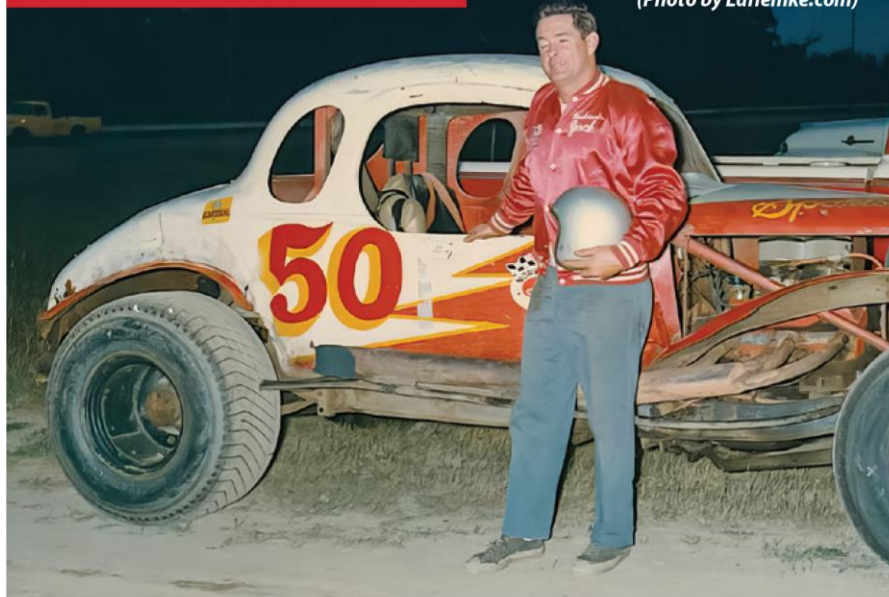


FLASHBACK

Ernie at Fonda.
(Photo by Edflemke.com)



ERNIE ON THE ROAD

By Lew Boyd

He had to be. Ernie Gahan lived to race, but his home was in New England's "Cow Hampshire," as it's called, seemingly 500 miles from anywhere.

Strong as an ox; basic as a straight axle, Ernie Gahan had emerged in the 1940s, towing out with his unadorned, under-financed battle wagons to any bull ring sprouting up in the Northeast. As he began to win more and more, his range grew wider and wider.

In February of 1956, he persuaded his decidedly more uptown buddy, Ralph Cusack—future owner of Maine's Beech Ridge Speedway—to accompany him to the beach races at Daytona. Poor Ralph. When they finally got there (Ralph estimated they blew 50 trailer tires on the way down), they had \$9 between them, had to sleep in the dunes NASCAR had roped off ("Beware of the rattlesnakes") and were told they would be starting 113th of about 120. But Ernie pulled it off, coming through with sixth place and earning \$600. He appeased Ralph, promising they'd be eating lobsters all the way home.

Ten years later, with his big block NASCAR modified, Ernie went after it big time, often alone. "Oh my God," he later recalled. "That year was something.

After finishing up a week on the road with a 200-lapper on Saturday and a 400 on Sunday, I hadn't slept since Thursday night. I was coming back over Hogback Mountain and I was so damned tired, all I could see out of the windshield was darkness. I grabbed onto the wheel, gritted my teeth, and waited for the crash. But before it came, everything stopped. I realized I had already pulled over and fallen asleep."

By mid-season, he had already run more than 50 times, bouncing like a hockey puck up and down the East Coast.

You can only imagine the road miles. Then one night Larry Grainger, promoter of Middletown, New York, called and urged Ernie to come to a big open-comp show on a Wednesday night. It didn't go so well. On his way out of the ballpark, Ernie busted his neck in three places and the car in quite a few more. The doctor announced that if he raced again, he'd be a dead man. Ernie's take for the night was \$15.

But that same week someone asked Ernie if he realized he was leading the nation in points. Off came the neck brace. That Friday he was driving for someone else at Malta, New York. "I did get in a little jingle there, but it straightened me right out," he said. The next night he joined Massachusetts buddies Vic Kangas and Marty Harty at Fonda Speedway. They had showed up with a car that, quite remarkably, they'd built in just the previous few days. It was off and running again.

By the fall, Ernie was still on top of the chase, but NASCAR scheduled a major modified race at Atlanta on November 6. Needless to say, there was no superspeedway car in Ernie's garage, so he grabbed his helmet and off he went to pick up a ride.

"It was kind of a sled but I drove my butt off. I couldn't believe it when Ray Hendrick, my closest competitor, drove Junie Dunlavey's car right into the wall. I always teased him afterwards that he shouldn't have concentrated so much on giving me the finger on his way by."



Pulling into Massachusetts's Norwood Arena for a night on the pavement. (Photo by RA Sivia)



The look of things after Middletown. (Photo courtesy Coastal 181 Collection)

Ernie managed a 10th, won the title, and that's when Bill France tapped him on the shoulder. "Now Ernie," he said, "We're going to have to send you to the Dale Carnegie School of Speech."

Ernie's response: "Bill, I'm a damn race car driver, not a speaker. I'm not going to get up in front of the whole country like some kind of hypocrite. My thing is winning races." And that's just what he did on the short tracks. For years more.

As Ernie reached his 80s, it was time to pay the price for the incredibly demanding way he had chosen to make his living. In the summer of 2009, he was in a hospital on the Maine coast and depressed.

A group of us took notice and put out an APB to try to locate his national championship trophy so we could return it to him. He had given the trophy to dodgy Rene Charland, who promised to put it in a museum he never built.

Through the good efforts of New York journalist Ron Hedger, the trophy was found, and we delivered it to the nursing station on Ernie's floor. We asked the nurses if they knew they had a NASCAR National Champion in their midst. They were thrilled, as they lived not far from New Hampshire Motor Speedway and understood the glory that went with that trophy.

As a group, the nurses marched into Ernie's room, trophy in tow. The head nurse asked him, "Are you as good as Kyle Busch?" Ernie grinned, with a smile like a lighthouse by the sea.

And the day after that Thanksgiving, he quietly passed away. **FSW**