

Brian Lawson in the 01 car, holds a slim lead over the 66 car, as they slide around a corner at Eastside Speedway in Waynesboro. Note how both drivers are steering to the right as they slide left.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Just about then, we hear the unmistakable sound of two cars colliding up on the track. The late-model series is bumping and grinding around the dirt oval. A guy in a crumpled black car has been nudged and has spun out. The yellow caution flag comes out. The black car spins its wheels in fury and heads around the track THE WRONG WAY, against the flow. He seeks and finds his alleged tormenter and rams him into the wall with a sickening crunch. The crowd is stunned in drop-jawed astonishment. The black car reverses and triumphantly exits the track, front quarter panel dangling and flapping like a crow's broken wing.

They have to call the tow truck to haul the other guy off the track. He follows his wounded chariot on foot, Nomex suit unzipped to the navel, fists clenched in rage and determination to find that blinkety-blank in the black car. Two crewmates try to restrain him. There's going to be a fight here in the pits tonight; you can just sense it.

The sprint car guys shake their heads and turn their backs in disgust. That driver might benefit from anger management classes. He certainly would have no place with the Virginia Sprint Series 305 Race Savers. That's why they call it race SAVER. You save your car for next week. And you leave your temper at home.

# French Grimes

At right, Virginia Sprint Series 305 Race Saver creator, French Grimes prepares for a race.

Photo by Phil Audibert

"French runs a tight ship," says Marty Madison reverently of the Sprint Car Series creator, French Grimes of Haywood in Madison County.

Grimes' goal: to create and promote an affordable, safe racecar series with a level playing field where spending more money does not give you an advantage.

He has been successful in this, partly because he wrote the specs when he created the flagship Virginia Sprint Car Series with the help of two others 10 years ago. It has now morphed into Race Saver Sprint Car series in Texas, Pennsylvania, New York and Nebraska. French Grimes Racing Systems controls it all—from the purse, to the specs, to the conduct code.

Madison points to the head of a standard Race Saver 305 cubic-inch Chevy engine in his shop. "They are built for him for this series specifically," says Marty. "When they're put on the motor, they put a seal on it." There are also seals on the intake manifolds and the timing covers. If those seals are broken, French knows someone has been meddling with the motor and that person is disqualified.

French also writes the rules governing driver behavior. Sitting in the comfy air-conditioned portion of his racecar trailer, the snowy-haired Grimes says, "You don't get into racing without having a certain amount of emotions involved. You need a forum and a framework to keep them under control. We provide that." If there's a problem such as we just witnessed with the late-model cars, "It is my job to handle the problem, to get the participants to calm down."

French points out the window to the family scene unfolding outside. "You see that granny sitting there? The grannies are here. Kids are here. The lady with white hair is

watching her son who is 50-years old and is driving that number 32 there. And he's got nephews who are driving. So we've struggled to have a good atmosphere here... safe racing, but good racing."

French video tapes every race. "We have a community here and we have to look out for each other. Yes, it's racing and it's hard racing, but we don't run into people. If you do, there's a reason. Somebody's at fault, and we'll talk about it." He thinks about that a moment and adds, "We will not talk about it by immediately running over and hollering at them. I will not tolerate it. I'll throw you out."

The Virginia Sprint Series is also affordable racing. On its web site it says, "Tired of being run out of racing by the ultra wealthy? Fight Back! RaceSaver® rules prevent money from buying a significant advantage. The RaceSaver® concept allows working men and women the opportunity to compete on a level playing field."

French explains. "The people who race short track are typically working people; they're not high rollers. Sprint cars, the way we

race them, you can get a car and a motor, you can be on a racetrack for less than \$10,000 which is far less than anything. And because of the way we enforce the rules, you can race these for less than you can race a go-cart."

He compares the 305s with the 410 Outlaw series, where it costs a million bucks to buy a 900-horsepower car and run a full season. "If you race a 410 competitively, you're going to flip the car every fourth race. You'll destroy a car every fourth race," he says matter-of-factly. One of the reasons it's called Race Saver is that a 305 motor can last five seasons, not just five races, before it needs an overhaul.

Grimes is also a stickler for safety. "It's still dangerous," he cautions, but risk is minimized by the long list of safety requirements he has written. "I really want people to be safe more than anything. And I want them to get along with each other."

He remembers when Marty and Brian first started running. "I sure have fussed at them," he says good-naturedly. He tells a story about Marty fretting over his car. French grabbed him and said, "Marty... repeat after me,

there is no magic. Put your driver out there. Let him drive the damn thing." French smiles wisely. "And this year, his driver Brian has done a fantastic job. Brian's doing really good and we're really proud of him. He hasn't given me a moment's trouble. He represents the best of what we're trying to achieve."

