

PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE HISTORY OF GENESEE COUNTY

THE HISTORIAN

A PUBLICATION OF THE GENESEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**SPEEDWAY
RIVALRIES!**



Ray Daniels winning another race before a packed grandstand, circa 1962; Photos courtesy of John Doering, Jr.

**Special Mini Issue
Birch Run Speedway 2022**

AUTO CITY & BIRCH RUN SPEEDWAYS

*STILL ON THE FAST TRACK
WHILE PRESERVING THE
"PURE AMERICAN PASTIME"!*

By Michael G. Thodoroff

Automotive Culture

THE ORIGINS

It has developed into as venerable establishment as there is in Genesee County. Working on its 66th year of operation, the Auto City Outdoor Event Center continues to provide family entertainment while launching the professional careers of many aspiring racers – and a national champion. Its story witnessed the track rise from a farmer's field to a facility overflowing with crowds, eventually gaining the reputation as the "fastest half-mile in the state."

Before the Auto City Outdoor Event Center came into being, the only game in town for local car racers was a track located just north of Flint called Dixie Motor Speedway that had been running race car programs since 1948. A young man by the name of Al Kukla was working for his boss, Joe Grabenhorst, at his State Automotive Supply business in Flint during the early 1950s. Kukla was racing at Dixie under Grabenhorst's sponsorship. Joe, a race fan himself, went

out to watch 'his' car in action anytime he could. One particular Saturday night saw Kukla clean the field in every event he entered. When Al and Joe went to collect the winning purse at the end of the night's racing, promoter Bill Shimler handed over a miniscule amount of money. Unflinchingly, Grabenhorst quickly gave the prize back adding that Dixie needed that token more than his race car did. Shimler only replied that if he didn't like the payouts, then "go build your own racetrack!" That, fellow Genesee County historians, is exactly how the originally known Auto City Speedway came into being.

Grabenhorst joined forces with his brother, George, and they began in earnest to find some land to start their project. They eventually discovered an old 37-acre farmer's field located at 10205 N. Saginaw St owned by Frank Lovejoy. With the support of a handful of other investors, Joe sealed the deal and started construction in 1954. On April 16, 1955, the first green flag dropped, signifying the official opening of Auto City Speedway.



Bonnie, John, Jr., and Jack Doerings. Photo courtesy of John Doering, Jr.

A NEW PROMOTOR ENTERS...FROM THE PIT ON UP

While construction was taking place, a young Jack Doering, future promoter, was racing around Dixie Motor Speedway in his 1937 Ford flathead V8 engine modified stock car. He was typical of a weekend racer who would hold down a day job and then after hours would work on his race car to get it ready for the weekend races. Doering's journey into the life of a racetrack promoter was different than most others who came into race track promoting. Not having his car ready to race one night in 1958, Jack instead decided to go Auto City as a spectator. While he was roaming the pits, a track employee by the name of Fred Wright asked Jack if he could help with the spectator head count (done manually in that era) as he needed this info for bookkeeping purposes. It was then that he was also introduced to Joe Grabenhorst. Doering agreed but that job didn't last long, as Joe talked him into staying on as the pit steward (a.k.a. supervisor of the pit area).

Even though Auto City's 1958 season ended in bankruptcy, Joe Grabenhorst scraped up enough capital to buy out the remaining assets of the seven original partners. Since Joe and his brother George had business commitments in Milwaukee, they leased the track to Bob George. Doering stayed on as the pit steward, with the added responsibility of preparing the track's dirt surface.

Bob George was no stranger to the racing game, as he was already the promoter of a sizable drag strip in McBride, Michigan. One 4th of July, however, he was faced with a conflicting schedule with McBride, and was unable to attend Auto City's program. As the parking lot filled up, Doering, wondering where his promoter was, finally placed a call to Joe Grabenhorst in Milwaukee to ask him what to do. Without hesitation, Joe said, "You run it!" With that, George decided to focus on his drag strip as the racetrack promoting career of Jack Doering waived the "green flag."

REVVING UP AGAINST THE COMPETITION

By this time, the competition between Dixie and Auto City was apparent, but Doering wanted to start off his promoting tenure on a good note. He went to Dixie's promoter, Ed Jones, and introduced himself as Auto City's new boss. Until then, Auto City always ran on Fridays and Sundays. Jones informed Doering "he" was running on Friday and Sunday nights, and Jack could have what was left. Of course, Jack Doering left Dixie smug and undaunted.

