

DENNIS LUN

Overcoming



JMS Pro Photo/Joe Secka

GER, JR.



BY DOUG KENNEDY

Dennis Lunger, Jr. of Albion, Pennsylvania, experienced his most successful racing season to date in 2013. Lunger concluded his 2013 campaign with a win in the Steel City Stampede at Lernerville Speedway. Nine months earlier, there was no guarantee that Lunger was going to live, let alone race.

Looking back on the '13 season, Lunger said, "That (Lernerville win) was probably the high point of my career."

Five feature wins at Sharon Speedway earned him the track championship at the northwestern Pennsylvania track. Those wins, plus another at Allegheny Mountain Raceway in Kane, Pennsylvania, earned Lunger a fifth-place finish in the Sweeney RUSH Weekly Series. There were also two victories at Raceway 7, which brought his season total to nine, by far the most ever for Lunger.

"It was an outstanding year after what I went through in the winter, wondering if I could even race anymore," said Lunger. More on that a little bit later. "It was one of those years that you're just happy to get through it."

Born and raised in Erie, Pennsylvania, Lunger eventually moved to Corry, stayed there for about eight years and then relocated to Albion, Pennsylvania, a move made so that he could be closer to his Conneaut, Ohio-based race shop.

The shop is owned and operated by Lunger's current car owner since 2007, Rueben Schwartz. The relationship actually began in 2005, when Schwartz' company - Schwartz Construction - became a major sponsor of Lunger's race car.

"We're like brothers and good friends," said Lunger of Schwartz.

Getting a late start, Lunger didn't begin racing until 2002 when he was 34 years old. At the time, Dennis and his wife, Beth, had two kids and then found out a set of twins were on the way. "That made it a little tough for us," he said. "She told me after we get our own house that I could race. So after we bought our house in Corry, I did just that."

"I took out a loan, bought a car, and went racing," said Lunger.

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"It was just me and my wife. I started off for the first five weeks racing my Spectator Stock at Raceway 7. We had no luck up there, and every week I was leaving on a hook."

That's when the late Fran Seamens, then promoter at Stateline Speedway in Eden, Ohio, came to Lunger and asked him why he wasn't racing at his track. Lunger ran an aluminum intake, which was illegal at Stateline, but Seamens said to forget about it and come and race there anyway. That would go on to cause problems between the other drivers and Dennis. "We took a lot of grief for that," said Lunger. "We were called a cheater by other drivers because the aluminum wasn't allowed."

Nevertheless, Lunger chose to race and finished second after starting dead last in his first ever start at Stateline. One night later, he captured the checkers at Eriez. All tolled, Lunger went on to win three features, a number that seemed to be the benchmark for a good portion of his racing career.

The groundwork for the

Schwartz/Lunger relationship actually developed in 2003, when a young lady approached Lunger following one of his races. "I was driving my Spectator Stock at Eriez and a young lady came up to me after the race and asked me if she could drive my car for the Powder Puff race that night," said Lunger. "I said yes. She drove my car and went onto finish second."

It seems that the woman of the couple that was with her that evening was Rueben Schwartz's sister. "She went back and talked to Rueben and said since I was such a nice guy that he should sponsor my car," said Lunger. "Two years later, I sent him a Christmas card." That gesture prompted Rueben to call Dennis and invite him up to his place, so they could discuss some possible sponsorship for his car.

Lunger raced his Spectator Stock through the 2004 season, one that would turn out to be his final season of running at Stateline. It seems that a track official told Dennis that he was getting tired of hearing complaints from his com-



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Dennis Lunger, Jr. powers his #71L through the turns at Sharon Speedway during the 2012 season.

petitors and that he would have to move up to the Outlaw Cadet Division. Being forced to switch divisions was far from his biggest problem following the conclusion of that 2004 season. With his weight tumbling in an unexpected way, Lunger was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease. The disease, an intestinal tract blockage problem, caused Dennis to lose three feet of his small intestine and six inches of his colon. A recuperation period lasted nearly three months.

Entering 2005, it was certainly not one of the brightest moments in Lunger's career, nor for that matter, his life. However, two racing friends, Doug Eck and Ron Davies, came to the rescue by providing him with two car bodies. Two weeks later, he fried a motor at Stateline. Lady Luck struck another blow on the following night when he blew up at Eriez.

"At that point, I decided it was time to park it and regroup," said Lunger.

On the verge of being down and out, two loyal Lunger fans, Ron

and Don North, stepped up to the plate. "After I blew that second motor they talked to my wife and said they wanted to financially help me out," said Lunger. Their only request was that Dennis stop racing in the Cadet Division and move up to the E-Mods. Months later, the car was ready to go for the season ending race at Eriez. It turned into being a pretty successful night for Lunger, as he went onto win the heat race and finish third in the feature.

