



BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN

BY MIKE ADASKAVEG

DESPITE A CRIPPLING SPILL, HARVEY HOWARD CONTINUED ON, EVENTUALLY TAKING OVER THE REINS OF DESERT THUNDER RACEWAY



Howard Harvey's determination is legend in Utah. When a motorcycle race accident left him paralyzed, he built a 1/4-mile dirt track on family owned land with a pickup and a grader, both of which were equipped with hand controls. Today, he races an IMCA modified at the track he promotes, Desert Thunder Raceway in Price, Utah.

Reminiscent of showdown scenes from old westerns, the low desert sunlight stretches the shadow of spoked wheels across powder brown dirt. A royal blue sky silhouettes a bearded man riding high on those wheels, dust-caked hands grasping and pushing with determination as he heads for his modern day steed. Two tough cowboys pick him up, slide him into the saddle, and within seconds he is off into the sunset, riding in a cloud of dust with his posse.

Harvey Howard is the sheriff of Desert Thunder Raceway. He's also the owner, promoter, and one of the top IMCA modified drivers there. By day, he works for Bucyrus, specializing in electro-hydraulics for underground coal-mining equipment. By night, he tears apart engines and transmissions for his race cars. One thing

we forgot to mention—Harvey has been paralyzed from the waist down since a racing accident when he was a teenager.

Little sister Tina Howard was a “flag girl!” when the tight-knit Howard family was watching Harvey about to win yet another motorcycle race. He was number one in desert MX and flat-track racing, and was dreaming of a pro deal.

At the last second, something went horribly wrong. His bike swerved, flipped, and landed on top of him.

“It was really, really rough,” says Tina, enjoying the late sun while sitting on the passenger-side rail of her brother’s modified. “We were all there. He said he couldn’t feel his legs. They took him to Salt Lake City. They said his spinal chord was severed and we’d have to live with it.”

ON NEXT PAGE: Howard leaves one set of wheels behind as he enters the specially equipped modified he built to race in the IMCA.





RIGHT: Howard steers with his left arm, operates a combination throttle and brake with his right arm, and runs up front of the pack.

BOTTOM: With the preciseness of a maestro, Desert Thunder Raceway starter Victoria Gallegos doesn't miss a beat as a symphony of IMCA modifieds make music below her stand.

Surgeries followed, and Harvey was sent home to stare at the stark beauty of the Utah high desert from his bedroom window. Multitudes of layered earthy shades, seldom interrupted by incongruent colors, greeted him every day.

"We thought the worst," says Tina. "But, not Harvey—he wouldn't hear it."

The rocks, hills, and dry hayfields framed in Harvey's window were soon interrupted by red, white, and blue—friend Bill Fuller parked a '72 Camaro, numbered 72, in the middle of the picture. He was moving away and couldn't keep racing it.

"I saw it sitting there, and I started dreaming," Harvey says. "I thought real hard—what would it be like to drive that car—to own it, work on it, build its engine?"

Harvey knew he had to be involved—but not *just* involved—all the way involved in stock car racing.

"We had a 40-acre piece of land not in use," he says. "I got busy—built hand controls for my pickup. Found a grader. Convinced my family and friends to load me in the back of the pickup and lift me into the grader. I built hand controls for it, too, and went right out and carved a 1/4-mile track into that desert dirt."

Harvey's determination is legend in Price, Utah. He perfected a driving system for that Camaro—brake and throttle for the right hand, steering wheel for the left—



Howard's little sister Tina was 14 when she witnessed the crash that paralyzed her brother. She, her siblings, and their parents stood by Howard's side on a remarkable journey back to racing.



RIGHT: College student Christina Gallegos is a talented athlete, skiing the toughest slopes in the Rockies. But, she says that isn't as thrilling as racing her stock car at Desert Thunder

UPPER LEFT: Mod shoe Zane DeVilbiss cools down after a heat race despite Raquel Capps turning up the heat in the trailer.

BOTTOM: Little Gunner Pine, 10 months old and ready to drive his buggy onto the track, hangs out and sweats with mom Dana Baum and driver dad Terrence Pine, who make racing their family weekend outing.



The soft and reassuring hand of Courtney Barnett is bound with modified ace Colton VanderHerp's gloved driving hand as he is waiting for a heat race on the fast little oval.

and started practicing. Before long, others showed up to challenge him. An old water truck was secured to suck what little water there was out of a nearby ditch.

Harvey's success at his hometown track took him to Moab, Utah, in 1991, where he won the track championship in the sportsman division. But, it was that year that a strange twist of fate allowed him to turn yet another negative into a positive.

