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VERMONT HISTORY

A Need for Speed

A brief history of the sport of auto racing in Vermont

WHEN YOU PICTURE VERMONT, YOU PROBABLY imagine peace and quiet and bucolic mountain views—but the state's faster, louder side has a proud history too. The year 2017 saw Vermonter Ken Squier elected to the NASCAR Hall of Fame's Class of 2018, capping a long and extraordinary career. It is no coincidence that the summer Ken was inducted, Vermont Governor Phil Scott was out racing, too, and winning in the Late Model division at Thunder Road in Barre, Vermont. Racing is in Vermont's blood just as much as maple syrup.

The first automobile races in Vermont took place in St. Johnsbury, at the Caledonia County Fair in September 1903. The *St. Johnsbury Caledonian* proudly announced the 1903 fair as "the largest and best ever held in St. Johnsbury," and noted that "one of the new features this year will be automobile races consisting of three races, a doctor's race, a county race, and an open race."

It was during the doctor's race, on September 17, that tragedy struck. "Machine Runs Away at a Vermont Fair, Killing One Man and Injuring Two," reported *The New York Times* the next day. Dr. John M. Allen was "recording a speed of nearly fifty miles an hour" when he lost control of his car and spun off the track. "Herbert Lamphere, who was riding on the front of the machine for the purpose of balancing the automobile in going around curves, was thrown against a hitching rail and almost instantly killed." Dr. Allen and a third man, Fred Garrick, were also seriously injured.

Quickly, the idea of racing cars became a polarizing concept in Vermont—as it already was nationally. Joseph Battell's *Middlebury Register* printed endless articles and editorials railing against the evils of the automobile, and the *Morrisville News and Citizen* opined that the clamoring for speed was a societal ill, asking "How much cool judgment is left in a man's mind



Archie Blackadar of Danville first worked as a starter and eventually became a NASCAR chief steward. Here he jogs alongside a car to retrieve the checkered finish flag in Thunder Road's first season, 1960.



Racing teams parade through downtown Woodstock in July 1908, part of a multi-state rally that covered much of the Northeast.

after making a rushing speed of 30 or 40 miles per hour? Not a particle.”

Nevertheless, both the automobile and its racing were here to stay. In 1906, races became a fixture at the Vermont State Fair in Rutland, and they quickly became a mainstay of county fairs. Slowly, they began to displace trotting races; each year, they received slightly more prominence and the horses slightly less. While some drivers were Vermont based, the state fair circuit in this era was New England-wide, with famous drivers serving as a draw and building reputations. Some fairs still encouraged local drivers with special races, as in the race just for Fords at the Tunbridge World’s Fair of 1920, won by Max Hayward of Chelsea. He covered the four-mile track in a time of 5:45 and won \$15.

At the same time as regular racing took hold on repurposed horse tracks, Vermonters found other ways to compete via automobile. Rallies, meant to test the limits of a vehicle and crew’s endurance, crisscrossed the state and all of New England, covering as many as 200 miles in a day. Hill climbs, which displayed the muscle of new cars, were a natural fit for Vermont’s landscape. In July 1921, car salesman Forrest “Wild Trader” Grapes won a hill climb at St. Johnsbury driving an Essex touring car, reaching a top speed of 56 miles per hour. Grapes advertised his



Catamount Stadium was a much-beloved track in Milton, and anchored the northern Vermont racing scene for more than two decades.

PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE CHO LEE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF LLOYD HUTCHINS



Early racing events at state fairs often also featured stunts held on the tracks to excite the crowds, such as this up-on-two-wheels trick (that might have resulted in a rollover) at the Vermont State Fair in Rutland, c. 1940.



Drivers compete at Northfield's Dog River Raceway in its first season, 1949. If drivers missed turn two on the track, they headed over an embankment and down onto the main line of the Central Vermont Railway. Racing was held on Sunday afternoons, when there were no scheduled trains.



Logs formed a crude track barrier at the Brattleboro Speedway, c. 1951.

success in the *Orleans County Monitor* for several weeks afterward, telling readers they could buy the very same model for a bargain price of \$1,445, delivered.

In 1941, America entered World War II, and the full might of the auto industry turned to wartime production. Steel and rubber were all directed toward making tanks and airplanes, and hardly any new cars were produced. In 1946, when they turned their attention to automaking again, postwar America was ready. New prosperity, better roads, and returning soldiers with mechanical training and a taste for adrenaline all combined for a surge in interest.

Cars were cheap, readily available, and mechanically simple. With newer models available, 1930s models found a second life as young men across Vermont hauled them to filling stations, mechanic bays and barns, and souped them up. Many of them found work in adjacent fields: as mechanics themselves, driving plows or delivery trucks, or working as engineers. At night and on weekends, they raced cars.

Some of the earliest dedicated tracks were simply dirt ovals in backfields. Enough cars went around enough times to grind out a rough path. Convenient hillsides served as grandstands. Local doctors came, along with their families, to stand by in case of accidents. Competition was fierce, and a tight-knit community formed.

The first officially established and dedicated track was Dog River Speedway in Northfield. An early project of DuBois Construction, the track took the place of the old Northeastern Fairgrounds and opened in October 1949. It quickly drew massive crowds and was followed in the early 1950s by tracks around the state: Brattleboro Speedway in West Brattleboro, Mallet's Bay Race Track in Colchester, Fairmont Park Motor Speedway in Fair Haven, State Line Speedway in North Bennington, Otter Creek Speedway in Vergennes, and Pico Raceway in Rutland, among others.