When Rueben Schwartz came on board as a sponsor following the 2005 season, he wanted Dennis to start racing at Raceway 7. However, that posed somewhat of a problem. It seems the only trailer that Lunger had for travel was a borrowed farm trailer. To remedy the situation, Schwartz bought him an enclosed trailer and painted it with the color of his choice - Caution Yellow. "People knew when we arrived at the race track," said Lunger.

Besides driving at Raceway 7, he was now driving the E-Mod full-time. A stickler for cosmetics, Schwartz bought four brand new chrome wheels prior to one of Lunger's races.

"He wanted us to look real good," said Lunger. "We were leading the race and with three to go, and a caution came out. On the restart, the next thing I knew the left rear wheel is going right by me."

The problem developed because the wheels needed to be torqued to help break down the chrome shell coating, something they failed to do.

"That was one feature win we left on the table," he said.

For the next three seasons, it was three feature wins per year. Beginning in 2007, Schwartz stepped up his involvement with Lunger by moving from just sponsoring to now owning. That move, however, seemed to intimidate the North brothers somewhat, causing them to back out of their sponsorship deal. Fortunately, the brothers have since returned to providing sponsorship for Lunger.

"They are two guys who just take the sponsorship money out of their paychecks," said Lunger.

Once he acquired ownership of the team, Schwartz wanted Dennis to move up and drive a Super Late Model. Lunger agreed and sold all his E-Mod equipment, including the trailer. In the interim, they bought a turnkey Rocket from Wayne Chinn. Returning home from Eldora after purchasing the Late Model, they arrived at Eriez Speed-



Above photo: Dennis Lunger, Jr. celebrates a Sharon Speedway victory in 2013.
Below photo: Lunger in action at Eriez Speedway last season.



way for a race that night and ended up finishing sixth after starting 25th. Not bad for his first time ever behind the wheel of a Late Model.

Two thousand-eight also provided Lunger with one of his career highlights. The milestone came when he won the Chiller Thriller at Mercer in his first ever Crate Late Model race. A track championship at Raceway 7 followed in 2009. By 2010, Lunger had an Open Late

Model and two Crate Late Models. The following season, he joined forces with Shane McDowell and converted his chassis from Rocket to Warrior.

A teammate was to join up with Lunger in 2011 to drive the second Crate, but for some reason, it never materialized. With all the sponsor spots sold on the car, Lunger was forced to drive it and won three of the first five nights out at Stateline.

By mid-season of 2011, Lunger and Schwartz purchased a second McDowell Warrior Late Model, one that Dennis raced in the prestigious Pittsburgher, a race he nearly won.

"I was leading the race with five to go and had a good lead at the time," said Lunger. "I broke the right front shock with seven to go and looped it with five to go and still ended up sixth. Satterlee (Greg) ended up passing me and it broke my heart."

A tired motor, as Lunger called it, and some health issues forced Schwartz to curtail his schedule and just race the Crate Late Model for 2012. Once again, there were three feature wins, all of them coming late in the season.

But there were more health issues for Lunger, as the Crohn's Disease returned late in 2012. Two more feet of small intestine and more of his colon were removed. An elongated hospital stay because of infections lasted from the second week of January through the first week of March.

"We (Lunger and Schwartz) talked about what we were going to do for 2013 and both agreed to just run the Crate stuff because of travel and my health," he said. "It's a lot less work with no \$40,000 motor to worry about, but you still have to be on top of your game."

Midway through this past season, Lunger bought a Warrior Late Model from Doug Horton and High Gear Speed Shop. That car enabled Dennis to win five features from July on.

A second Late Model was purchased from High Gear and should be at their disposal by



Left photo: The Lunger pit area at Hartford, Ohio's Sharon Speedway last season. Below photo: Dennis Lunger, Jr. works the inside line on the #5G of Scott Gurdak at Eriez Speedway in Erie, Pennsylvania.




Greg Kinnear

January. Entering the 2014 season, Dennis Lunger will have three Crate Late Models, that is, if he doesn't sell the oldest one. The shop roster will also include three motors to go along with those cars. "It looks good as long as my health is good," said the driver of the red, white and blue #71L.

Significance for the #71 comes from the fact that it was his football number and also the number of one of his racing buddies and heroes, Ron Davies.

Plans for Lunger are for him to defend his Sharon Track championship. He also is exploring the possibility of doing more RUSH Series Touring races. "If it's not extreme, we might do that and not chase the Sharon championship," he said. "We're not going to do any major travelling." Two and a half hours is about the limit for Lunger's travel.

"My wife always asks me how long I'm going to do this and I tell her to ask me when I'm 50, so I guess that means it will be five years. Health, however, will dictate everything." 

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