Locals called the County Commissioners to complain that an illegal speedway had cropped up in the desert. When the commissioners got the whole story—they offered Harvey the deal of his lifetime.

"They told me I had to shut down... but, there was some good news," Harvey says with a smile. "They said, 'If you reopen the old Carbon County Speedway in Price, we'll let you and your friends race there.'"

That day, Desert Thunder Raceway was born. Nine years later, Harvey bought it from the county.

"His love for racing brought the family together again," says Tina. "We're all still here—mom's in the tower, dad's driving the water truck, sister Carol is working the pit booth, and brother Robert is right here, at the gate."

By the car counts, you would never know it's a long haul for many who race there—that's why Harvey promotes a unique Friday and Saturday night program, but not every weekend. Cars come down from Canada to the north, New Mexico and Arizona to the south, and Colorado to the east.

"Most of us are from far away," says modified driver Colton VanderHerp, "It's a blast racing here—and the promoter gets it—he and the IMCA came up with a

schedule that works for the three tracks out here—Diamond Mountain in Vernal [Utah] and Fairgrounds Speedway in Cortez [Colo.]."

Zane DeVilbiss hauls in from New Mexico with his home-built modified, and says he feels Desert Thunder makes him a better driver.

"The dryness takes the motor out of the competition and brings the driver in importance," DeVilbiss says.

"This area has zero humidity, the opposite of the Midwest," says fellow New Mexican Rex Higgins. "Everyone can be fast when a track is tacky. It's about finesse, not power, at this track."

Locals like the tight schedule. Despite four divisions loaded with competitors, Harvey points out that he has the fans "home to the babysitters by 10."

Fathers advising racer sons or daughters are in every corner in the pits. Young drivers have girlfriends learning the ropes—checking tire pressures, attaching tear-offs. Babies and young children wave checkered flags as their mommas put on fire-suits and give the guys a run for the money.

"It is a fun place to bring the kids—the little kids like the sport compact division, the big kids like the modifieds," says Dana Baum, pointing out cars to 10-month-old Gunner, whose father, Terrence Pine, races a sportsman. "It's a fun place where you are able to relax and enjoy family time while racing."

Leaning against the pit shack for a moment of shade, young Christina Gallegos wears a "Dirty Girls Finish First" T-shirt above a tied-off fire-suit. You'd never guess: college



student, majoring in music; or, college athlete, exceptional skier. She's both. Her hero? "My dad," Christina says. "He drives a modified."

When she's not playing alto sax or oboe at Adams State College in Colorado, or skiing Powderhorn in Mesa, she's driving a stock car.

"I want to coach ski racing, and I want to race a modified," she says. "And, yes, driving at Desert Thunder is more thrilling than skiing a black diamond trail."

Brian Wordelman gave up running asphalt in Salt Lake City to run dirt.

"Used to be able to run one car on both, now they have to be separate cars, so I chose dirt," he says, with his wife Amy by his side. "Asphalt meant four hours of setup and tweaking. Racing here means getting the car ready at the shop, getting it here, and going—it's a driver's track."

Their appreciation for what they have shines through like the desert sun.

"Harvey remembers everyone's name," says Brian. "He greets everyone and shakes their hand every night. At other tracks they don't even know you. And, he says thank you at the end of the night."

"Harvey's love for the track—for the drivers, and for everyone who comes here—is something you don't find anywhere else," says Amy.

For Harvey, the future is bright—despite being inundated about the talk of a bad economy. His son, Wyatt, 14, will start his racing career next season. As for juggling two racing teams and the track, Harvey is committed to making it all work.

RIGHT: Fans perch high on the backstretch cliff for a unique perspective of the hottest show in the desert.

BOTTOM: The modified feature's checkered flag is prey for top runners Colton VanderHerp (28), Robert Gallegos (11), Chuck Buchanan (99), Zane DeVilbiss (18), and Aaron Spangler (16).



"My goal is to protect this track," he proudly says as the desert sky fills with millions of pinpoints of light. "If I had a million dollars, I would spend every last dollar of it on racing."

Ray Safely, father of driver Dusty Safely, stops to offer his approval of Harvey's efforts.

"Best-run racetrack in all of the Western states," he says.

Hours pass as Harvey relaxes in his wheelchair, making sure every fan is out safely. He glances back to see campfires dancing in the distance, racers kicking back to enjoy family time under a canopy of stars you can only see at a raceway called Desert Thunder.

"Now, its time to turn out the lights," he says. **SI**

TOP: A mod heat lines up against one of the most spectacular backgrounds in racing.

BOTTOM: IMCA modifieds come from far and wide to be silhouetted against the brown dirt of Utah's Desert Thunder Speedway.