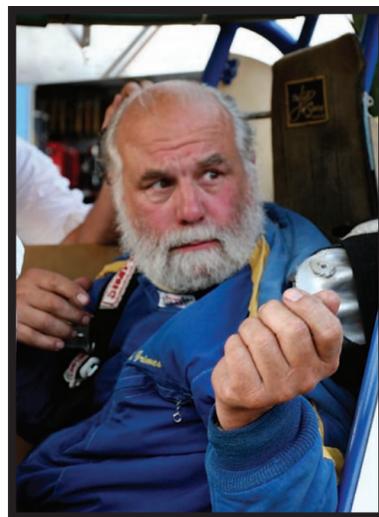
Just about then Grimes' daughter and quasi crew chief Nancy pokes her head in the door to remind him it's time to go racing. "Where are my shoes, hon?" he asks absent-mindedly. She smiles demurely and brings them to him.

French wins the feature race that night, passing Brian with just a few laps to go. But he didn't win much money...maybe \$150. "Our purse is based on a per-car system. We are paid per car. We have a flat purse. We don't keep points in this group because that keeps people mad from week to week," explains Grimes.

Marty Madison echoes the sentiment. "You'll go to the track, you'll race, you'll load it back up, come back home, and you'll break even. It pays the same amount of money if you win a race or if you come in last place. Everyone gets the same amount of money."

The weekend of Sept. 16 marks the end of the season. Brian, French, and all the others in the Virginia Sprint Series Race Saver 305s will run against each other in the Nationals at Eastside Speedway in Waynesboro. It will be a heckuva show. And the winner "doesn't get a dime," says Marty. "He gets a nice clock, he gets a big ring and he gets the notoriety and the publicity for being the Virginia Sprint Series Champion for that year."

Maybe, just maybe, our hometown boys will bring that clock and ring home to Barboursville.



Above, Brian Lawson gets the checkered flag at Eastside Speedway. MadLaw Racing's season will come to a close the weekend of Sept. 16. In the wings for next season is a second car that will be readied during the winter.

At right, Lawson flashes that race-winning smile as he laces up his driving shoes in preparation for a practice run at Eastside Speedway in Waynesboro. Brian had never driven a race car until last season when he and Marty Madison became involved with Sprint cars. Today he is running consistently in the top five.

Photos by Phil Audibert



You can see drivers rubbernecking as they crest the rise on Route 33 between Eheart and Barboursville. What the devil is that thing parked on a trailer in the apron of Marty and Betty Madison's garage? **Looking like the end result of a blind date between a metal hang glider and a go-cart on steroids, the oddity is barely recognizable as a racecar.** But it is a racecar, more specifically, a Sprint car.

Take a closer look. It leans naturally to the left. Its right rear tire is not only wider than the left; it is taller. The driver sits in what looks like a bi-plane cockpit with a drive-shaft running precariously between his legs. There are few controls: two pedals, one a brake, the other an accelerator, a removable steering wheel and a shift lever that in true binary fashion leaves you just two options: ying and yang, zero and one, on or off, nothing and something. .... neutral and GO!

But Whoeee! is that "go" ever loud and fast!

**"You gotta turn right to go left,"** says Brian enigmatically. **"As soon as I hit that brake, I mash on the gas pedal."**

And away he goes, head pinned back against the seat from the acceleration. One eye blink later, he's at the other end of the oval, setting up for the next corner.

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INSIDER

BY PHIL AUDIBERT  
SEPTEMBER 7, 2006

Behind the driver is a liquid bomb...a fuel tank full of methanol. In front of him rumbles a 305 cubic-inch engine that can torque around 420 horsepower. And on top of all this is a huge wing with sideboards. The wing is almost as big as the car itself.

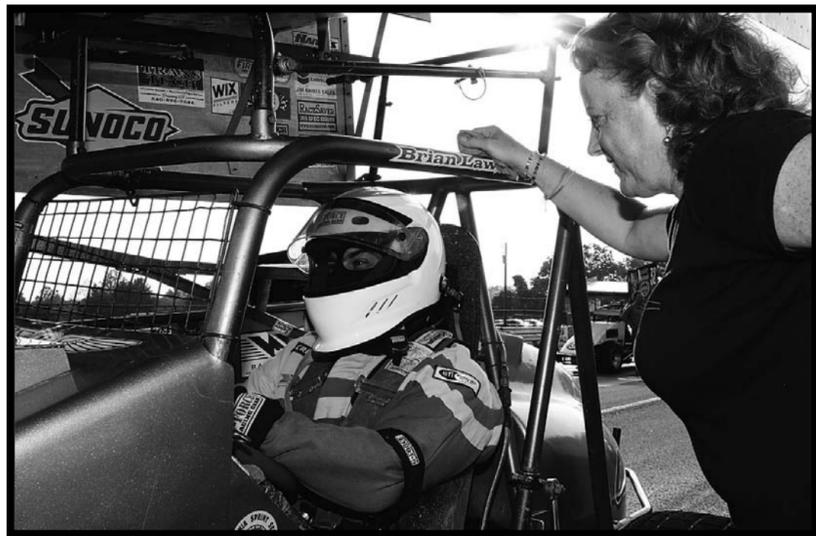
But it doesn't fly... or it shouldn't anyway. If it did, and they sometimes do, the driver and the car are in some serious trouble. No, the wing's purpose is to keep the car on the ground, not in the air. "It catches the air and puts the down force on the back end," says the oddity's owner and creator, Marty Madison. "There's no clutch, there's no transmission," he continues. "It's either in-gear or out of gear." It doesn't even have a starter. At the track, four-wheelers with padded bumpers push-start each Sprint car into position.

