“Off of Four” = “Checkers or Wreckers”

J.S. Wagner

Lips Babbitz, the car racing track announcer, slowly let his voice rise in suspense whenever he announced that Jack was on the track.

“On the front stretch now, driving the Expo Back Ground Company, Action Rising Engines, Resolution Specialists, Car Number 7—‘The Illinois Boy’—Jack Cassady!”

Dozens of the hundreds of fans screamed a wild response to Jack. They loved risk-takers, and Jack took risks every time he strapped into his fire-breathing, 900 Horsepower, non-winged sprint car. These passionate fans, the ones cheering for Jack, especially loved to see an underdog go from the back to the front in 30 short laps of the feature race. Though they seem simple, they are incredibly knowledgeable about the races. They understand that Jack is one to watch.

Currently, he was idling slowly around the track warming his engine before some practice laps in his sprint car that looked like the classic dragster from Mario Kart with a safety cage on top. It was a beautiful crimson red color, with a gold number seven on the tail. He took really good care of his car and never abused his engine before it got nice and hot. Once he did step on the gas, he would be drifting around the oval, the car turning left, him turning right (like Doc Hudson from the movie *Cars* and when you play on manual.)

Jack was known to do a move called the “slide” during races. He would drive next to another car in the turns, and just when he thought he was in front of him, Jack would slide up and make the other car decide if they were going to crash and maybe even get upside-down real hard. Sometimes, the other drivers don’t like to “get slid” like that. His crew chief, Johnson, had warned him of this no fewer than five times.

“Yer getting’ awfly brave with that slider, son,” Johnson would warn when Jack came in off the track in his deep gravelly voice. “Someday, some boy ain’t gonna lift, and you’ll be upside-down so fast I’ll have ta…”

“Set up the car and shut up,” Jack would think with a bitter look on his face while he silently let Johnson keep scolding him. Truth was, Jack loved the thrill of putting it all out there. “Checkers or wreckers” was a saying that meant you either won or you crashed. A tow truck—wrecker— took you back to the trailer in the pits when you crashed.

The engine was warm now. Jack gradually stomped down with his whole right leg, and the monster beneath him purred, then suddenly roared to life.

The noise was incredibly loud, and Jack began sliding sideways.

In the mean time, the power of Earth’s gravity tripled inside of his stomach, like the feeling of going over the climax of a rollercoaster.

His reflexes, quick and instinctive, guided the car in a way he practiced and practiced perfectly, and he relaxed his mind. He was going to the 130mph speed zone.

Left right, stomp, off, stomp, left right. Jack pumped his arms and legs smoothly, rhythmically, precisely. He zoomed around and around at constant top speed for 5 laps, about a minute, and then slowed down when the green lights around the track changed to yellow, and the flagman high upon his stand waved the checkered flag.

“Woo-hoo!” Jack screamed under his helmet into the fireproof sock around his head. He pulled his car into the pits where Johnson waited for him.

“Lookin’ good!” Johnson shouted over the idling engine as Jack kept it running.

Jack gave him a thumbs-up and unbelted. Taking his helmet off and messing up his wet hair, he left his earplugs in and listened carefully to the engine. He thought, “Give everything of yourself, and take nothing from the car.”

“This should be our night,” Johnson’s gravelly voice could shake you when he yelled because it stayed deep and scary. Jack stepped up and out of the car. Then, he reached in and flipped the switch off. The sudden silence was odd for a moment.

“I’ma gonna make you fast tonight, boy,” Johnson said, “Just don’t put ‘er n the wall.”

Jack thought his usual unspoken opinions about Johnson with his bitter look. “I know how to go fast,” was what he was thinking this day.

The truth was, Jack had plenty of reasons to be scared. He’d been getting upside-down since he was racing go carts at age 11. His dad had taken him to North Carolina for big time Kart racing on pavement tracks. Even as a boy, Jack was a gasser and a risk-taker. He raced one kid too close, and they both lost control and skidded into the grass. Jack’s cart had flipped up on top of him while his helmet was dragged across the ground. He was knocked unconscious and doesn’t remember it happening.

Though all racing is dangerous, sprint car racing can be incredibly dangerous.

It was time to race. Jack was doing everything he could to be safe by strapping himself into seatbelts, harnesses, fireproof gear, and his helmet.

His first event was a short heat. Like in the Olympics, in track, in swimming, and speed-skating, Jack would race a shorter race that transferred him to the big race (where they paid $10,000 to win).

Ten cars enter, the top four finishers move on to the next round. Jack relaxed his mind and waited to see the car in front of him go. The lights would change, the flagman would wave the flag, but Jack watched the car in front of him.

Green.

Jack’s car shot forward with a painful thrust of speed. He was used to the roller coaster sensation. He dodged the other cars as they swarmed into the first corner, he peered into the dust to make sure it was ok, and then he punched the gas again. Around and around like this twice a lap Jack raced inches from the other cars, up near the wall made of concrete that kept them inside the track, and at the edge of human ability.

He needed to finish fourth to get to the big race, but he counted. He was sixth. Jack wouldn’t miss the transfer without a fight. It was time for a slider.

