

Robert French Following In Family Tire Tracks At Wall; N.E.E.T.S. Has The Right Idea



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Commentary

In the late-1970s, young Doug French enthusiastically began his race driving career in the Sportsman division at his N.J. home track Wall Stadium. Working with him on the family's metallic blue, always immaculate No. 90, was dad Bob French – who had been a fine driver in Wall's Novice/Sportsman ranks going back to the late-1950s.

This past Saturday, Doug, now age 50, was again in those familiar surroundings, with his family race car in the Wall pit area. But these days, he's there as car owner and mentor to his 17-year-old son Robert. During the week, Robert is a Howell Township, N.J., high school student, and on Saturdays a fast-rising driver in Wall's very-competitive Legend Car division with the family-fielded, black & white-trimmed No. 98 coupe.

Making it even more special for Doug and his son is that Robert's proud grandfather Bob, who oversees the car's maintenance in the shop during the week, is a key member of the team that represents three generations of Wall racers.

"Robert's dream, since he started driving in Quarter-Midgets, was to be able to race here at Wall, like his grandfather and I did," said Doug. "So now, the absolute best part of this is that the three of us (Bob, Doug and Robert) are all racing together."

Doug shared those reflections as we talked in the late afternoon at Wall from our vantage point in the pit area above turns three and four – while he was keeping an eye on his son who was turning quick laps in pre-race practice. Behind us, adjacent to Wall's pit area, was the Garden State Quarter-Midget Club 1/20-mile paved "Little Wall" oval, where the French family spent many Sunday afternoons going back some 10 years.

That was in 1998, when Robert began racing in the Quarter-Midgets, with a family car, at age six.

When dad Doug himself started racing, the Quarter-Midget track wasn't around. He needed to wait until age 18, by the New Jersey State racing rules back then, to compete in his newly-built Sportsman car. Doug recalled on Saturday with a laugh that (then Wall chief steward) "Tom O'Rourke actually caught me, in the pit area, trying to drive the car here, when I was under age 18! Tom was strictly by the book, so there was no way I was going to do it!"

"But I wanted to race, after all I had just built my first race car! So I went to (Pa.'s dirt) Grandview Speedway, where I could race at a younger age. I actually drove my asphalt car there, and finished sixth in the feature! But the officials told me that while I was okay to drive, my car wasn't legal because it was way too low! As soon as I turned 18, I came to Wall and started racing regularly."

Doug, a Wall Township native, quickly became a "home town hero" to the fans -- combining his on-track performance with a winning, enthusiastic personality. He was Wall's 1979 Sportsman titlist, then moved right into the full Modifieds the following year and scored a win in his rookie campaign. In Wall's full Modified era, Doug won two more mains through 1986 – ultimately joining the NASCAR Modified Tour during the 1990s as a teammate to his good friend driver Jamie Tomaino under Joe Venezian's Perth Amboy Spring Works banner. The last car that Doug ran regularly on the Tour was the black No. 98 – which is why Robert, who recalled his dad in that specific Modified, wanted *his* racing machine to look the same way.

Doug also competed on a national level in his fine career – driving in NASCAR's Cup and the now-defunct big-track Sportsman divisions; ARCA and Hooters Pro Cup circuits.

But while Doug had those opportunities to race all around the country – in fact, having won races in five states while sharing the track with the national stars of the time, he most treasured the moments he spent right back in New Jersey with his family.

That includes his parents –dad Bob and mom Claire – a former mayor of Wall Township, and longtime Monmouth County, N.J., clerk; his wife Robin and their five children. Along with son Robert, Doug and Robin are the parents of four daughters – Patricia, Sarah, Rebecca and Samantha. They are all cheerleaders for Robert, whether they're at home or in Wall's grandstands.

Always a "hands-on" driver, who knew how to set up his car along with a natural ability to take it to the front, Doug is enjoying the opportunity to help his son hone his skills in both areas.

Also closely watching Robert's line as he powered around Wall's challenging, high-banked paved oval on Saturday was No. 98 crew chief/family friend Russ Cook, who brings plenty of practical experience and valued advice to the operation.

Indeed, Russ was a winning Street Stock driver with his familiar yellow & black No. 95-9 cars, going back some 10 years ago. That was before a crash, with serious injuries, which led him to stop racing. Now, he's the all-around wrench-turner for the French Legend Car. Russ is also a driver for Doug French's Wall-based material transfer company. The team also includes No. 98 crewman Fred Brown.

The main sponsor on the No. 98 is J.P. Steffer & Sons of Toms River, N.J. They're a supplier of dirt for construction and development projects, the type in which French's business specializes.

Robert French went on to win many Quarter-Midget A-mains through 2005, in a variety of classes such as Light Mod, Sr. Honda and Light 160. He was also a solid representative of Quarter-Midget racing away from the track. For example, he was a spokesman for a inline roller skating and skateboard program, based in nearby Brick, N.J., that spread an anti-drug use message to teens.