Marty unscrews the fuel cap. "Take a little whiff of this," he chuckles. The aqua blue methanol fumes are, well...staggering. "It's pretty potent stuff" he smiles. "You don't get a lot of mileage out of it." Marty screws the cap back on. "It takes it a long time to get it to 180 degrees, the car burns so cool." He pauses a beat. "If this thing caught on fire, you can't see it."

Marty stands behind the contraption pointing to the wider and taller right rear tire. "If you took this car off the trailer right now and you started pushing, it will automatically start going to the left," he explains. "If you take the steering wheel and turn it to the right, and it doesn't take much, it's almost like putting the brakes on." Ah yes, brakes. We didn't mention that. There are indeed brakes on the oddity...on three of the four wheels... the left front mostly. "The car doesn't want to go right, it wants to go left," repeats Marty.

This is a good thing because these cars are raced counterclockwise (that's going left isn't it?) at speeds approaching 90 miles per hour on 3/8-mile dirt ovals from Waynesboro to Fayetteville. "You're looking at 400 and some horsepower in a 1,650-pound car with the driver," says Marty, pausing to let this nugget of information sink in. "The power-to-weight ratio is huge."

Just about then, "the crazy guy that drives this thing," Brian Lawson pulls up. With a winning smile he explains how you drive the oddity. "We don't slow down a whole lot in the corners," he explains. "I blink my eye, I'll be at the other end of the straightaway." At the corner, he'll "set the car up," by tapping the brake until the back end starts to slide to the right. Then he'll turn the steering wheel to the right to keep it from sliding too much. "You gotta turn right to go left," says



Above, Betty Madison gives driver Brian Lawson some words of encouragement before a practice run.



At left, back in the pit area, Brian Lawson's brother, Greg Lawson (left) and Marty Madison refuel the Sprint car with cool burning methanol.

Photos by Phil Audibert

Brian enigmatically. "As soon as I hit that brake, I mash on the gas pedal." And away he goes, head pinned back against the seat from the acceleration. One eye blink later, he's at the other end of the oval, setting up for the next corner.

This is a good team. Brian drives; Marty tinkers. "There's a lot of little adjustments you can do to this car...if you do something to the left front wheel it changes the affect back here on the right," says Marty of what's called "staggering" the car. "I'm big into drag racing and he's into dirt trackin'. We got to talkin' about Sprint cars. One thing led to another and I bought this." He pats the oddity affectionately.

It was about a year and a half ago that Marty bought an aging used rolling chassis and set to work. "I had never fooled with one, and I've liked mechanics pretty much all my life and he had never driven one," he points to Brian. "And we went into it as a hobby...went in to have fun and to get rid of the every day pressures of driving a tractor trailer and blow off a little steam on Saturdays."

Fast forward now to Eastside Speedway in Waynesboro on a recent sweltering Saturday evening.

One of the first things you notice is the good natured camaraderie among the assembled Sprint car teams. "If a guy hit me and knocked my front wheel off, he'd be right there getting it together helping me before I go out again," says Brian. "They'll say, 'hey I'm sorry this happened. You need some help?' " He thinks about that and adds, "We're not going to go out there and beat and bang on each other. If you are, you can't race."

Brian is dressed in a stifling three-layer Nomex one-piece driver's suit with an additional layer of fire-retardant long underwear, head sock, driver's gloves, helmet and Head and Neck Support (HANS) device. His crew, consisting of his brother Greg, friend and confidant, Kevin Gallihugh, and, of course, Marty and Betty Madison, flutter about him, snugging harnesses, giving him advice. MadLaw's main sponsor is TaKaBet Trucking, Marty's tractor trailer company. But there are others "who are really hooked." Take Brian's Mom and Dad, Peggy and Bill Lawson, for example. They will be partners in next year's new car that is currently sitting in pieces in Marty's garage.

The race is about to begin. Brian seems cool as a cucumber but admits, "I can feel my heart really going before a race, but as soon as they push me and I get out on the track and get lined up you just forget about it all and focus."

