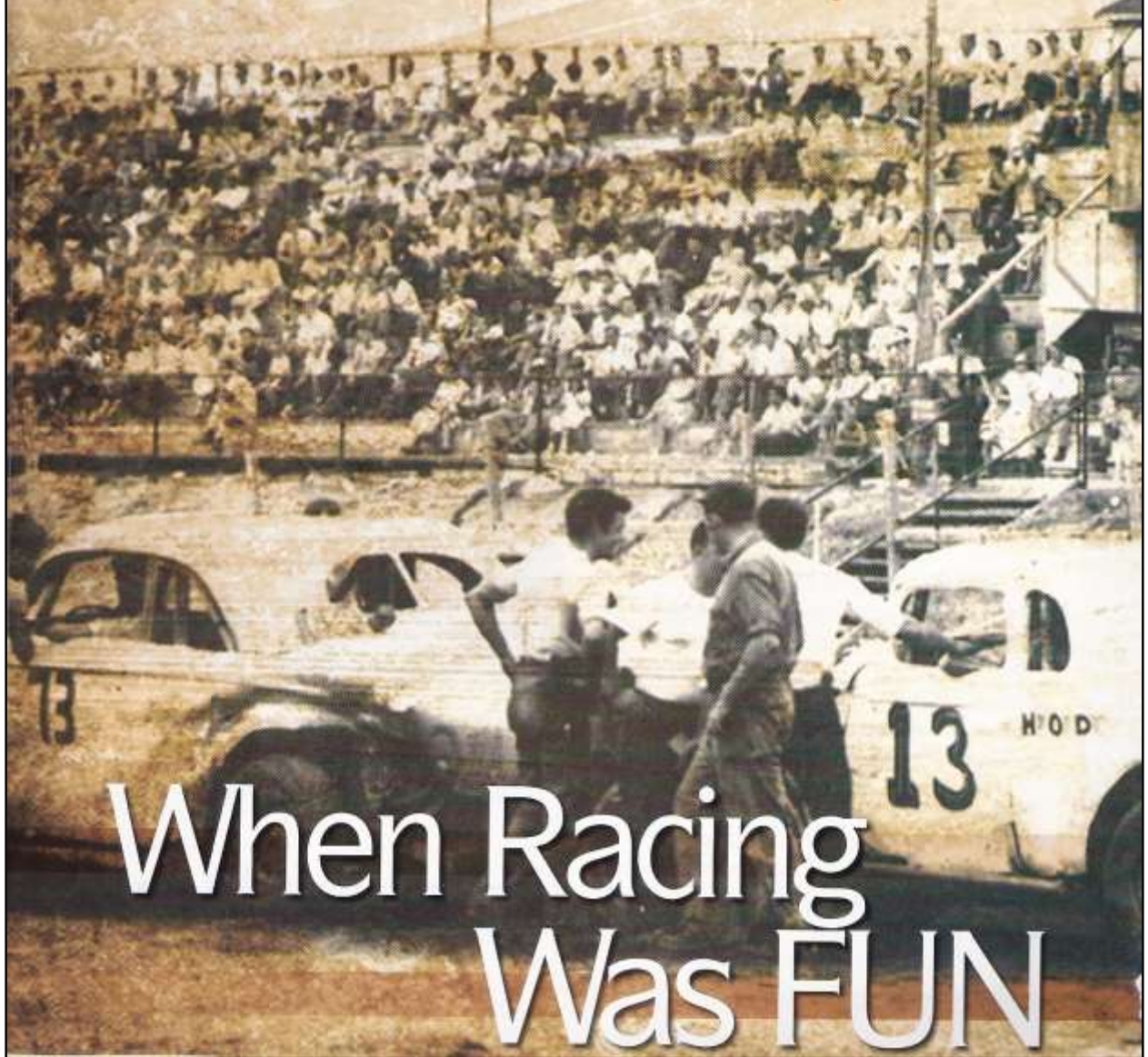


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But hey, it was Saturday night!"*



When Racing Was FUN

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Written by William Stokes; photos by Anthony Rao

Buster Burt recalls the early years of stock cars

How did you spend your Saturday nights in the 1950s? Dancing to a juke box or to a name band at some lakeside casino? Going to the movies?

Or, as many young men did, watching local up-and-coming drivers push their modified stock cars around the local dirt oval?



FROM TOP: Sponsorships are all-important in auto racing. One of Buster Burt's first was Howard's Fuel Oil Co. in Maine. Later, in the early 1990s, Buster and wife Zoëann traveled the country with one of Valvoline's show cars, giving demonstrations and appearing in car shows. Buster was inducted into the Maine Vintage Race Car Association's Hall of Fame in 2006.

