

Turkey Night
(The 59th Thanksgiving Midgetcar Grand Prix, Irwindale, Calif.)

I haven't been to Turkey Night again since I wrote this, even though I live so close to Irwindale I can hear all the Ed Pink engines.

Midgetcar racing used to be the bomb, back when.

It was Billy Vukovich scorching the earth, bringing his "Mad Russian" act to the Indianapolis 500. It was A. J. Foyt lighting the fuse of *his* deal by starting last in the fabulous Hut Hundred, at the Terre Haute Action Track, and winning anyway.

It was Mario Andretti putting his name in lights, capturing three main events on three different tracks in two different states all on the same day.

It was peglegged Broncho Bill Schindler; it was Rodger Ward smoking the Formula Libre crowd at Lime Rock; it was the great gypsy Jimmie Davies; it was Cactus Jack Turner and Shorty Templeman; it was Allen Heath windmilling his hook playing rope-a-dope with crashwalls from Seattle to San Diego. You get the picture? Singleseater champions-of-the-future once made their bones mastering darting, shivering, I'll-cut-you-no-slack midgetcar tactics.

Midgetcar racing quit being the bomb when big singleseater racing fell under Championship Auto Racing Team's thumb and demand went out for a different sort of racedriver. For the last few decades, racing a midgetcar became the chosen way *not* to train for a career in the Indy 500.

But midgetcar racing is monster all over again – and with a really crazy twist.

If you're some young hot dog with a seriously heavy right foot, and you're burning to climb up to the big leagues, the bad news is that a doodlebug still won't be your ticket into CART – and probably not the Indy Racing League either. But the good news is that the puppy *will* take you to the taxicab heights of NASCAR – which, of course, these days is hotter than CART and the IRL combined.

Midgetcar graduates, if you've noticed, are standing Winston Cup on its head. Probably John Andretti – always underrated – set the stage. Then Jeff Gordon hit big, and for the last couple of campaigns he made himself the new Richard Petty/David Pearson/Dale Earnhardt. Just a year ago Kenny Irwin was NASCAR's top novice. And now it's prime time Tony Stewart who's knocking everybody out.

Underappreciated and even unwanted when he was racing in the IRL – somebody even tried jamming up Tony with a lawsuit to keep him out of this year's Indy – Stewart in 1999 found NASCAR friendlier. And he doesn't lack for supporters. Asked what he thought of Tony's fourth place in points/three-victory/rookie of the year Winston Cup seasons, Joe Gibbs, the ex-football luminary who is Tony's angel, said he was blown away by Tony's over-achieving. Still gushing about Tony being just a taxicab freshman and all, Gibbs concluded, "Nobody dreamed he'd win a race!"

He's right. The midgetcar racing faithful – now returning from decades of exclusion, but without ever having lost faith in the sport's potency – never dreamed talented Tony would win a single race either. We imagined he'd win half a dozen or so.

Anyway, thanks to this credibility boost from NASCAR, doodlebugs again are the bomb. This was especially timely news for the ancient and annual Turkey Night Grand Prix, once midgetcar racing's "most prestigious" extravaganza, lately fallen on hard times.

A Methuselah 59 editions old, T-Night has almost too much history to swallow – or adequately describe.

During the 1930s, midgetcar racing's swank era, Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles hosted the GP, and the likes of Bob Swanson and Ronney Household set the pace.

In the 1940s, Vukovich, the one and only, put his name among its winners.

In the 1950s, the show moved from glitzy Gilmore to bluecollar Gardena Stadium; Johnnie Parsons and Tony Bettenhausen were among the lions collaring wins.

The 1960s, a magic time of Ascot Park and of Foyt, Parnelli and Herk, saw the trinity finish one-two-three not once but two Turkey Nights in a row.

In the 1970s, Turkey Night was a magnet for sprintcar cyclones like Jan Opperman (who could only finish third) and honchos Bubby Jones and Gary (The Preacher) Patterson.

Through the 1980s and early 1990s Turkey Night fell under the spell of Ronnie Shuman, who was champion seven times and remains another conspicuous example of a midgetcar and circletrack hero who got screwed out of an Indianapolis career.

Billy Boat, now in the IRL, made himself a triple champion in 1995-1997. But by then its prestige was evaporating, and Turkey Night badly needed to find traction and get hooked up again.