Doering knew a number of car dealers in the area and got them involved in running sponsored cars at Auto City, eventually landing

around 30 "street stocks." Slowly but steadily, the purses grew from approx. \$380 in 1959 to--an unheard of at that time--\$3000 by 1961! Ever since, Auto City Speedway has run the most successful Saturday night racing program in the state of Michigan. Ironically, Grabenhorst and Doering purchased Dixie Motor Speedway from Jones and his partners in 1969. Jack Doering became half owner of Auto City in 1962 which led to an amazing 23 years of partnership with Grabenhorst.

MAXIMUM SPEED THROUGH EVERY TURN

Auto City underwent a year of rebirth in 1986, the year Doering made the decision to resurface the track with asphalt. Previous to 1986, all local racing venues were dirt tracks and there was a "religious hope" the wind would be blowing away from the grandstands. However, when daylight savings came to Michigan, it fundamentally devastated dirt racing. It used to be at 8:00p.m. it was getting dark allowing the track to be watered-down again right after car qualifying. With DST it's 9:00 - or 10:00p.m. and the sun is still out. As a result, halfway through the racing program it became "dustbowl city!"

Although going to asphalt was a risky - and expensive - move it paid off because the crowds soon doubled, which necessitated the addition of more grandstands. Plus, the program could start on time since the asphalt surface obviously does not need the preparation that dirt requires.

Jack Doering earned the respect of his peers over the years, due in part to his sincere dedication to the sport of racing. He was the catalyst behind the organization of the Michigan Speedway Promotors Association which was founded on 1972 with the purpose of helping

racing promotors throughout the state with their concerns. Instead of being competitive with one another, this association encourages the promotors to cooperate to make the sport more enjoyable for not only the fans, but for the race teams as well.

Because he was a lifelong resident of the Flint area he believed in his community and did his part to help out. He initiated a practice of allowing various charitable organizations to come in and put on their own programs to help raise funds for their cause. Organizations from the boy scouts to the area's local fire departments have taken advantage of this courtesy for years. He watched his two sons get involved with the track with Jason earning the responsibility for all of the track's concession activity while John Jr. actively raced in the premier Super Stock class and handled some of the organizational duties.

(continued on back page)



Jack Doering and Joe Grabenhorst

However, the one element all businesses must experience in order to survive is change. The decade of the 1990s saw a tremendous shift in not only socioeconomics but in business, as well, in the form of the internet, smart phones, web sites, social media, chat rooms and the like. After 40+ successful years of promoting, "Racetrack Jack" decided it was time to pass on the opportunity to the next generation.

A NEW GENERATION

Joe DeWitte, owner of Edgecraft Construction Company, was a car racing enthusiast and got involved in the sport by sponsoring a car driven by good friend Dr. Bob Ducharme, an Oakland County practicing chiropractor. After a couple of successful seasons in Auto City's Pro Stock division, Joe and Dr. Bob (everybody called him "Dr." Bob!) worked out a purchase agreement with Jack Doering in 2000. While a legend gracefully bowed out, the enthusiasm of DeWitte and Ducharme combined to keep Auto City's legacy growing. "Jack Doering was one of the greatest local racetrack promoters of his time," DeWitte affirmed. "He gave me some insight on how to streamline the operation of running the facility of which I still refer to today." Later that year the new business partners created Auto City's first web site. While it was a great "ride" running the track with Joe, after a few years, Dr. Bob's growing family and thriving chiropractic business required that he keep his priorities in order.

DeWitte continued the operations with tremendous support from Marketing and Promotions Director Sharon Fischer. Because of the national economic downturn after 2009 and a declining car count, they strategically looked at creative opportunities for the track. By 2014 after much thought and calculation, they decided to re-brand the facility as an outdoor events center. Now, the grounds at the historic Auto City Speedway have been found to be perfect for corporate outings, concerts, festivals, car shows, trade shows, family reunions, outdoor movies, and sporting events, including driving and ride-along schools. It can also serve as a host for automotive original equipment manufacturers, tire manufacturers, race teams, advertising agencies and media. And remember, they can host charity walks or runs on the same ¼ or 1/2-mile paved oval that host stock car racing's finest. Expanding on the outdoor event center is a large infield which provides an excellent surface for most events. With electrical access and 20 acres of parking plus another area (35 acres) adjacent just south of the track can be used for camping, parking, etc. All-in-all, the facility lends itself to hosting events with thousands of attendees.

Through all the recent years of re-defining the Auto City Outdoor Event Center, Joe DeWitte and Sharon Fischer have diligently worked – and continue to work – to put on the best show possible, all while giving their loyal fans something new to look forward to. Joe repeatedly says, "I take pride in continuing the legacy of the *"Pure American Pastime."*

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