idea. We never touched wheels or anything."

Being a driver that has not had a lot of incidents or altercations is something that Kenny thinks people will remember about him. At least he hopes that's the kind of driver he will be remembered as. "I'd have to say there can't be a one (driver) that says they can't race wheel to wheel with me. Ed Reno always said I was the smoothest race car driver he had ever seen in his life and could still win races. I wasn't as good as Doug Wolfgang and would never be as good as Doug Wolfgang, but I always thought I drove like Doug Wolfgang. He won a ton of races and never tore up many race cars. I drove his race car that Bob Weikert owned at the end of one year at Hagerstown. I honestly jumped right in his seat and never changed anything and felt right at home. (Kenny won big in the second of the double features that day.) That just enforced my theory that I drive like Doug Wolfgang."

While Doug is whom he thought he drove like, the driver he always wanted to be like was Rick Ferkel. The way that Rick handled the fans and how he was the biggest gentleman in sprint cars made Kenny admire Rick. And that was as close to a hero in racing that he had, other than one certain old time driver. "I've never had heroes in racing, other than my own dad (the late Kenneth H. 'Jake' Jacobs)."

Kenny Jacobs, a fan of the late sprint car racer Dean Mast, continues to race sprint cars and live in Holmesville, Ohio, with his wife Kim. Their oldest daughter is Jennifer, while younger daughter Kendra works for Penske Racing, handling the publicity for open-wheeler-turned-NASCAR Nextel Cup driver Ryan Newman. Son Lee races sprint cars in the Jacobs family tradition. Kenny's siblings include Kathy Marthey, 1983 Wayne County Speedway (WCS) sprint car champion Gerald "Bud" Jacobs, Susan Petit, Lola Phillips, MaryBeth Hall, and 1992 WCS sprint car titlist Dean Jacobs.