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County resident writes biography of racing legend

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Gary Ludwig became a dirt track racing fan about the time he learned how to walk.

Actually, it was a few years after that, but not all that many years. That wasn't particularly surprising, since one of his Oley, Berks County, neighbors was Tommy Hinnershitz, and at the time, Hinnershitz was perhaps the best dirt track driver in the country.

The connection between Ludwig and Hinnershitz was actually deeper than simply living next door, however. Ludwig's uncle, Floyd Delp, was involved in racing and had worked with Hinnershitz. And Ludwig was distantly related to Hinnershitz, as well.

Hinnershitz retired as a driver following the 1960 racing season. Ludwig, meanwhile, began a career in racing as a journalist and commentator 10 years later when he moved to Lebanon County after having served in the U.S. Army. That career included writing racing reports for Illustrated Speedway News, as well as anchoring Speedsport Commentary Radio Network three days a week. He later promoted racing at Fredericksburg Speedway and handled public relations at Penn National Speedway.

By the end of the 1970s, Ludwig had pretty much walked away from racing, at least as a vocation. He still remained close to some of his racing friends, but not until 2007 did he seriously begin thinking about racing again. That was when he was talking to his Uncle Floyd, and his uncle said "someone ought to write a book about Tommy."

Floyd Delp died about six months after that conversation,

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1948. At the time of his retirement, he held 39 track records.

Although Ludwig set out to write a biography of Hinnershitz, the book itself is more than a biography. Well researched, Ludwig not only writes about Hinnershitz's life and racing career, he also writes about the times, about the men who, with Hinnershitz, made central Pennsylvania the heart of dirt track racing in the United States.

Included in the book are stories about Lebanon's Cyrus Patschke and Mark Light, Buster Warke and Bill Holland, Ernie McCoy and Otis Strine, Johnny Tompson and Eddie Sachs.

It is the story of racing as it developed in the 1920s and '30s and what it became in late the 1940s and throughout the 1950s.

It was also a bit of a voyage of discovery for Ludwig as he began researching the book.

"I was amazed at how much I'd been a part of the (racing) community," he said. "You forget about the outside work when you begin talking to racing people, which is what I was doing when I was covering racing for Illustrated Speedway News. You begin talking about things only racing people know, and it brings back memories."

Working on the book also brought out a few regrets for Ludwig.

"I think the thing I realized was that I had a lot of opportunity to meet people," he said, "and there were so many that I never really interviewed or talked to, people like Ernie McCoy."

The book, Ludwig said, has been a success, so much so that a second printing has been scheduled. And in helping to promote it, has afforded him the opportunity to meet old friends and acquaintances at book signings.

"It's amazing how close the racing fraternity is," he said.

The book is available at Waldenbooks at the Lebanon Valley Mall.



Gary Ludwig adjusts a poster promoting his book on Tommy Hinnershitz at Waldenbooks in the Lebanon Valley Mall last month. Ludwig's biography of the well-known dirt track driver includes not only the story of Hinnershitz but some of the history of the early days of racing in Central Pennsylvania. (Jim Zengerle / Lebanon Daily News)

but the more Ludwig talked with people he knew, the more they suggested that he write the book.

"I decided to do a book on Tommy," Ludwig said. "I started writing in April or May of 2008, and the more I did it, the more I enjoyed it."

The end result was "Tommy Hinnershitz: The Life and Times of an Auto-Racing Legend."

In a racing career that began in 1928, Hinnershitz won five Eastern AAA (American Automobile Association) sprint car championships and two Eastern USAC (U.S. Auto Club) sprint championships and finished as the AAA runner-up four times. He won 103 sprint car features, finished second in 93 feature races, and third 57 times.

Hinnershitz captured seven midget car races, finished in the top 10 in 14 champ car races and competed in the Indianapolis 500 three times, finishing ninth in



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