

## Motordrome's Piney Laskey Memorial Fulfilled All Expectations

Anticipation is an exciting part of the sport of auto racing, especially during the days leading up to a big event. When the day finally arrives and the green flag drops, you never know what's going to happen on the next lap, or in the next turn.

Such was the case prior to the running of the Piney Laskey Memorial Fall Festival III at Motordrome Speedway. Speculation abounded, and questions surfaced as fans wondered what was going to occur on the weekend of the prestigious race.

For example, would Bobby Henry, the hottest driver at the Smithton oval the last two months of the season, continue his hot streak and win the 100-lap Late Model feature? Would four-time champion Mark Cottone, who historically does well in long distance races, bring home the bacon? Would either previous winners Will Thomas or Neil Brown repeat the feat? Would Colt James, whose overly aggressive driving style in 2009 became a subject of controversy, be subject to retaliation? Who would go into the history books as the next winner, an outside invader, or a Motordrome regular?

All of the fun began and some of the answers to many questions began to unfold on Friday night as 29 of the best pavement drivers in the country ran time trials. Colt James served notice that he was a force to be reckoned with, as he set fast time. Ironically, Mark Poole, who was leading the 2009 race when he was involved in a crash with James, was second fastest.

Opening a lot of eyes on Friday night was 19-year-old Mike Pilla, driving a car owned by Pittsburgher Paul Zito. Competing at Motordrome for the first time, Pilla, a Florida native now residing in North Carolina, blistered the track and was fourth fastest in qualifying behind Thomas. When I first met Mr. Zito about a year and a half ago and asked him about his driver, he smiled and simply said, "The kid's good."

On Saturday evening, everyone at Motordrome got to see just how good of a driver Mike Pilla is. By the luck of the draw, Pilla lined up on the outside of pole sitter Poole, and the race was on.

Poole jumped into the lead. It was anybody's guess what Pilla would do on a track unfamiliar to him. The youngster seemed unfazed, as



he settled in behind Poole. For 30 laps, Pilla studied the veteran driver, then made his move for the lead, executing a clean pass on the low side in turn one.

In the meantime, Colt James was setting his sights on the leaders. James and Pilla are very familiar with each other's driving styles, as they're competitors on pavement tracks in the Carolina's. As a matter of fact, James encouraged Pilla to give Motordrome a try.

The first of eight cautions flew on lap 34 for debris on the track. Pilla got a great jump on the restart, while Neil Brown and Poole battled for second. Unfortunately for Brown, he stopped on the track a few laps later. Pilla took the lead again, while James worked his way into second. Several laps later, James found an opening under Pilla in turn four to take the podium spot.

From that point on, James and Pilla set the pace, with past Jennerstown Speedway champion Barry Awtey hot on their heels. Brown worked his way back into the top five, but made contact with former ASA star Robbie Pyle on lap 81, sending him spinning. Pyle was then hit by another past ASA racer and three-time Motordrome champion Rick Miller. Brown was sent to the back of the pack for rough driving. When the race resumed, Awtey worked his way past Pilla into second.

A double file restart on lap 86 pitted James and Awtey, who had a run-in last year, side by side. When the green waved, James gave Awtey no room at all, running him up the track. Awtey made a nice

save and had to back off. The yellow appeared for the last time one lap later. The ensuing restart was a lot cleaner.

James was successful in holding off Awtey for the victory, while Pilla placed third. Aside from the paint exchange with Awtey, James ran a clean race.

"I didn't leave on the best of terms last year," he said in victory lane. "I wanted to show everyone that I'm a clean driver. The track was real racy, and lots of fun. I'm a friend of Jason Laskey, the grandson of Piney Laskey. I promised him I would wear his grandfather's cowboy hat tonight. It's a real honor to win this race."

Awtey was pleased with second place, but thought he had the machine to win.

"Maybe if Colt would have kept it straight, I might have passed him," he said. "The race car was hooked up good tonight."

Pilla relishes the challenge of big races. "I've run only four races this year and finished in the top five in all of them. I have a great crew. We came to Motordrome with no notes at all, and changed a lot of stuff on the car. When we get more laps here, we'll be better."

I was impressed with how quickly Pilla adapted to the tricky Motordrome surface.

Mike is the son of Doug Pilla, a New England native who raced Modifieds at Stafford, Thompson, Riverside and Wall Stadium. He also won a feature on the Hooters Pro-Cup Series Southern Tour, and once worked on Geoff Bodine's Winston Cup pit crew.

"I quit racing to get Michael started in the sport," said Doug. "I put him in a Go-kart when he was four years old." In ten years of go-kart racing, Mike won approximately 300 features, and 30 championships, including two national titles.

Brown, whose strategy was to keep the car in one piece until lap 70, and then race, finished fourth after twice working his way from the back of the pack.

Equally impressive was the fifth place finish of underdog Larry Behanna, with a low budget un-sponsored team. "I needed a long green flag run to finish even better," he said.