

Buddy Pearce – Have Helmet, Will Drive

By: Gerry Hafer, The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club



The term “journeyman driver” has been used to describe the career of Dale “Buddy” Pearce, but if you look up the actual definition, you’ll find that it only partially describes this racing standout’s place in Florida racing history. Academically, the term means “competent and reliable but unexceptional.” Take a trip through the archives of Florida’s racing venues through the 1960’s, ‘70’s, and 80’s, and you’ll quickly

find that “unexceptional” is a word that bears no relationship to Buddy Pearce and his command of short track racing during that period.

As a genuine “helmet for hire,” Pearce was always ready to drive. Any car, any class, any track, any owner...just give him a nod and he’d climb in the car. In fact many car owners took advantage of Buddy’s driving skills to see exactly what could be gotten out of their car. “I just liked to drive,” Buddy usually says with a broad grin, “and it didn’t matter to me how evil the car happened to be.” Buddy began his career on the quarter mile dirt tracks up in Pennsylvania and Ohio, driving at tracks like Heidelberg (Pittsburgh), Penn Speedway, Canfield, Sharon, Mercer, and Large. Eventually, he moved to Florida to boost his career, running at such venues as Medley Speedway (Miami), Hollywood, Hialeah, New Smyrna, Sunshine Speedway, Ft. Pierce Speedway, and of course Palm Beach Speedway. It was at Palm Beach where he began to notch his place in Florida’s racing history, competing head-to-head against the likes of Dick Anderson, Gary Balough, Bobby Brack, and Will Cagle, to name a few. It was there that he ran up against the group that would later be known as “The Alabama Gang”—Donnie Allison, Bobby Allison, and Red Farmer. Did any of those names intimidate him? “No,” says Buddy, “Like I said, I just liked to drive.”

Buddy is unable to tell you how many feature wins he accumulated during his career, but judging from the racing programs, newspaper clippings, and racing memorabilia he’s accumulated, the total is easily in the hundreds. What stands out most in his mind these days, though, is a win in a Late Model Modified 100 lap banner event in the early 1970’s at Ft. Pierce Speedway. Driving a Bunny Miller-built car owned by citrus giant Robinson Groves, Buddy arrived at the track with an ill-handling machine that qualified dead last in a field of roughly 100 cars. A full-field inversion, however, gave Buddy the pole, along with an uneasy feeling about what the car *couldn’t* do. After all, drivers like Tiny Lund, Red Farmer, Paul Connors, and Bobby Brack were starting behind him, with qualifying speeds well exceeding his speed. At the last



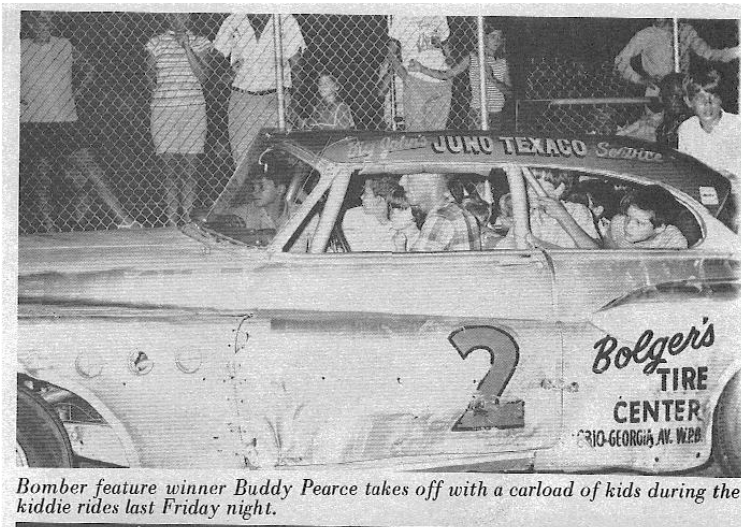
Buddy’s winning 42X at Ft. Pierce Speedway

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minute, though, just as he was getting ready to head out on the track, Miller—being familiar with the car and its setup—stopped him and informed him that the front and rear tires were switched. It seems the sign painter they had hired to put the finishing lettering on the car had been using the tires as a seat as he moved along the side of the car, and had rearranged them. Once the tires were installed correctly, Buddy recalls, the car was a rocket. He went on to win the event, lapping the end of the field on the first lap, and leading all 100 laps. As a side note, Buddy also observed that the sign painter misspelled his name on the car!

Some of the highlights of Buddy's racing career include his winning the Figure 8 Championship at Ft. Pierce Speedway, along with his Figure 8 success at Gold Coast Speedway. He also racked up considerable success driving a Holman-Moody Ford at Palm Beach Speedway, and won several events in one of the two 1949 Ford Strictly Stock class cars he built himself. But beyond his on-track accomplishments, one of



August, 1969 - Buddy building rapport with his young fans at Palm Beach Speedway

Buddy's most treasured memories is his relationship with his fans—fans who followed him from track-to-track. "I was sort of a clown," he reports, "and I had a lot of fun with people who followed me around." As a testimonial to his popularity, Buddy's fans at one point pooled their funds and bought him a brand new, specially painted Buco full-face helmet. He truly was a fan favorite on South Florida's weekly circuits, and was even nicknamed "Uncle Buddy" to his legions of adoring followers.

A racer, certainly. But Buddy's career was much more than that. He was a construction worker, a steel mill worker, a professional ballroom dancer and instructor, and a professional water ski instructor. These days, though, he's well known in Central Florida for his restoration of a 1930 Model "A" Ford, and recently led a contingent of 67 Model "A"s on an expedition to Palm Beach for a reunion event. Just picture a string of that many Model As making their way down US1, with Buddy in the lead. He still loves to drive!

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