



Fat Guy in a Black Racing Suit

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Andy Ford is a fat guy in a black racing suit (Andy called himself this, so I'm not in trouble). He's a fat guy in a black racing suit who sits engulfed in a pocket of hot metal, usually on the weekend in the summertime. He described himself this way moments after wrenching his body out of the cockpit of his Thunder Car in the midday torpor of the Mosport infield, then pointed to his ear, twisted his finger, and said:

“Smart, eh?”

I play hockey with Andy, and have known him since Toronto's New Wave halcyon days. A few years ago, Andy disappeared: he stopped playing music, missed games, fell out of the group. My friends and I asked each other: What's wrong with Andy? Is he ok? Has anyone seen him? Where has he gone? Then, pictures of a car starting showing up on our computers, and inside that car, a figure: its pink face pushed under a silver crash helmet, Muppet gloves slung coolly over the arc of a steering wheel, dark sunglasses winking at the sunny abyss from the seat of a swollen Hot Wheel.

Andy remembers watching dirt races as a child in PEI, but his heretofore driving experience begins and ends with mine and yours: racing home along the 401, grooving lane-to-lane across the Fred Gardiner Expressway or QEW. Andy is 42. Some things that middle-aged Torontonians do when they're 42: think about buying some affordable land in a wooded enclave, remember how easy it used to be to get drunk then do something--anything--the next day, consider whether or not having an elbow or knee or tailbone repaired is an admission of mortality, realize they will never marry Valerie Bertinelli, grow disenchanted that, while their parents' generation had The Beatles, they were stuck with The Police, and voice anger and disappointment with the world while their waning energy and focus makes it hard enough to keep the cable bills paid. It goes without saying that very few of us force ourselves out of our chairs and exhaust our savings so that every Saturday we might crawl into a fire retardant suit and rub fenders with strange machines roaring around a circle at ungodly speeds.

I'd never seen Andy race until last Saturday at Mosport, the venerable track that's been intrinsic to Toronto-and-area sport since its founding company built it in a valley northeast of Bowmanville in 1961. I picked Andy up at his home in Scarborough, where he lives alone, and we made our way through the morning cottage traffic to his brother Dan's home in Castleton, where Dan, his wife, Spinney, Andy's dad, Eric, and Andy's nephew, Cup, were gathered around the garage (Cup's real name is Winston, but a lot of people call him Cup, after the NASCAR championship trophy, and, by extension, the cigarette). I found Andy's car sitting in the cool of Dan's garage, its front kissed black by rubber, its sides rippled and bitten as if dropped from the jaws of a dinosaur (a thunder car is a built-up car that uses a stock frame--mainly one from an early to mid-'80s full-size automobile). At one point at the beginning of the summer, Dan--who is a great-sized man built for his vocation: fixing rigs and sanitation trucks--and his pal, Bully, had

rolled it gleaming and perfect from the shed, but then Andy got at it, or rather the other asphalt rats did.

“It took 66 forty-ouncers of gin to finish this sucker,” Dan told, me chewing a cigarette and reaching into the engine like a surgeon exploring the guts of a body. “Then those other dumptrucks started hitting it,” he said, before chasing a set of enormous pliers out of Cup’s hands.

“It looked a lot better before last week,” concedes Andy. “I was running fourth in a money race, then I got rear ended and finished sixth. You get banged around out there, scrape walls, and ride inches away from the others. Four years ago, a guy died after his car caught on fire,” he said, looking straight through me.

In the first race of Andy’s Thunder Car career, he hit the track’s concrete wall. In his third race, he spun out and was left sitting alone on the infield. “I didn’t move from the car,” he told me. “I was a mess. All of those doubts about what I’d done, what I’d gotten into, came into my head. I told myself that I couldn’t do it, that I’d wasted all of my money and was done. I saw how completely ridiculous it was for a 40 year old guy to start racing, especially against guys who’d driven for 25 years, guy who had lots of points under their belt.”

I asked Dan how he advised his brother in his moment of crisis. “I told him that I hadn’t busted my ass twenty hours a week to get the car ready so that he could sit on the infield and cry,” he said, plugging another smoke into his mouth.

