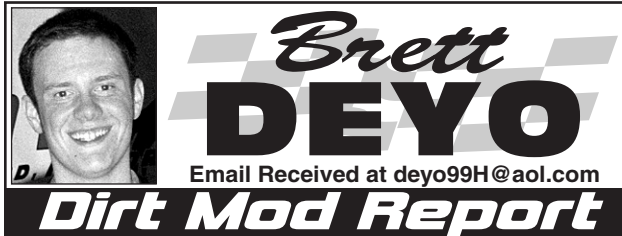


Kevin Hirthler Overcomes Field Of 70 Mods To Win SuperNationals; FMP Storylines



Kevin Hirthler's 'big-race prowess' came to the forefront one more time. Hirthler, the 29-year-old Boyertown, Pa., driver wheeled to a \$5,000-plus payday in last Saturday night's Short Track SuperNationals presented by Dart Machinery at Five Mile Point (N.Y.) Speedway.

Hirthler was making just his second career start at the Kirkwood, N.Y., quarter-mile oval under its current configuration (he was there in the late-1990s before the track was widened by Andrew Harpell). "We're on the money for these big races," Hirthler said after celebrating his victory on the roof of his family-owned No. 117 in Victory Lane.

"I've been trying for years to get a car to be that good at Grandview (Pa., where Hirthler races regularly)," Hirthler said. "It felt about perfect."

Hirthler, who jokingly exclaimed, "It's great to be in New York!" has now won in five different states: New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware. He has previously collected big paydays in the Delaware State Dirt Track Championships at Delaware International Speedway and the Octoberfest 350 at Hagerstown (Md.) Speedway.

To think, his foremost concern en route to Five Mile Point Saturday was making the show.

"I was nervous to qualify," Hirthler admitted. "On the way up, I was thinking of all the good guys that were coming and I knew the draw would be a big part of it."

Ultimately, the draw was kind to Hirthler - twice!

"My Dad (Craig) pulled No. 1 coming through the gate and then my son (Jesse James) did it in the redraw," Hirthler recalled. "I guess it was our night."

Unlike many of the invaders who had either never visited Five Mile Point or hadn't raced there in years, Hirthler had competed at the Southern Tier track in 2008, earning a top-10 finish. He had an affinity for the facility - and more importantly, a base setup.

"Last year, I had a top-10 finish from the back," he said. "We came back with the same car, my 2004 Bicknell that we won at Hagerstown with, so I figured we would be at least as good as the previous year. The only difference was the motor. Last year we ran my open SB2. That's apart right now, so we went with our Saturday-night Grandview motor. I didn't know what to expect from that, but on a track this size the motor isn't as important."

"I like the place (Five Mile Point). It's a small track, but I can't believe how wide it is. There's a lot of usable space on the track - a lot of room to operate, which makes for a good show."

Hirthler, who works full-time at his family's auto repair business, held off Jeff Strunk for the race's first 23 laps, many of which featured a side-by-side battle for the lead.

"I knew he (Strunk) had to be my stiffest competition, especially starting second after he won the heat race and the Clash," Hirthler said. "When I ran the outside, I had the momentum."

"Jeff is one of the cleanest drivers you could ever race against. He wouldn't get into me or slide up and push me out of the groove."

Hirthler's only miscue on the night came when he darted to the bottom on lap 23 following a restart. Strunk's Gagliardo Motorsports No. 41 wheeled by on the top for the lead.

"After that restart, I wanted to see how the car would be on the bottom and he (Strunk) got me," Hirthler said. "I don't know if we could have gotten him back."

Strunk's night came to a premature end when a busted hub assembly prompted the loss of the car's left-rear wheel on lap 27. Hirthler fell shy on leading the \$500 half-way lap (sponsored by Dale Smith) but did regain the top spot and held it for the final 23 circuits.

"With all the top guys there, it was a big win for us," Hirthler said.

With \$5,000 plus already in his pocket, Hirthler will receive a \$500 bonus from Dart Machinery of he attends the upcoming 40th annual Southern Tier 100 on Oct. 31 at the Point (the Race of Champions Dart Dirt Modified Tour finale).

Should he win that event, the bonus increases to \$1,000. He plans to chase the extra cash.

"I'll be there," Hirthler said.

LEAVING WITH LOOT: Strunk, the Grandview Speedway NASCAR Whelen All-American Series 358-Modified champion and recently-crowned Pennsylvania State champion, lost out on posting a Short Track SuperNationals victory.

But he didn't leave the Point empty-handed. The 41-year-old made the tow from Syracuse, N.Y., (where he entered a big-block at Super DIRT Week) worthwhile by winning the Trackside Products All-Star Clash for a \$600 payday. He pocketed \$70 for a heat victory and \$500 for leading lap 25 of the feature.