Robert and the family then moved up the racing ladder, to the Leg-



WALL RACERS Robert French (left), dad Doug (right) and crew chief Russ Cook get their No. 98 ready for competition. (Photo by Jim Smith)

end Cars and began racing all over the East Coast.

"We owe a great deal of thanks to Kevin Yeatts," emphasized Doug, speaking of the outstanding Legend Car driver/mechanic/set-up whiz from Virginia – who invaded Wall and has three wins there, including at the 2003 Turkey Derby. "Kevin was recommended to us by John Molesworth (dad of N.J. Quarter-Midget, now Legend Car standouts Duncan and Patrick Molesworth), as a person who could give Robert excellent direction since the Legend Cars were brand new to us. Kevin certainly did, and became a great mentor to Robert."

In fact, the No. 98 that Robert drives was a former Yeatts car. But although Robert wanted to race a Legend Car at Wall, he had to wait until now when he became the correct age. He *could* drive the Legend Car, however, out of state – and the French team concentrated on paved tracks south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The past few years, Robert competed at Virginia's Southside, South Boston and Shenandoah Speedways; and at Hickory, N.C. – and in the Northeast at Pa.'s Lake Erie Speedway. He also turned laps in full-size Late Model-style stock cars. But his goal remained Wall.

That long-awaited debut came on May 9. On that Saturday night, he started 18th in Wall's Legends main and finished a strong fourth.

But, in the two race meets that have followed at the Shore Speedway, the results have been different.

Two weeks ago, Robert was sidelined when the motor let go. This past Saturday, after high expectations following a strong practice session, he and the No. 98 were done way too early.

Starting from seventh in the initial heat race, Robert made it no farther than the first turn – spinning up into the fence after contact with another competitor just after the start. The impact caused enough damage to the No. 98's front end to end the night.

The feature went on without him, with the fans watching a thrilling contest in which 2007 track champion Mike Fulton took his first win of the year. That came after young Derek Hopkinson and 2006 titlist Mike Stull tangled off turn four while dueling for the lead on the final lap. Fulton, having a ringside seat in third, was the recipient of the situation. He passed both, and took his fifth career win at Wall.

Robert, like any true racer, was frustrated himself – wishing that he could have been in that main instead of spectating. But, since Doug has imparted good advice to his son, about "racing philosophy," he knew that there would always be "another race."

You see, Doug heard those same words himself, 30 years ago, from a person that he considers to be very wise.

That's his dad Bob.

"It's tough for someone like Robert, who is still new to this and young, to realize that 'there's always next week,'" said Doug, after the meet had ended. "It took *me* time to learn that as a driver, but the more you race the more you learn. As much fun as racing can be, and as much as you can be successful, it can humble you real quick. So going back to our time in the Quarter-Midgets, I always told him 'just do the best that you can. You're not going to win each time'. I wanted to set the right example, because it's the same in life itself."

"When I started racing, my father – who is also my best friend – was right there to help me out. He gave me advice, not just with how to race here, but how to run a race team from a business sense," recalled Doug. "He also taught me that while it's important, if you're racing, to focus on winning, that it's also important to remember that it's supposed to be fun. There's always another race, and you learn from your experiences – whether they're good or bad. I've tried to do the same with *my* son."

Wall's program this past Saturday was the immensely successful "Family Fun Night" – where fans watched, for a \$5 adult admission charge and a free grandstand for kids – the track's regular Legend Cars and the visiting Northeast Enduro Tour Series (N.E.E.T.S.).

The Enduros use different rules – while safety in the building of the cars is paramount, it's not uncommon for the race to continue even though a car has spun and may be sitting on the track for many laps while others use evasive moves to get by the stalled car. Should there be a major crash, or fire, however, the red is thrown and drivers must stop in order for the safety crews to go to work.

New Jersey has strict racing rules as to the construction of the cars and overall safety on the track during events, that are enforced and under the guidance of the N.J. State Police.

"With this being our first event in New Jersey in quite a few years,

there were many questions from our side and by the State Police. They wanted to make certain that we were doing everything correctly," said N.E.E.T.S. promoter Joe Cutri. "But thanks to (State Police Trooper) Steve Slimowicz (head of the State Police racing rules group in New Jersey), it worked out great. Steve was extremely helpful, and made us feel welcome. We wanted to do this right, and he made it happen."

The opening N.E.E.T.S. main, at 25-laps for its four-cylinder division, was won by dirt track stock car regular/class point leader Dave Bentley Jr. after a close duel with runner-up and many circuit leader John "Sack Man" Saccomandi and dad Dave Bentley Sr.

The nightcap, which closed out the meet, was over the 100-lap distance. There, Wall Factory Stock regular Joe Constandi bested another Wall regular Elliott Wohl – a previous winner there in Street Stock and Pro Stock competition; and Richard "Uncle Petey" Petey.

