

Paradise
(Nat Reeder)

Raising a brewski for Glass Man.

Hang out with racers, and you run the danger of wanting to become a racing driver yourself. Crackpot as it sounds, back in the Paleozoic time – OK, back in the dreamy 1960s – you truly could do this. And so we segue into this session's parable.

Folk hero Nat Reeder, "Nat the Glass Man", a self-taught fiber glassing virtuoso and beer hound of the Los Angeles racing colony, had devoted a frustrating decade to watching customers A.J. Foyt, Jim Hurtubise, etc, race everywhere from Indy to Daytona.

Then, in 1965, Nat at last acquired a competition chariot of his own, a cruncher Chevy Impala 409.

For his debutant match he selected Ascot Speedway's dirt halfmile. Starting in the extreme rear, he spun out five times, got into a loser's pileup that set him back another five laps, and finished 11th and utterly last.

But during a second Ascot outing, Glass Man spun out less and only caved in one door, his own. Encouraged, he decided to go after bigger game and become a Grand National participant in the NASCAR *Motor Trend* 500 roadrace at Riverside Raceway.

Towing the Impala on a flatbed trailer with his pick-up truck, Glass Mann motored from L.A. to Riverside. His arrival was dramatic. While he was in the process of off-loading the Impala, an excited guy ran up asking if he, Glass Man, was the Impala's owner.

Glass Man confessed to that, whereupon the guy anxiously inquired if the Impala had an assigned wheelman for the 500. Glass Man proudly replied that indeed it did, but before he could identify himself the guy interrupted and enthusiastically urged him to fire *that* stroker, whatever his name was, and replace him with the stud – whoever *he* was – who'd been hauling the Impala 120 mph down the freeway.

For all three warmup days prior to the 500, NASCAR stewards wouldn't allow Glass Man and the Impala to go through tech inspection or to practice. Finally, at 4:45 p.m. Saturday afternoon, with the track closing in 15 minutes, Glass Man was permitted to horrify the steering wheel for one reconnaissance lap.

Doing zero damage, he managed to waltz the Impala off the slowest kink of the Raceway.

NASCAR stewards assured him he'd done well, then told him he could start 43rd and last.

Glass Man's raggedy-assed pit crew include a used car salesman, a retired race driver and another beer hound. They were in unanimous agreement that in the 500 Glass Man must send up an early Mayday and get off the track before any of the marathon's brand name drivers got the chance to lap him and reduce him to cannon fodder.

But on Sunday morning, having borrowed a driving uniform from his bud A.J. Foyt, Glass Man experienced second thoughts and vowed to remain in the hot seat for as long as he could. What would super Tex think of him if he folded early?

Complicating matters was that Glass Man's crew lacked a signaling black board, but it was agreed that the used car salesman would stand up on the pit wall whenever it was time for the Impala to be refueled. He was wearing a bright orange shirt Glass Man couldn't miss noticing.

Taking his position on the butt end of the rear row, and expecting to be handed his lunch by even the worst stragglers, Glass Man gratefully discovered that he and the Impala could smoke off at least a couple of enemy taxicabs, and did.

Parnelli Jones was the first of the brand names to lap him. And then: Dan Gurney, A.J., Freddie Lorenzen and Darel Dieringer. When Junior Johnson went by, too, the Glass Man decided to throw caution to the winds and give chase.

He dropped too low in Turn 1, veered up on two wheels, did a lazy spin, and for his finale went pitching up the Riverside esses traveling backwards. Congratulating himself for remembering to pop the clutch and not stall, and to avoid running over a track steward pedaling to his rescue on a bicycle, Glass Man adrenaline a boil, resumed the battle.

The orange shirt was on the wall, signaling that the Impala had burned off its fuel load and it was tie to pit. But when Glass Man did, the track steward on the bicycle was there waiting for him, screaming that as a result of the spin Glass Man's front wheels were pointing in different directions, and that the Impala required inspection.

Glass Man's beer hound pit member counseled Glass Man that if he obeyed the steward he'd fall way behind, so why not ignore him. Glass Man considered it. The steward became pissed off and ordered Glass Man behind the pit wall for six laps.

The miles accumulated; a pattern developed. Gurney, the ultimate winner, was lapping Glass Man once every 10 laps. So Glass Mann set his pace accordingly. He was having an uproarious good time. Every pit stop got better. By the next-to-last refueling, with barely 100 miles left, attrition had done a number on the 500's other 42 starters, and Glass Man's pit crew announced that he was running 10th. Pleased, they lit him up a big cigar for a reward.

Suddenly things got ominous. At Turn 9, where the back straight ended, the winds rose and across the Raceway boiled a dark cloud of dust, Plunging straight into the cloud, Glass Man took a brake scoop through a port window, then ran over a windshield lying in the groove.

His uniform buddy, A.J., had lost it and gone bailing to the bottom of Turn 9's inside canyon.

Ugly bolts of reality briefly interrupted Glass Man's reverie: jeez, a guy could really bust his rump doing this.

Meanwhile, the orange shirt hadn't been visible for a long time, and Glass Mann next felt the Impala burble and begin to die. Sure enough, the pit crew had committed its one and only mistake of the 500 and allowed him to run dray. Momentum, however, carried the Impala clear to the top of the esses and Turn 6.

Unstrapping himself and climbing out, he'd still placed 13th out of 16 finishers. And that A.J. was all busted up but should be O.K. The cigar still clenched between his teeth, a wall to wall grin plastered across his mug, Glass Man noticed his beer hound pitman cracking open an ice cold brewski and passing it to him in tribute.

Paradise. (1996)