All told, Strunk's 22nd-place finish netted him \$1,370.

"I thought we were good (to win)," Strunk said dejectedly.

WHAT A CHARGE: Yes, Hirthler was the SuperNationals victor. But Mike Ricci may have been the show.

Ricci, the hardscrabble second-generation driver from Rosendale, N.Y., wheeled Jeff Mastrocola's No. 76R from dead last on the field to place runner-up. Ricci started from fifth but was placed at the tail of the field after contact with Bobby Trapper on the opening lap.

Undeterred, he carved back through traffic, reaching second with



the white flag flying. He fell one spot shy of his second Short Track SuperNationals victory. He won the inaugural race in 2006 at N.Y.'s Afton Speedway.

"I just hooked him (Trapper) when he checked up going into one," Ricci said. "It was a racing deal."

Ricci is confident in his extra-distance setup for FMP in preparation for the Southern Tier 100.

FINALLY A FINISH: Mike Gular has made only infrequent starts at Five Mile Point Speedway in his career. And they've been memorable for all the wrong races.

"I never finished a race here before tonight," Gular, 26, beamed after a third-place SuperNationals finish with Terry Fasnacht's No. 53 Teo-Pro car.

Gular used Friday night's open practice to dial in his car for Saturday. He made the two-and-a-half-hour tow despite a grim forecast.

"I was glad we came to practice," he said. "We were on the fence because of the weather, but it was definitely worthwhile."

Gular won his heat race and started the feature from sixth position, running inside the top five for the entire distance.

"I wish we would have pulled some gear out for the feature," Gular said. "That's one thing we should have done differently."

"Finally, we didn't have any problems, didn't run out of fuel and we finished!"

MERKEL MAGIC: Sean Merkel had never visited Five Mile Point Speedway until Friday night's open practice. Like Gular, the Bechtelsville, Pa., driver's seat time proved worthwhile.

Merkel drove his family-owned No. 118 from 14th starting position to place a solid fourth. The top-five effort helped ease the pain of a blown engine while leading a heat race during the Sept. 19 Freedom 76 program at Grandview.

"We had a good time," smiled Merkel, who likewise posted a fourth-place run in the Big Diamond (Pa.) Raceway Coalcracker 100.

Merkel ran his first race as a married man. He wed Lindsay Dewan on Sept. 26.

TWO TOP FIVES: Joey Grammes joined Mike Ricci as one of two drivers to have posted top-five finishes in both editions of the Short Track SuperNationals. Grammes, of Lehigh, Pa., finished fourth in the first event at Afton in '06 and fifth this time around.

The Grammes team fielded a pair of cars in Saturday's event. The second seat was filled by Grandview Speedway regular Jason Hamilton, who won a consolation to qualify for the main. However, Hamilton was eliminated with right-side damage midway through the feature.

Brad Grammes was formerly Hamilton's crew chief when the Erwinna, Pa., resident drove for Doug Flurer.

"I want to thank Brad for letting me run his car," Hamilton said. "My (Grandview) car is already sold. We're going to run it one more time at Grandview (for the Oct. 17 Five-25s) but didn't want to take a chance with it in two races."

SHORT TRACK SUPERNATIONALS NOTEBOOK: The field of 70 Modifieds included representatives of five different states: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Vermont. The large car count required use of two pit areas.

A solid crowd turned out for the SuperNationals, so large, in fact, that spectators resorted to parking on the backstretch and even the local supermarket a quarter-mile from the track on Francis Street....

Billy Pauch Sr. lost out on a sure second-place pay envelope three laps from the finish when his PPB Racing-sponsored No. 8 slowed with apparent drive line failure four laps from the finish.

"I felt it at halfway, starting to vibrate," said Pauch, 52, of Frenchtown, N.J., who was nonetheless pleased with the performance of his car and the track conditions at FMP.

"I was really good on restarts," Pauch said, recollecting a move that

vaulted him from fifth to third in a pair of turns....

Pauch's 22-year-old son Billy Jr. recovered from an opening-lap skirmish that sent him to the infield in turn one to place ninth.

"I had it (the five car pileup) missed, but I got forced down to the bottom and had to stop," he surmised....

Stewart Friesen's eventful week resulted in a productive 23rd-to-sixth drive in the feature. Friesen had been slated to run Will Brown's car in the SuperNationals. However, the Cambridge, Md., businessman wasn't able to attend the event and informed Friesen - who was competing at Super DIRT Week - on Thursday.

Friesen hastily arranged a ride with Mike Dinatale in the MAD Motorsports No. 11D on Friday (he had been scheduled to run that car at the Diamond Nationals but that event fell to rain).