Richard, who drives, yes, a blue No. 43, is also well-known at Wall, racing in *every* N.E.E.T.S. event since 2003, as has Howie "Dr. Destruction" Bott, who finished a strong sixth on Saturday in his No. 75.

Howie's wife, Cindy Bott, is as dedicated as her husband, having never missed a series event and being a long-time Enduro supporter – and represents the group as "Ms. N.E.E.T.S." while presenting the large trophies (from Bux-Mont Awards in Sellersville, Pa.) in victory lane at each event. She's also the post-race "hostess" in the pit area after the events. At Wall, Cindy had a large bowl of candy that she made available to racers and the many spectators.

It's evident that the N.E.E.T.S. racers are serious about their racing, but want to emphasize "family" and "a good time" as well.

The two N.E.E.T.S. features had the constant attention of the fans with action that was all over the track. While the Four-Cylinder contest ran without incident, action in the "Big Car" main included an errant wheel, that circled around much of the inside of the track when it came off the No. 33 of Frank D'Entremont; while other racers spun or hit/climbed the steel guard rail – yet kept right on going without any slowdown. In the midst of that was fender-to-fender racing, often three-abreast as the drivers raced for position – the type of competition that had the spectators, many who were at Wall for the very first time based on that \$5 admission, cheering for more.

Track promoter Jim Morton, very-pleased with the large turnout of spectators and on track action, confirmed that the N.E.E.T.S. Enduro racers would be back on July 11, as part of another "Family Fun Night" with reduced admission. While the car count for the Enduro events was not as large as expected, the racing was still exciting.

"Many of our regular drivers had heard of Wall, but had never raced there – or even *seen* it, before this past Saturday," said Joe Cutri. "There were actually a number of them there, in the grandstands on Saturday, to 'check it out'. Everyone agreed that it was a great track, and we'll have more racers at Wall for our next event."

The N.E.E.T.S. Series began in 2003, under the direction of veteran Pennsylvania racing official and promoter Billy Bartley. A racer at heart, his concept was to provide a touring series for low-budget stock car racing, using the "enduro" concept of racing, with the emphasis on fun. One of the tour's early shows was at Wall, with current Modified standout Chris Hamilton taking first place in that event.

A few years ago, Joe Cutri and his wife Erin (Billy's daughter) took over full management and promotion of N.E.E.T.S. and have it going strong with a vision for the future. The event at Wall last weekend was the third for N.E.E.T.S. this year – with the first two having taken place on the dirt at Pa.'s Grandview Speedway.

The concept of "Enduro" racing with strictly stock cars goes back to the 1980s, when it was common for over 100 cars to run in "timed distance" events. Back then, it was more of a "rolling demolition derby." As time went on, the Enduro drivers refined their talents and became true, serious race drivers – and many have gone on to become top competitors in other divisions of the sport. At the same time, the Enduro regulars are among the best in their field.

Today, the N.E.E.T.S. Enduro program focuses on giving its participants an opportunity to build and race stock cars within a strict budget, and to travel to different paved and dirt tracks. Just like the old days, a N.E.E.T.S. stock car can race equally well on both types of surface. Cutri said that many teams take great pride in building their stock cars from the ground up, just like it was done years ago.

Importantly, he and the organizers stress that *racing*, not wrecking, is the foundation of its series. And that racing is exciting.

"We're proud to say that our drivers are true racers, who are proud of their cars," said Joe Cutri. "They do this strictly for a hobby, and spend their hard-earned money to be at the track with our series."

During the week, Joe is a building code official in Eastern Pennsylvania communities, through Keystone Municipal Services; and has done racing photography. His wife Erin is employed as an accountant with national music and entertainment supplier/transporter Rock-It Cargo. At the track, Erin handles N.E.E.T.S. registration, line-ups and post-race money – "and keeps me straight!" said Joe.

The close-knit "N.E.E.T.S. Team" includes chief flagger Matt Odwazny, tech officials Josh Oswald and Rick Collins, and "all around" official Pat Karley. J.A. Ackley, well-known for his racing website work, handles point computation for the N.E.E.T.S. races.

That "racing and fun" credo was evident once the final checkered waved for the N.E.E.T.S. racers at Wall on Saturday night. Even though many of the teams were from as much as two hours or more away, they had what has now become a customary for the series post-race, fun-filled gathering in the pit area – sharing plenty of stories and laughter, while meeting spectators, of all ages, who came over from the grandstands to check out the race cars up close.

"No matter what type of racing you have, in any division, the competitor is going to spend money," said Joe Cutri. "We're no different with our series, but we want to make it *manageable*. We want everyone to keep coming back, to race and enjoy the camaraderie. Our racers are doing this to have fun, and we, as the officials, enjoy it just as much. That's why we call this the 'N.E.E.T.S. family'."