

Jim Lacy: Outstanding Competitor

Just about everyone in the Northeast who ever attended auto racing events and either witnessed or read about auto racing in the area knows of Jim Lacy's exploits on the speedways. Jim was one of the most powerful individuals who ever turned a wheel.

Born in Brooklyn on December 6, 1927, he stood close to six feet tall and about 190 lbs. He was an accomplished miler on the Mephram High School track team in his hometown of North Bellmore. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the army and trained at Fort Knox, Kentucky, to be a tank driver and after six months there, he went overseas to Japan for 18 months. Discharged in San Francisco, Lacy came back home to work for Grumman in 1947, until his retirement in 1989. During his time there, he worked his way up from the assembly line to foreman on the military flight line and overseeing hangars with 90 men reporting to him. Tom Johnson, vice president of manufacturing operations, named Jim Lacy general manager of Plant #4, in charge of all manufacturing and related operations. Sitting at a desk even for part of his day was not easy for Jim because he had been on the move a good part of his life. From 1969-71, he was supervisor of flight operations. Then his career took off literally in another direction. He served until 1973 as a Gulfstream field service rep, part of the time in support of the King of Cameroon's Gulfstream 11 Fanjet. He returned to Plant #4, serving as supervisor until his general manager appointment. Now Jim had to spend a little time



Jim Lacy after winning main event at Island Garden being congratulated by his wife Eileen and Pop Savona, car owner's father, (1960)



Popular Driver Jim Lacy posing for photo prior to entering Main Event at Island Garden, 1960.

behind the desk but those who knew him will tell you it would be as little as possible, and maybe with good reason. Lacy's responsibilities included overseeing E-2C final assembly and flight, corporate Gulfstream fleet, TC-4C mod program, F-14 operational flight trainer fabrication, F-14 mod program, prototype shops, avionic systems test labs, shuttle trainer aircraft development and the product development center.

Auto racing was a family tradition with older brothers Ray and Joe seeing action on area speedways. When Jim was 24, with stock car racing being run on a weekly basis in 1952, his brother Joe talked him into giving racing a try. Jim turned out to be a very talented driver. He raced modifieds, Non-Fords, sedans, midgets, 3/4-midgets and boats and won races and championships with all of them. Some of

the cars Jim raced included Andy and Frank Spies #447 Non-Ford, Joe Orzano's #88 Non-Ford, Joe Schlichtig's #13 sedan, Johnny Hertle's #50 modified, Sal Giresis' #18 midget and the fabulous Frank Savona Roadster #8 Crosley powered 3/4 midget. Driving this car, Jim Lacy became the winningest driver in the history of 3/4 midget racing. Jim won seven championships in the Savona #8 with the help of the pit crew which included four Savona brothers; Frank, Willy, Vinny and John, and Anthony "Pop" Savona. Frank Savona also became the winningest car owner in the history of 3/4 midget racing.

Tricks of the trade came Jim's way through the efforts of his good friend, Johnny Zeke, a veteran of pre-WWII midget racing and post-war stock car racing. Jim credited Johnny with helping him to learn, perfect, enjoy and respect the sport. He competed until about 1965 and said auto racing was the most enjoyable era in his life. He said the biggest thrill in his racing career was winning the first Jake Kedenburg Memorial Trophy event, a 100-lap race at Freeport. That was in 1960, the year after Jake, the veteran Freeport promoter, passed away. Jim respected and admired Jake. He also won it in a subsequent year. Lacy won at least 12 driving championships in his career. Some of the tracks he competed in included Freeport Stadium, Islip Speedway, Riverhead Raceway, Island Garden, Commack Arena, Tuckahoe Stadium, Rochester War Memorial Stadium and White Lake Speedway in New York; Teaneck Armory, Pinebrook Stadium, Wall Stadium, Flemington Speedway and Fort Dix Speedway in New Jersey; Riverside Park in Mass.; Waterview Speedway, Connecticut and Grandview Speedway in Pa.

He came from a family that included one non-racing brother, Jack, and a

sister, June, as well as Ray and Joe who both died. Jim's other hobbies consisted of ice skating on the Roosevelt Field artificial rink and driving a 1930 Model-A Ford for fun. And according to his family, he was also a big time practical joker and an expert water skier. For example, one time he took a saucer type object and secured a bar stool to it and with a beer in his hand and sitting on the stool, he was off and skiing, towed by a friend's boat. Can you picture this? Jim also loved fishing for shark and tuna on his 27-foot Chris Craft.

remember the ordeal Jim went through on June 6, 1959, when he got up bright and early that morning and took part in the "Around Long Island Boat Marathon." He struggled through the 8 1/2 hour contest which covered 280 miles in a 16-foot outboard and won the event the first time he ever tried his hand at it. Then he collapsed from exhaustion and required an ambulance trip for a medical check-up. He recovered later and headed for Freeport Stadium that night only hours after the boat race and won the 25-lap main event.

Though Jim liked to win races as much as anyone in the sport, he did not keep any record of his victories and did not display his special awards, trophies

and other proofs of his success. He kept these items in a closet at home. He always said, "I wanted my kids to think of me as their father; not as some kind of a symbol because of those trophies." He told me that he wanted to retire from auto racing "as a champ; not as a chump," which he did. Jim and Eileen had seven children; James, Carol, Richard, Elaine, Eileen, Daniel and William. When asked where and how he met his wife Eileen, Jim replied that he met her on a blind date.

Jim was a Camel smoker and lover of Mantovani and semi-classical music. I am very sorry to say that Jim Lacy passed away this month while I was writing this column. Jim was not only a fellow competitor but he was also a good friend. He will be sorely missed. The Savona #8 roadster 3/4 midget racing car is on display in the Himes Museum along with many other Jim Lacy items, including photos and the #447 Andy and Frank Spies Non-Ford racecar. ●

Marty Himes is the owner-curator of the nationally recognized Himes Museum of Motor Racing Nostalgia in Bay Shore



Jim Lacy, after another win at Island Garden Arena, West Hempstead. Nick Fornoro (starter, striped jacket), Frank Savona, proud owner, behind winner Jim Lacy, Yale Garber, promoter, on right (Nov. 1960)



Jim Lacy at Freeport Stadium in 1960, driving Andy and Frank Spies #447 Non-Ford to another win.

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