Arthur "Buster" Burt of Country Club Hills got the racing bug in his native Lewiston, Maine, when he and his teen buddies stacked into Buster's 1940 Ford coupe to watch the "stockers" each weekend.

"There would be a lot of noise as those cars went for broke during an eight-race card plus a feature, a lot of beer and an occasional fight. But hey, it was Saturday night!" he recalled.

He started racing at Old Norway Fairgrounds in Maine in 1949 on a night when so many cars were disabled that the public address announcer called for volunteers from the stands to enter their street cars in the feature race. Buster lined up his car – and finished fifth in the first race of his life.

He not only found that he loved competition, but also went on to win his share of races, giving him enough cash winnings to buy and maintain his own car.

"Early on, sponsors kept you going," Buster explained. "Howard's Fuel Oil sponsored me, and taking home 50 bucks on race night was a big deal.

"You had to have a day job and work on your car at night. Fortunately, I worked for Wheeler's Garage and had the time and tools at hand."

Buster's winning streak continued for two years at tracks all over Maine before he joined the Air Force in 1951. He was a crew chief on B-47s and B-52s for nine years.

Buster was stationed in Orlando and ran street stock cars on the seaside course at Daytona Beach: two miles up the beach and two miles back down A1A. He also was able to race weekends at Florida tracks including Tampa, Eau Gallie and Lakeland. In 1959, after running races on Daytona's beach, Buster took part in the sportsmen's race, which was the first race at the Daytona International Speedway.

A decade later, the Air force transferred him back to Maine, where he first saw the popular Legend cars, replicas of original Ford and Chevrolet sedans and coupes powered by 1200cc Yamaha motorcycle engines.

"Legends were very popular in places such as the Carolinas, where racing had become really big, portending the sport's future," Buster continued. "I purchased a Legend car specifically to race and was doing OK until I got hurt."

"I was trying to pass another guy when my left front wheel went up over his right rear wheel. It threw me airborne about 10 feet, and I hit an infield light pole at about 65 miles per hour. I've had a rotator cuff problem since." He has had a lot of wrecks, he said, but it was turning 66 that convinced him to quit.

Following his Air Force discharge in 1971, Buster operated a successful recreational vehicle sales and service business in Kittery, Maine, for 16 years.

He and his wife, Zoeann, will celebrate their 29th wedding anniversary this year and share the affections of six children and 10 grandchildren. Catching Buster's eye, she asked, "It's been a great life, hasn't it?" A nod indicated he agreed.

"He had returned from the service when I met him," Zoeann said, picking up their story. "We later sold the RV business and wintered around Florida for several years beginning in 1982, but always returned to Maine."

"We went on the road with Valvoline/Jack Roush Racing in 1992-93, traveling the country, giving racing demonstrations, appearing at car shows, parts stores, shopping centers, promoting Valvoline wherever their products were sold." Zoeann and Buster, decked out in the company's colorful uniforms, towed the company's Winston Cup Show Car #6 in a trailer.

Zoeann recalled, "We moved to Country Club Hills from York, Maine, in 2007. No sooner had we closed on a house around the corner than I saw this one and fell in love with it. So here we are in our second Florida home in a year!"

"I don't compete any more," Buster said, "but I think about racing all the time. As for making friends, Zoeann and I owe a lot to The Villages' 200-member Motor Sports Fan Club. We attend races as a group at nearby tracks including Ocala Speedway, New Smyrna Speedway, Lakeland, Bradenton and Lake City."

Since the Burts were in Florida, Buster recently asked a friend in Maine to stand in for him and accept his membership into the Maine Motor Sports Hall of Fame.

"My public speaking career began when we did a Valvoline show and were guests of the Ford dealer near Punta Gorda," Buster chuckled. "He invited us to lunch and we were driving down his stately, palm tree bordered driveway, when he said, 'Oh, by the way, I neglected to tell you: You're the guest speaker at the Lions Club meeting today!'"

As a reward for being a guest speaker at the Villages' car club recently, Buster is now a member of its Hall of Fame.

"I don't agree with much of what's being done in professional racing today," Buster confessed. "Now, it's more business than sport: millions are spent by sponsors, the drivers become personalities in their own right, and the way they line up the cars is so different, the little guy hardly has a chance. When I started racing, it was fun."



Buster hasn't raced competitively for several years. But his memories are kept alive with his membership in the Villages Motor Sports Fan Club.