

History of Quarter Midget Racing In Connecticut

Compiled by Betty Sherman, with invaluable assistance from Mr. Ed Battle, Mr. Bob Gada, Mr. Chris (Pete) Gada and Mr. Donald Lafontaine

Quarter Midget Racing began in California in the 1930's with cars called "Junior Midgets." They had rigid axles and were powered by a 4-cycle Lauson or Clinton engine, and reached the fabulous speed of 15 mph. The national organization, "Quarter Midgets of America," (QMA) actually recognizes 1934 as the beginning and celebrated the 50th anniversary of the sport in 1984.

Quarter Midget Racing debuted in Connecticut in the early 1950's. David and Dennis Gada's uncle Chris (also known as Pete) drove at one of the first Connecticut tracks, starting in 1955. The track was on the ball field at Veterans' Memorial Field, on Pennsylvania Avenue in Niantic. There was also a track in Danbury in 1957.

In 1958, 4 more tracks opened, in Stratford, Goshen, Milford, and Meriden. The Niantic track also moved to Cohanzie in 1958 and the club incorporated that year as the "Custom Midget Club." The Cohanzie track was located on Dayton Road, off Route 85, across from what is now the Crystal Mall in Waterford, on the fairgrounds behind the Cohanzie Firehouse. All of these tracks were dirt except Danbury, which was dirt with flat paved turns. At that time there were about 80 cars all told in the state.

In 1959 three more clubs were added to the circuit, New Haven, (paved) and Fairfield and Canaan, which were dirt. There were now 9 Connecticut clubs and 200 cars. Quarter Midget racing's future looked bright.

In 1960 Danbury, Cohanzie, Meriden, and Goshen were all paved, and two more paved tracks were added. One was in North Haven and the other was in the Buckland section of Manchester, just a stone's throw from where Mike Vengruskas recently had his race shop. The tracks were averaging 30 cars per show and there were now about 300 cars in all.

Then in 1961 the bottom fell out when the State Safety Council began to push the legislature to ban quarter midget racing in the state. Although the clubs raised money, did a lot of leg work, and successfully defeated the proposal, the threat started a decline in popularity. The clubs in Milford and New Haven dissolved that year, and the track in Manchester closed in 1962. Participation continued to drop in 1963. The tracks in Danbury and Canaan closed in 1964, and the Stratford dirt track closed after the 1965 season.

Perhaps 11 tracks within a 25 mile radius of the central track were too many, but the drop from 11 tracks and 300 cars in 1960 to 3 tracks and about 85 cars in 1967 was a serious blow to the sport! However, the dedication of those who stayed, and their belief in the joys and benefits of quarter midget racing slowly but surely attracted new families, and once again turned the sport around.

Around 1970 or '71 the Custom Midget Club was forced to look for a new location, and started to build a new paved track in Mystic, on Hewitt Road, off Route 1, on land owned by Mr. Donald Lafontaine. You couldn't see the track from the road, and because it was probably put in without zoning approval, there were no signs directing people to the facility. You had to count 10 telephone poles and then drive over a "cart path" across a field, through a wooded area to reach the track. That first year there was nothing there BUT the track. The scorers sat at a table, and the concession stand consisted of a charcoal grill and some ice chests.

However by 1973 the 26 families who made up the membership had paved a pit area, cleared a parking area, fenced the track, brought in electricity for night racing, and constructed a concession stand with scoring tower above. There the club continued to grow, and at our 1975 Labor Day Invitational we had well over 100 cars signed in, including some from Pennsylvania.

Then in 1976, the members were told that the land would be put up for sale at the end of the season, and the hunt began for yet another location! One of the members had land on Route 2 in Stonington that he was willing to let us use, but we couldn't get it through the zoning board. Several other locations were investigated, including Waterford Speed bowl, where the owner, Harvey Tattersall wanted to put our track in the infield!

Eventually club officials, led by then president, Bill Benevides, met with Don Hoenig, the owner of Thompson Speedway. He was reluctant at first because of a previous experience with a go-cart club, but he finally agreed to take a chance with us, and even loaned his men and equipment to do site preparation. Thanks to an interest-free loan from Mr. Dick Armstrong, the owner of the "Nu-Style Jewelry," red #1 modified, driven by Geoff Bodine, (Dick and his family had joined the club in 1974,) we finally had a location and the funds to start building our present facility. The blueprints were obtained from the newest and largest legal QMA track in Titusville, Florida, and our members began the long process that is still on-going today. Since the first race was held at the "Little T Speedway" in late May or early June, 1977, spring of 2002 marked the 25th anniversary of the Custom Midget Club at Thompson Speedway! In 2007, we completed 31 seasons of racing here at Thompson.

Over the years, through the hard work and generous donations of hundreds of families, the facility has continued to improve and grow. It is our responsibility to continue to improve and protect the legacy that has been handed down to us, so that we, and countless families still to come will be able to enjoy the benefits of this close-knit family sport! In 2008, we celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the incorporation of THE CUSTOM MIDGET CLUB!