But there was one final obstacle. The 26-year-old ran out of fuel en route to Five Mile Point from Syracuse on Saturday afternoon, a stone's throw from the I-81 exit for the speedway (a group of helpful travelers helped Friesen and Co. push the vehicle to a gas station)....

Brian Weaver and Ryan Godown both relinquished the lead in consolation events. Godown was setting the pace in the Tom Umbenhauer-owned No. 19 when the car's right-rear tire went down.

Five Mile Point champion Weaver, who was making his debut with a fresh chassis, suffered terminal engine problems that ended his night....

Mitch Gibbs rode out a grinding crash at Super DIRT Week during his time-trial effort on Thursday, but arrived at Five Mile Point Saturday ready to race the Ken Brewer-owned No. 77x, powered by a fresh Wally Fiehl big-block.

Gibbs, of North Norwich, N.Y., pitted to replace a flat right-rear tire on lap 20 but worked forward to a 10th-place result....

Jesse "the Thrill" Hill lived up to his nickname with an awe-inspiring drive to qualify through the final consolation. Hill, running an open small-block on methanol, out-raced 15-time '09 winner Bobby Varin for the final transfer spot.

Back-to-back Bridgeport (N.J.) 358 Small-Block champ Hill, 22, of Sewell, N.J., was marching forward in the feature from his 27th starting position until scratching his right eye near the halfway point.

The second-generation driver's eye was swollen shut by the final laps and he coasted to a 13th-place result.

"It messed with my depth perception," noted Hill, a first-time FMP visitor....

Varin, incidentally, fought brake issues with the Andy Romano-owned No. 97 during his heat event and missed qualifying by one spot....

Rich Ricci Jr. regretted a decision to run a harder-compound D3B right-rear tire on his family-owned No. 406. Ricci, typically a victory contender at FMP, was a quiet 12th, the last car on the lead lap.

While Ricci was racing at Five Mile Point, his daughter Allison won a Powder Puff race at Accord (N.Y.) Speedway Saturday....

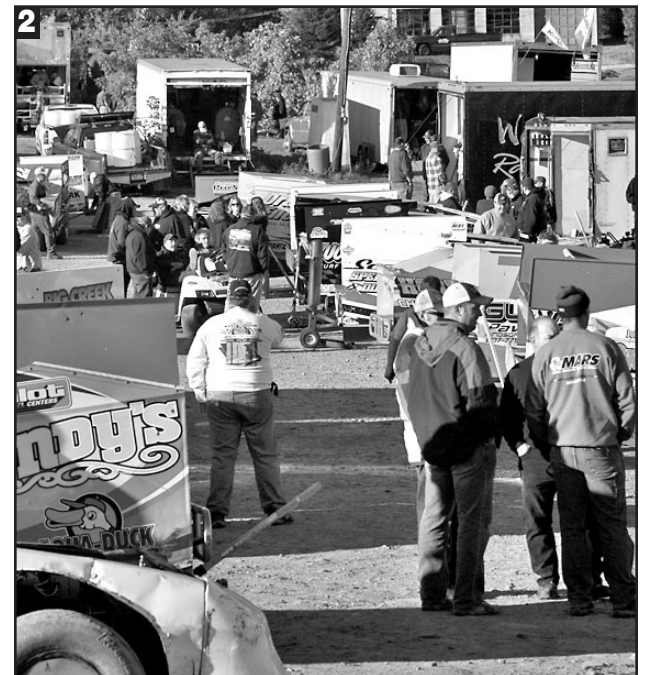
Tough break for both Vermont's Dave Camara and Central New York racer Paul Jensen, who were done for the night after a multi-car crash in warm-ups....

Jimmy Chester made his return to FMP for the first time in several years and qualified his big-block through a heat race. Suspension issues sent the No. 44 to the pits in the feature, but the Newfield, N.J., driver said he enjoyed the rare trek to New York.

"I had a lot of fun," he said. Chester capped his weekend with a Modified win on Sunday at Georgetown (Del.) Speedway....

Whitehall, Pa.'s Keith Hoffman pulled out on lap 14 with a right-rear flat tire on the Dennis "Moose" Eisenhard No. 77....

Speedway promoters in attendance included Al Wilcox and Reed Miller (Pa.'s Penn-Can), Kenny and Tina Rogers (Grandview), Jamie Friesen (N.Y.'s Ransomville), Ken Sands and Mike Sanchelli (N.Y.'s Orange County) Gene Cole (N.Y.'s Utica-Rome) and Danny Serrano (N.J.'s New Egypt)....



CONGRATS IN STORE for 1) Kevin Hirthler (right) who is congratulated by runner-up Mike Ricci (left) after last Saturday's main event; 2) Filled pit area made the SuperNationals a success! The race attracted a large field of cars and a packed grandstands.

(Photos by 1-Scott Bender; 2-Debbie Smith)