Monroe Speed Bowl

As you probably know, the Indianapolis 500 has been held almost every Memorial Day weekend since 1911. But did you know that Green County had its own automobile races in Sylvester Township in the 1950s. The Monroe Speed Bowl was located about two miles northeast of Monroe along Highway 59.

The business was incorporated in August 21, 1951 "to manage and operate a race track for stock car and midget races and races of other vehicles as well as the staging of various forms of amusement related to the race business." There were 100 shares of no par value stock with a minimum capital of $6,000. Allie Holtshopple and Ben Kubly, both of Monroe, and Stanley Whitehead of Juda, signed the articles.

Races were being held as soon as the incorporation was completed. Officials were getting the track into condition shortly before the first midget auto races scheduled for Sunday, August 26. Midget cars had no transmissions; they were pushed to get them started, and then continued around the track slowly until all were in correct positions. The slowest cars in time trials got the front positions on the track at starting time. The faster cars then had to work their way through the pack to get into the lead. Time trials started at 1:00 with the first heat at 2:00. The races were to be finished by 4:30. Forrest Deininger was the only driver from Monroe that day, driving Clifford Solem's midget.

The purchase of the property along the highway from Stanley Whitehead was not official until December 29, 1951. The property contained about 35.4 acres in Section 30 and was purchased for $1.00 and "valuable consideration."

Unfortunately, the first midget car races that were scheduled had to be called off because of track conditions due to the rain earlier in the day. Midgets had a tendency to slide sideways, and the track was more slippery than anticipated. The midget races were scheduled for the following Sunday with stock car races on Labor Day. Rain checks were given to those who were at the Speed Bowl early for time trials. It was thought that "at least 1,500 cars would have filled the natural amphitheater if the weather had been favorable."

This photo, from the collection of the late Tom Mahle, shows a race at the Monroe Speed Bowl, which was located about two miles northwest of Monroe along Highway 59. The facility operated for less than three years from 1951 until 1954. Thanks to Mahle's daughters, Marianne and Bev, for sharing the photo.

According to an advertisement in the Times on August 31, “Seven thrilling events” were scheduled for Labor Day, September 3 with time trials again starting at 1:00 and the races at 2:00. Local cars were invited to the open competition. Admission cost $1.00 with children admitted free when accompanied by parents. Nothing was found in the newspaper about that race.

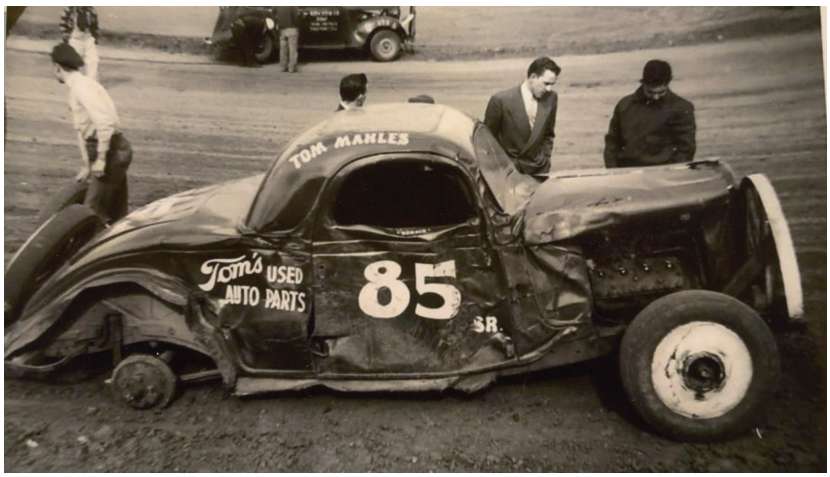
It was reported a week later that Lee Harvey, of South Beloit, finished first in the stock car races on Sunday while driving a Rockford car. There had been 32 entered with 1,331 admissions paid to see the events. Three drivers from Monroe were entered in the competition with Bernie Martin finishing on top in the time trials. Wilbur Krause placed sixth in the feature race, but the car driven by Howard Kohn broke down after the time trials and was not able to enter the heat races.

“Nearly 1,500 spectators” attended the races on September 23 where Jack Dorr, Janesville, pocketed the $125 first-prize money after driving a 1940 Ford. Russell Share, Beloit, won the time trial in a 1939 Cadillac. Jay Underwood, formerly of Monroe, won second prize in his 1938 Plymouth and took $75 home to Richland Center. In addition, the Washington Huskies took on a Monroe team in “a special tug-of-war contest” that afternoon.

An undated article from 1951 shared that Lester Stiibe, Janesville, who drove a 1941 Ford, “captured the 50-lap feature race before more than 1,100 fans” and took home a total of $120 in prize money. Bernie Martin, driving a 1935 Ford owned by Tom Mahle, was the only Monroe driver to receive money. There were plans for having night races in the following years with lights having already been purchased that year. The north and south curves were going to be banked more and the infield was to be seeded and a drainage system put in. “A protective netted fence might also be placed around the inside of the track.”

People continued to enjoy the facility during the next two and a half years. Another undated article stated, “Bernie Martin, driving the oldest car on the dirt track at the Monroe Speed Bowl yesterday, a 1935 Ford owned by Thomas W. Mahle, won the feature race yesterday” in front of a crowd of more than 1,500 “to view the 40 stock cars in action.”

An article from either 1952 or 1953 said, “A crowd of slightly more than 1,000 braved the cold yesterday to see the fast races this year at the Speedbowl yesterday.” Local drivers mentioned were Bernie Martin and Wilbur Krauss. It added that the midget races would probably “be held under the lights May 4.”



This photo, from the collection of the late Tom Mahle, shows his race car taken in 1952.

After a sheriff’s sale on March 16, 1954 the property was sold to T. O. Stauffacher for $3,250. Plaintiffs in this case were Robert H. Richardson and Victor Schiller.

The final event held at the Monroe Speed Bowl was probably on Friday, May 21, 1954. The Eagles sponsored two performances of the Hagen Bros. Circus, one in the afternoon and one at 8:00. A few youngsters rode their bicycles out to watch the show set up. Each show lasted slightly more than an hour and “only small crowds turned out” for either show.

There was a small advertisement on May 21 stating that there were two lunch stands for sale at the Monroe Speedbowl, where they could be seen. Each was 12- by 20-feet.

The address of the property is now W4576 Highway 59; the mailing address on the official Green County website is Speedbowl North LLC, W4633 State Road 59, which is the address of Rufer & Son Excavating.