If Andy is a man out of time, so is his domain: the speedways of southern Ontario. With the exception of race car technology, Mosport is a mid-70s postcard, its old bleachers rising up from the field over a paved circle where men and women in greasy t-shirts obsess over quavering boxes of heat and noise. In an era where a glut of new stadia--and a dearth of historic ones--have robbed Toronto sport of its character, Mosport is charmingly preshistoric. Because the sound of snarling metal is the soundtrack of auto racing, there’s little room for Toto songs blasted wall-to-wall or the cloying pitch of obtrusive pitchmen (or Zamboni races; here, there’s the real thing). And while other sporting events often give the impression that the game itself is secondary to concession sales and corporate sponsors, here it was all about the drivers and their crews, who, as clouds rolled in to tease the sun, scrambled under their car’s chassis to make final adjustments before the racing began.

On one level, however, racing culture--at Mosport, at least--seems forward thinking. Before coming to watch Andy, I’d have never suspected that auto racing would harbour a liberated sporting set, but there were almost as many women as men busying themselves on the infield. This was both good and bad for my friend considering that one of the series’ leading drivers was a 16 year-old girl named Jamie Horner, who carried herself like a typical teenager wrestling with the world, but whose eyes were as fine and focused as a shark’s. Jamie’s been driving for three years, but she only recently got her G2 learners’ permit.

When I announced my surprise to Andy that he and Jamie would be competing in the same field, he said: “Racing is the great equalizer. Whether you’re 42 years old and weigh 270, or 16 and weigh 150, your car has a weight standard. It doesn’t matter what you look like out of the car. It’s what you drive and how you drive it that matters.”

Most of the other Thunder Cars are operated by teams with a racing legacy--grandpa drove, so did dad, and so does son or daughter--but not the Fords. This endeared them to the rest of the field, at least for awhile, but, on race day, it became obvious that Andy would no longer be afforded a rookie's berth. In his first two heats, his rumbling red behemoth finished 5th, and before the evening's feature--which was run under the grandstand lights after a light rain had helped mist the scene--I asked Andy where he expected to finish. He sized up the field--four or five of the series' top drivers were starting ahead of him, including Jamie--sucked some Gatorade, and told me that eighth place seemed likely from there.

At around 10 pm, me, Dan, and Andy's dad put a single foot on top of the infield's stauncheon and watched as the starter waved his green flag. The scene burst alive as it does at a thoroughbred track, only no matter how hard we cheered Andy to greater speed and strength inside a crush of storming automobiles, our voices were lost in the rumble. But our support was beside the point. The race, as it always is for my friend, was a battle between dream vs reality, Andy vs Andy, in the steel-gray hull of his car.

By the 10th lap of the 20 lap race, Andy sat fifth. I was thrilled that he was exceeding his hopes for the race, but Dan kept shouting, "Let 'er go! Let 'er go!!" only to pass a hand over his face and stare witheringly at the track, as if some unknown force was slowing the iron child that he'd babied and brought to life. With five laps to go, Andy kept driving well and was maintaining his position. And then he made his move.

It happened on the last turn, fifty feet from where we were standing. Jamie Horner, who'd been at the front of the pack all race--fighting experienced drivers, men four times her age--drifted high on the wall, creating a small space below. Andy filled that space. As he did, their fenders' gnashed; Andy's went low, Jamie's high, and as quick as you could say the dream of the everyman, the Ford Brothers' bent bolt bucket had passed under the chequered flag--fourth--his sweetest result of the summer/autumn campaign.

Rumbling across the infield, Andy extricated himself drenched in sweat from the cockpit. As he did, Jamie's father came at him, yelling and stammering and accusing him of dangerous driving tactics. Jamie walked inconsolably away from the scene. Andy's face was red and exasperated--a thrilled look in his eyes--as he apologized and said that he hadn't meant to hit his daughter. But the conflagration did little to drown the glory of the event. It was a triumph greater than a number on a scoresheet.