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RACING PAST THE OBSTACLES

Despite an accident that left him wheelchair-bound, Bobby Lewis never gave up on his dream

Bobby Lewis cannot afford to own a race car. But he does. He cannot afford to maintain a race car. But he does.

Some say he probably shouldn't be driving a race car. But he does. That's the resolve of 28-year-old Bobby Lewis, of Bradley Beach. Most said he couldn't buy a race car, maintain a race car, or drive a race car. He said he could - and has, and still does.

"I was aware I was getting into this without really being able to do this fully", said Lewis. But he had to try. For that, he deserves a great deal of credit and admiration. Bobby Lewis has been in a wheelchair since the morning of March 4, 1984, when he was seriously injured in a motocross race.

Please, he says, no pity. Cheer him, yes. Support him, yes. Root for him, yes. Pity him, no. He'll have none of that. Not Bobby Lewis, not now that he's become a small block modified car owner. Not now that he drives the No. 95 small block modified. Not now that, for the most part, he's a crew of one.

The accident

Lewis got his first taste of auto racing "between 2 and 4, when my grandfather took me to East Windsor Speedway," he said. It was at the dirt track that still runs Friday nights where Lewis first got the idea that it would be great to climb into a race car and drive. But racing a motorcycle on the motocross circuit, came first, when he was 13. He raced competitively for two years, from the time he was 14 until his accident, when he was 16. At the time, he had won 10 races and was rapidly becoming one of the top young amateur racers. He was in a race at Bridgeport Speedway, on the infield of the race track, the morning of March 4, 1984, riding a Yamaha YZ125. The temperature had dipped below freezing the night before and the clay surface was wet clay on top of still-frozen clay, making for a very, very, slippery surface.

"I tried to accelerate out of a very slow corner and was kind of leaning forward, bracing against the acceleration," Lewis recalled, "but the wheel just spun because it was so slippery. So with my weight forward, I hit the first bump, and just kind of fell over frontward. It was very slow, coming out of a very slow corner. I just happened to land square on top of my head, and my neck and back happened to be straight, so nothing bent. It just crushed two vertebrae, T6 and T7." The accident didn't seem to look all that serious at the time. Lewis remembers being down on the track, though not knowing why. He knew he really shouldn't be there, but not much more. He remembered being at the front of the race, so other racers would be coming up behind him soon. He was fearful of being hit by them. "I wasn't fully aware of being hurt or anything else," Lewis said. Luckily no one hit him while he was on the track.

It wasn't until two days later, while in the hospital, that he realized the severity of his injury. That's when doctors told him what had happened and what the damage was. "They said it was a serious back injury," said Lewis, who was a sophomore at Brick Township Memorial High School at the time. "I hadn't cut any nerves or anything in the spinal cord but there was pressure on them from when the vertebrae broke and I had a severe bruise. They gave me a 50 percent chance of recovering. That 50 percent is still there as far as I know. There's





still that possibility (he'll walk again). They never said never."

Once he was discharged from the hospital, Lewis remained active in motocross racing as a spectator, helping friends develop as racers, helping with bike maintenance and preparation.

An interest in cars

"After the injury, I realized I wasn't going to recover right away," he said. "At least, I figured I'm not going to race motorcycles right away. I figured I'd concentrate on cars."

The desire to get into a race car tormented him. It was something he wanted to do, something he had to do. Lewis would tell his friends he'd race one day. Often he got the same response. "Yeah, right." Not many believed him. Talk was cheap and cars were expensive. Money was his biggest hurdle. "The thing that is taking so long here is a combination of the amount of time, facilities, equipment, labor hours, and money that it takes, compared to racing a bike," said Lewis. "It's a tremendous difference."

Lewis saved every penny he could, not squandering a dime on anything he really didn't need. If he was going to fulfill his dream, he needed enough cash to get started, to buy a small block modified car, to outfit the car properly, maintain it and keep it running. On Friday night, May 31, admittedly "nervous and scared" because it was costing so much and leaving him nearly broke, Lewis purchased a car. He bought it from John Barnett of Tabernacle, who once raced at Wall Stadium, New Egypt Raceway, and Flemington Speedway. The car was built for Richie Evans before his death, and was driven by Barney Truex, who won the Garden State Classic at Wall Stadium in it. It cost Lewis \$7,000, complete, "including the engine and a lot of spare parts," he said. By today's standards, it was a good price.

"The car is the smallest part of racing," said Lewis, who began working on it the night he bought it. "I'm here on borrowed property (at Dick Barney's garage in Lakewood). I had to borrow a trailer, I had to borrow a truck." Without people like Dick Barney, who runs NASCAR modifieds at Flemington Speedway with John Blewett III as one of his drivers; former regional and national motocross champion Mickey Kessler, and Kerry Irwin, who helps Lewis on race nights, Lewis might not be racing right now.