This year it did. The host facility was the new Irwindale Speedway, a high-llama glitter palace of a shorttrack with a screaming fast paved half-mile plus state-of-the-art amenities including elevators, computerized electronic scoreboards, VIP suites, custom lighting and sound – and concrete crashwalls that won't quit.

Plus, there's a new buzz to midgetcars. High-techies may discount them as dinosaurs with front engines that require pickup trucks to push start and fire them up. But midgetcars are at an interesting state in their evolution.

The Offy, VW and Cosworth eras are long finished, and powerplants of choice have become – to put it crudely – cut-in-half sprintcar mills tricked out with electronic gizmos. When really juiced out, 350-plus ponies are at a driver's beck and call.

But the real buzz of this season's GP was Tony Stewart, who was on furlough from his Pontiac Grand Prix to fly in and see about adding his name to Turkey Night's list of luminary winners.

Irwindale's audience, 6,500 strong, was with Tony, but nervous. Had the humongous taxicabs robbed Tony of his opencockpit, openwheel soul? Did he still have the wherewithal to strap down inside a gristly 900-pound midgetcar and get with the program?

Tony's booming time trial lap of almost 104 mph – fast time out of the sprawling 50-car field – answered the riddle and earned him an ovation.

But that was only the first question. Newly-accustomed to 500-mile marathons lasting hours, could Tony still remember how to rise to the occasion and be an oldfashioned hardcharger during Turkey Night's sprint of a halfhour and change?

Whatever happened, Tony would have to work for it. Because the format of midgetcar racing discourages excellence and is the most audience friendly going, equality is always mandated.

To mitigate the risk of tires going away, every Turkey Night starter wore on its right rear the hardest compound of Hoosier rubber going.

Bulky 100-lap fuel loads notwithstanding, their copycat coilover suspensions guaranteed that the Beasts, Stealths, Drinans etc. wouldn't get nervous but remain nailed to the track.

Driver parity was mandated too. Tony's quick time may have won him an ovation – it didn't, however, win him the pole starting position. Just to be sure he didn't put the grandstands to sleep by checking out and saying sayonara to the completion, Tony got relegated to a starting spot back in the traffic of the third row.

Another Turkey Night!

Jason Leffler, on pole, books for 24 laps, but by then Tony has almost finished dislodging people from positions and nails Jason on lap 25. Five laps later, Jason executes a look-out-I'm-passing deal of his own and retakes first. Not liking this scenario, Tony tolerates it for five laps, then goes back in front for the following 27. Jason, too, came to race and somehow sails ahead for another 14. Then Tony is in charge for 18; catching the white lastlap flag, he's still leading.

Tony and Jason have been out there missing each other by inches, and their dueling almost doesn't let you breathe. Members of the same rich publishing company team, both of them are lapping faster than Tony qualified. And Irwindale is no banal WFO bowl, either, but a teaser track whose banking requires brakes, throttle and keeping a cool gourd while navigating through blankets of unruly lapped traffic.

You don't want to take your eyes off Tony and Jason, but if you don't you'll miss the sterling effort of an underdog named Clay Klepper. Time after time, Clay climbs right up to Tony's and Jason's coattails; seems to almost have them in his clutches; and then a yellow flag – almost a NASCAR-type yellow flag – flies.

Tony and Jason know what's what. Come every restart, they bring the field around so achingly slow that it prevents Clay from coming around them on a flier. Then, right at the end, a third publishing team car that had started in the caboose catches Clay and knocks him off the podium.

Last lap. Still leading and ready to win, Tony has his engine, a screaming Ed Pink Ford, soften just enough for Jason to zap him. And Jason, who honestly looked like he'd been wailing it in fractionally deeper and harder than Tony, gets his name instead of Tony's on the Turkey Night honor roll with those fabulous old bones A.J., Parnelli, Tony, Johnnie, Vookie, Ronney and Bob.

Who is Jason Leffler? He's a three-time national champion of midgetcars and previously a major player at such doodlebug theaters of combat as Belleville and Indianapolis Raceway Park. Appropriately for a midgeteer, he's toysized, looks approximately 15 years old, has a headful of porcupine hair, and is all primed to be NASCAR's newest midgetcar explosion.

Jason's scheduled to be on the pedal of Joe Gibbs' NASCAR Busch Series entry in 2000.
(1999)