Drivers still came in from out of state, but Vermont was beginning to develop some extraordinary local talent, too—both drivers and officials. Johnny Gammell, Larry Granger, Norm Chaloux, Tony Colicchio, Chester T. Wood, and brothers Beaver and Bobby Dragon began racing and winning at these small



Northeastern Speedway in Waterford, shown here c. 1962, was the first track to offer regular purses a season-long points system. Today, the track has been partially restored and there is a Vermont state historic marker on the site declaring it the state's first organized track.



Harold "Hardluck" Hanaford kisses a cow after winning the inaugural Milk Bowl at Thunder Road in 1962.



Ken Squier (left) interviews Harmon "Beaver" Dragon (right) after a race, c. 1970.

tracks, some of which sprang up for only a few years before disappearing. Competition on and off the track was fierce—at one point, there were nearly half a dozen tracks in Chittenden County alone.

New England-wide competition continued, as Vermont drivers left the state to compete at tracks in New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, and drivers from those states came north. New Hampshire had a particularly strong contingent, led by early champion Harold Hanaford and including Ronnie Marvin, the Ingerson brothers, Stanley Fadden, and Roy Forsythe. Maine sent Dick McCabe and Glenn Andrews, and Quebec sent Jean-Paul Cabana.

Some of Vermont's most famous individuals involved in racing were not themselves drivers. Ken Squier of Waterbury began calling trotting races at state fairs at a teenager, thanks to his involvement in the family business of running radio station WDEV. He quickly became hooked on stock car racing and booked jobs all over the state calling races. His love of the sport and flair for nicknames and vivid descriptions propelled him to the national spotlight as the on-air announcer for CBS's earliest NASCAR coverage.

Archie Blackadar of West Danville worked at the Ralston Purina plant in St. Johnsbury during the day, but spent his nights at racetracks with his wife, Pete. He first became known as a starter, famous for his acrobatics and his way of starting a race from the middle of the field. In 1961, he became a chief steward for NASCAR, and during the next 30 years he worked at 48 different race-tracks as an official in various capacities.

After an accident that injured several spectators at the Colchester raceway in September 1950, State's Attorney Lawrence Deshaw declared that he would be looking into whether racing in Vermont violated the state's blue laws, which prohibited certain kinds of business and entertainment from occurring on Sundays. He took his crusade seriously, arresting several drivers who showed up despite his public announcements and threatening to bring charges against drivers at North Bennington's State Line Speedway—where track operations and the grandstand were in New York, but part of the track's far turn extended across the border into Vermont.



Short, circle track races such as this one were popular events at the Vermont State Fair in Rutland and other such venues years ago. Here, the starter at a 1960s-era race has apparently waved the green flag and is now hurrying off the track.



Midget race cars, first introduced in the 1930s, became popular in both Australia and the U.S. in the 1950s; these cars were raced at Rutland's fairground and other similar dirt tracks well into the 1960s.



Robbie Crouch, the "Tampa Tornado," poses by his car at Catamount Stadium, c. 1980.

Opinions for and against raged in Vermont's newspapers (a *Burlington Free Press* editorial stated, "This stock car racing probably is a fad which will pass. The quicker it passes here in Vermont, the better for all concerned."). The legislature took up the issue, passing the first regulations of motor vehicle racing in 1951, and sent the question of racing on Sundays down to each individual town to decide at town meeting votes.

As the 1950s closed, racing entered a new era in Vermont. Northeastern Speedway in Waterford opened in 1959 and brought two crucial advances to the scene: guaranteed purses and a season-long points system. During the course of the first season, the track owners had to build additional grandstand seating, and after three months were regularly drawing crowds of 3,000 or more.

In 1960, Ken Squier founded the ambitiously named Thunder Road International Speedbowl in Barre. He set racing on Thursday night, to capture the earnings of just-paid granite workers, and on the first night of racing on July 1, more than 5,000 people crowded into the stands on Quarry Hill—with more than 1,000 turned away at the gate.

Catamount Stadium, a partnership between Ken and several others including Ray and Reginald Cooley and Jack Dubrul, opened in Milton in 1965. Devil's Bowl Speedway opened in Fair Haven in 1967, and Bear Ridge Speedway followed in Bradford in 1968, and it was this quartet that would take Vermont stock car racing through the next quarter-century.

Slowly, the influence of NASCAR reached Vermont. Otter Creek Speedway was the first to receive official sanction from that national governing body as it expanded, but other tracks quickly followed. Some of the unpredictability faded from the scene; car numbers had to be standardized, and the development of new divisions with new rules meant that home-built junkers were no longer competitive. Owner-driver teams had never been uncommon, but sponsorship money was now necessary to keep a car on the road.

By the 1970s and into the 1980s, there was a true northern NASCAR circuit in Vermont, with five nights a week of consistent racing, including Sanair International Raceway in Quebec and Airborne



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ST. JOHNSBURY HISTORY AND HERITAGE CENTER

Presumably racing an off-the-showroom floor Essex touring car to tout its worthiness to prospective buyers, car salesman "Wild Trader" Grapes won this trophy in a 1921 St. Johnsbury hill climb.

Speedway in Plattsburgh, New York. New stars like Dave Dion, Tom Tiller, Robbie Crouch, Ron Barcomb, and Joey Kourafas rose to prominence, and drivers who had been young men in the 1960s now came into their own in subsequent decades, as the Dragon brothers, Clem Despault, Fadden, Cabana, and others found success in the Late Model divisions. Racing became generational, as young members of the Dragon, Laquerre, and Bigelow families all began driving.

In 1986, Tom Curley formed the American-Canadian Tour to replace the NASCAR North Tour, and soon afterward racing contracted and centralized. The much-beloved Catamount Stadium in Milton closed, as did Can-Am Speedway in Newport. That left Vermont with three continuing, stable tracks in Thunder Road, Bear Ridge, and Devil's Bowl, and all three continue today with regular racing through the summer season. 🏁

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