I really can't afford it. I had a little savings. I'm spending it and when it's gone, I'm going to be down to a very limited schedule." said Lewis. "My whole plan, going into this, was to do everything as right as I could. I don't want to cut too many corners and I want to do the best I can and try and impress a sponsor or car owner before the well's dry. "I can't afford to race. This was the first and probably last opportunity to give it any kind of a shot."

The money pit

What Lewis has done so far is nothing short of amazing. He has scraped together every nickel and dime he had. He's begged and borrowed. He's virtually done all the work himself to prepare the car. Because it sits outside, he works on it in good weather and bad. He's welded parts in the rain because the work had to be done, then and there. No time to waste, he said. Someone taped "money Pit" on the tarp covering his car at Barney's. He doesn't know who, but the joke is that all Lewis' money goes there - into the "Money Pit."

The jokes and the naysayers didn't stop his enthusiasm. He worked relentlessly to get ready to race, even when most everyone thought he never would race, not this year, not next year, maybe not ever. "I thought I would," said Lewis, a determined look in his eyes, "no one else did. Even people that I have known for a long time, and I was kind of disappointed in a lot of them because of it. I told them I was going to buy the car, and I don't think they believed me. Then when I got it they asked, 'Are you going to be ready this year or next year?' I gave myself a goal of a month, which ended up being over two, but even when I said that, they didn't believe me. And then when I said I'm going in two weeks, they said 'Yeah, OK,' and then I went."

Modifying a modified

Changes had to be made so Lewis could control the small block modified with his hands. "It's got a hand control that operates the throttle and brake. The exact same unit I have in my street car, that I've been using since I was 17," said Lewis. "The throttle and brake mechanism which is commercially available, is made to be used on an automatic transmission. They make automatics for race cars but they are actually a big advantage over a standard transmission and they are against track rules. "So instead of giving someone something to complain about, I figured it was better to use the same standard transmission and figure out a way to operate the clutch. So I have a pneumatic cylinder which pushes on the clutch. I have an air tank mounted in the car. I just push a button and it operates that cylinder and works the clutch." Lewis describes the changes that had to be made as minor. "It's not that different than any other race car," he said. "I can undo it in an hour, and Dale Earnhardt could get in there and drive it. The pedals and everything are still in. The controls connect to the standard controls that are in there." Cost to adapt the car for Lewis was "less than \$1,000."

The big day

When Lewis was finally ready to race, ready to put No. 95 into competition at Wall Stadium, he told "maybe 10 people" he was going to race. He called Wall Stadium to find out how to begin racing there, without letting them know who he was or the circumstances. "I just wanted to show up and get going good," said Lewis. Five weeks ago, he showed up - ready to race. Of course, when he did, it got the attention of pit officials. "They didn't really hassle me too much," said Lewis. "They asked a few questions. They just basically looked around, in general, to see if anything was going to get their attention as a safety problem. They just basically stood back and watched, to see what was I was going to do."

All eyes were on Lewis, though. He knew it and felt it. He was nervous. He got lapped in a heat race but "stayed out of the way," he said. "I went as fast as I could without taking any risk of moving off line or getting in anybody's way. That has been my whole goal all along - not to give anybody half a reason to give me a hard time. Staying within those bounds, I want to do the best that I can."



Running the “hot laps” before the 30-lap small block modified feature, where Lewis was last in the starting grid, “the leaders had come around and started to lap me. One guy ran into the back of another guy and turned him sideways and he ran into the side of me, and that turned me up and I just went up and touched the wall in turn four. “It had nothing to do with me,” said Lewis. “Two other guys were wrecking each other. I just got caught up in it.” While I was sitting up there at the wall, I thought I had damaged the car some, so I took the window net down and then the track crew came over and said I was clear to release the brake and back away from the wall. They said the car looks all right. So I fired it up and I drove around to rejoin the race. And then the starter stopped me and said something and I couldn’t hear him and I said “What?” and he said, ‘Go to the pits.’ The following week when I didn’t race I bought a picture of the car from the track photographer and I looked at and saw the window net was down. That’s probably why they sent me to the pits.”

Lewis missed the next week because he ran out of time to prepare his car. He had to change two ball joints, replace the double nerf bars and a few other things that were the result of hitting the wall and he couldn’t get done in time. Plus, he had no one to go with him to the track so he sat out the night. It was about the same time he was laid off from his job because work was slow.

The following week, again starting last, Lewis got up as high as eighth. He finished 13th, winning \$90. The next week he was 17th in a field of 24. “I think at this point I’ve shown pretty good judgment and good control of the car,” he said. “I’ve been the victim of other people’s mistakes at times. At this time, I’m pretty relaxed about that, because I think everyone else is relaxed about the situation.” “Really, I’m keeping my mind set on ‘I got a job to do here.’ My job is to keep the wheels on the car and do the best I can. That’s the attitude I have. It’s like I’m showing up to work and I have to concentrate on doing my job.”

A job well done, for sure.