Jack followed the car #10 in front of him through turn one. He watched him to see what mistakes he might make, when exactly he might bobble (mess up) so Jack could pass him.

“This time,” thought Jack as quickly as racers can think.

He dove way down to the bottom of the track and let the car slide up through the turn. While he heard #10 closing in, getting closer, his engine getting really loud right behind him, Jack didn’t flinch. He made the pass into fifth. The other guy lifted off the gas.

One more spot to go.

The car bounced, sped, and rattled Jack around. He pumped his arms and legs back and forth rhythmically. Though he had no time for wooing, Jack was in his special place doing exactly what he loved. Everything was fast: his thoughts, his reflexes, the dust flying through the air, the ten short laps of the heat ticking off every 16 seconds, and the cars whizzing past and sliding around above 130mph.

Jack was closing in on the #2 car in front of him. As they passed under the flagstand nose-to-tail, the flagman waved the white flag. One more lap, one more car to pass to get to the big race.

As he had to pass for fifth, Jack followed the #2 through the first turn watching for his mistakes. They raced down the backstretch towards the last turns of the race.

Jack didn’t hesitate.

He smoothly guided the car down to the bottom of the track, and began the slider maneuver.

His hands and wrists twisted the wheel to the right.

His right foot stomped down hard on the gas.

The car bumped, hopped, bounced, and gradually began sliding up the track in front of his opponent. Again, Jack only heard the engine in the other car getting closer and closer. He waited for the pause in the sound, the moment the other guy lifted and let Jack slide up in front of him. He was still waiting.

The #2 never lifted.

Jack first knew something was wrong when he felt a sudden violent jerk to his left. The open front wheels of the #2 were hitting the back of his car. Jack felt a lightness begin in his stomach. He couldn’t feel the roller coaster feeling. He was floating.

Jack’s #7 was tipping over to his right. In one last effort to keep it on its wheels, Jack hammered the brake with his left foot and cranked the wheel all the way to the right.

Boom.

The car slammed over onto its roof.

Bam.

The front of the car, while upside-down, hammered the concrete wall.

Suddenly Jack was high into the air and upside-down with his roll cage facing the oncoming cars. Doing what he had been taught to do, Jack clinched his eyes closed tightly. Straps kept his neck in place, and still other straps ensured that his hands and arms stayed inside the roll cage.

The car #10 that he had already passed slammed into Jack at full speed. A mess of tangled metal, fuel and oil, little rubber hoses, and other debris littered the track.

Jack’s #7 tumbled two more times end-over-end, and came to a stop on its side.

The crowd looked on in eerie silence.

Five seconds after Jack’s car came to a complete stop, members of the track safety crew were there.

“Jack! Can you hear me?”

He could only grunt in a weary response. He was dizzy, he was hurt, and he was very scared.

“There’s no fire, don’t move!”

The ambulance was there in 26 seconds.

Gradually, they flipped Jack’s mangled #7 up onto its broken wheels and helped him get his seatbelts off.

“Any real bad pain?” one Ambulance worker asked.

“Nah,” Jack tried to sound tough. He couldn’t tell them he hurt all over. “#10 ok?”

“He’s already walked back to the pits.”

Lips Babbitz, the track announcer, told the fans that all the drivers would be fine. Only then did the silence break as the fans clapped in appreciation.

Jack stood outside of his car and looked in disbelief at how destroyed it was. As soon as some of the pain began to fade away, he looked over to the fence to see Johnson peering at him.

The wrecker took the junked #7 back to the pits.

“I hope you’re ok,” Johnson said in a soft version of his gravelly voice, “because I don’t want to have to wait too long to say I told you so.”

Jack said nothing, just grimaced.

“I ain’t mad, Jack,” calmly explained Johnson, “I want you to go fer the transfer on the last lap. That’s racin’. I’m just disappointed that we’re done for the night.”

A reporter from the local TV came up to Jack with his cameraman.

“You ok for a quick interview?” he asked.

“Sure,” replied Jack. He fixed his messy sweaty hair.

“Jack Cassady, you took quite a tumble out there. What happened?”

“Yeah it’s disappointing for us. Action Rising Engines gives us good power, and Resolution Specialists have really helped us this year. Johnson puts a good car under me every night. I guess my dad taught me it, and I need to remember. You can’t race reckless, and checkers or wreckers didn’t work too good for us on that slider.”

“Thanks Jack. There you have it from the man who just took a wild tumble in turn 4, and walked away to race another day.”

Off Turn Four

Oh Jack, you take so quickly back

The time to years that flip away.

No cage could keep your speed’s attack

From cracking our banal malaise.

The sideways peel of open wheels

Terrifies new-modern minds,

But down you sit to soulf’ly feel

The moisture that your spirit finds.

Tonight the dirt will judge your worth

As oval rhythms you will pump,

Could checkers fly to bring your mirth?

Or wreckers return what you’ve junked?

So fly so fast while sliding past

Through time that slowly rips the day,

Tell us what it’s like to grasp

The life that never fades.