

Jack Hewitt and The Villages

Florida Open Wheel at Hoseheads.com

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By Richard Golardi



Jack Hewitt is speaking in The Villages on Wednesday evening. You know, it's that place in Central Florida near Wildwood, with over 100,000 residents over the age of 55. It's sometimes called the fastest growing city in America, with 11 AM happy hours and over two thousand "Resident Lifestyle Groups." Living there has been described as being on permanent vacation, a chance to have fun and enjoy life after a lifetime of working hard to be able to afford one of the \$200,000 homes. The place is huge, spread out over 32 square miles and three counties. I got lost my first time there, and had to ask for directions at one of the security checkpoints at a subdivision entrance. The guard

was very polite and quickly got me pointed in the right direction.

One of the more popular resident groups is The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club. It's a group of fervent auto racing fans that has embraced local racers, tracks, race teams, and even this reporter. I had the opportunity to speak to the group in October at their monthly meeting, held on the first Wednesday of each month in one of the community's recreation centers. Two things surprised me – the size of the club and the number that came to the meeting to hear me speak (about two of Florida's legendary sprint car drivers), and their acute knowledge of and desire to take in short track racing. They could often be found at Citrus County Speedway, sitting in a group with their yellow club shirts along the front stretch. They had chosen Citrus County as their home track, placing a club sticker on a wall above the track at one point.

Citrus County Speedway promoter Gary Laplant spoke to the group in late 2013 as a means to connect with the group and promote the upcoming 2014 race season. Later in 2014, Florida sprint car legend Stan Butler regaled the group with stories from his racing career from Florida to the Little 500. Jack Hewitt, who lives in Florida during the cold weather months and is now a Floridian (as stated on a certain government-issued state ID), is coming off an eventful year highlighted by his return to the USAC Silver Crown Series at Eldora Speedway in September. The 63 year old National Sprint Car Hall of Fame inductee expressed a slight bit of trepidation about his January speaking duties when I interviewed him at Eldora in September.

"I'm going to have to find out from you how it is, and if they butchered you are not," Hewitt said after I informed that I'd be the monthly speaker at The Villages just a few months before his speaking engagement. "No, no," I replied. "Stan Butler was there in July, and supposedly they loved him, and I'm October, and then they'll have you, and I'm sure they will love you," I said, mentioning all the sprint car racing related speakers. By the time my short interview had ended, my recorder captured the sound of several bystanders laughing uproariously, as Jack had managed to find the absurd and humorous side of any initially serious discussion about racing. Once Jack Hewitt started to tell a racing story, you had better prepare to laugh.

I asked Jack Hewitt for his reaction to the recent expansion of USAC and ASCS involvement in Florida Speedweeks, with the series adding races at East Bay and Bubba Raceway Park. "With USAC, what's happened in Ocala is that it's one little killer non-wing race track, and it's brought the racing back. We know East Bay, we ran there without the wings years ago. It's better racing. I'm not bad-mouthing the wings, but it's so expensive. If you want to watch a parade, you watch a Macy's day parade on Thanksgiving. The 360s, they've brought it back to where they're competitive, with ASCS with the wings. I'm not bad-mouthing World of Outlaws, but there's just not a lot of passing. It's called racing, it's not follow the leader. I drove 'em both (wing and non-wing). Money will win with a wing, where money don't dominate non-wing racing. I mean, you still got to have good equipment, but a decent motor will win you a race."



I also asked about the expansion of Speedweeks to five weekends of sprint car racing, and if there was a danger of this being too much expansion that will over saturate the fan base. "I got to worrying about the week after Daytona, because a lot of the race fans have left. But, I think the fans may want to come down later to get some warmer weather. At first, I thought it might be a bad deal, but I really think it's going to be better. Rather than come down for the World of Outlaws and the All Stars to watch, if they're a 360 fan, they'll just come down and do those two weekends (referring to the last two weekends in February). If they're USAC, they'll plan their vacation around the races that they want to see. There are a lot of cars coming. Before, they were coming down for three races, now they're coming down for six. So now it's worthwhile," according to Jack.

USAC had originally expressed their desire to have five or six races in Florida over the course of a six or seven day period. The final schedule showed a marked departure from this plan, with a four day stretch of no racing between race dates in the last week of the month. "Well, you got to have it. The tracks are taking a chance even on the weekend. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday is not going to be a really good date down here. Sunday's the problem. They have to have a rain date. He wanted Sunday for a rain date (referring to Bubba Raceway Park owner Bubba Clem), and you kind of got to give them what they're needing to stick their neck out and do three," Jack said.



Hewitt gave special praise to Bubba Raceway Park in Ocala, which has been the only Florida track to host USAC sprint cars in the past few years. Track owner Bubba Clem is a dedicated lover of sprint car racing. "Ocala – that is one of the number one non-wing race tracks in the country," Jack Hewitt proclaimed. "Now, I'm not just talking Florida. I'm saying in the country. I've never seen a bad non-wing race down here. It just amazes me how it just suits it so good. Right now, we're talking to them to see maybe we can bring the two-seater and be involved with it that week. So, that would be something special."