Lined up in twos, all 20 or so Sprint cars crawl around the track waiting for the green start flag. Brian is well-placed today, sitting in the second row. The green flag goes down, and in Brian's words, "When you mash on the gas, it's gone...right now."

With a deafening roar they fly down the straight, set the cars up, and slide sideways through the corner. Brian has taken the lead right from the get-go and holds onto it for most of the race. He sums up his driving strategy: "Either spin out, turn over, or it works."

The turn over part is a little disconcerting, but flips in the 305 series are rare. If it does happen it's usually because the back end slides uncharacteristically to the left. The car "stumbles" over its smaller left rear wheel and flips. Brian is protected by a cage and is so tightly cinched in, he finds breathing difficult. He even has restraints to keep his arms from flailing outside the cockpit. He also has a Halon fire extinguisher on board. All he has to do is pull the pin and, according to Marty "It'll put that fire out—like now."

Here's another little known fact about the oddity; it has no rear view mirror. As he is being pursued around the track, "I have no idea where a car is. I can hear it, but I don't know where it is." And wearing ear plugs, a head sock, and a helmet, "I can't hear a whole lot." When it comes time to pass someone, "You're either sideways above 'em or sideways underneath 'em."

Now, here's a shocker. Until the middle of last season when they started all this, Brian had never raced a car...hadn't even attended a driver's education event! "I've never raced before in my life," he says with an embarrassed shrug. It should also be noted here that Marty has never driven the car either and doesn't intend to. "I'm getting old," he says. "My reflexes aren't as good. I just like the sound of power and watching it run and just seeing it perform. I like that."

Marty doesn't meddle with Brian's driving strategy. "He's driving it. I don't tell him how to do it; I don't tell him what to do. He leaves it up to me to get it to where it will work for him and I leave it up to him to make work what I've done." And although he works on it during the week, once at the track, Marty prefers to leave the car alone other than to make minor tire pressure adjustments. "It's 80 percent driver and 20 percent car," he says matter-of-factly.

He recalls their first season, last summer, with a laugh. "When we went into it, he thought he was just tearing it up," Marty smiles and points at Brian. "He thought he was setting the world on fire and I couldn't tell him no different." It's a different story this year. "He went out the first time in practice and he got on it like we'd never seen him get on it," says Marty, awestruck. "After that I told him 'last year all you were doing was drivin' a cab.'" Marty pauses and adds, "We ain't out-runnin' 'em yet, but we're out there runnin' with 'em." Maybe they need to revise that statement; just recently, Brian won the heat and feature race at County Line, North Carolina. "It was wild," says Marty, relishing the moment.

In this feature race at Eastside, Brian holds the lead almost to the very end. He is overtaken by the father of the sport, the legendary French Grimes of Madison County. Still the MadLaw team is happy. Why? Because they rolled the 01 car back onto the trailer in the same shape as it was when they rolled it off at the beginning of the evening... no crumpled fenders to bang out, no wheels to replace, and most importantly, no angry words exchanged and no fisticuffs.

"You know what feels good is when you come back in and you know, just 'cause you passed somebody or maybe just tapped them, there ain't gonna be no fightin'," says a relieved Brian. "There was, then you can't race with French Grimes. He'll throw you out. "It's a neat set up, it really is," says Marty as a cluster of fellow Sprint car drivers drop by the MadLaw trailer to exchange greetings and congratulate Brian for running such a fast clean race.

At right, born and raised in Orange County, Marty Madison, 46, has tinkered with cars all his life. But it's only been over the past year and a half that he has become seriously involved with Sprint cars.

Bottom photo, Madison (foreground, right) and Brian Lawson drive grain trucks, mostly for Perdue, during the week. They are often on the road by 1 a.m. hauling local grain to Chesapeake, Harrisonburg and Pennsylvania.

Photos by Phil Audibert



## TaKaBet Trucking... MadLaw Racing

Marty Madison has some bodacious tats. There's one on his right arm of a comely lass clad in black stockings and nothing else. She flaunts four aces and a deuce. The deuce is on her cheek, and we're not talking about the cheek on her face. She is something of a mascot for Marty's trucking company, called TaKaBet Trucking Inc.

So what's with the poker theme anyway? Actually, it's got nothing to do with gambling. Marty took the first syllable of the names of the three women

most important to him: daughters Tara and Katrina and wife Betty, and combined them...TaKaBet. And that's how he and Brian formed MadLaw Racing. It's got nothing to do with anger and the legal system; it's just the first syllables of their last names combined.

Marty and Brian were born and raised within a couple of miles of each other in extreme western Orange County. Both went to OCHS. Brian played for the ill-fated football team that lost that heart-breaker state championship game in the snow to a bunch of illegal-cleat-wearing thugs in Richlands in 1993.

Ask Marty if he's any kin to Orange County's most famous Madison and he laughs, "Some distant, distant,

distant, distant, yeah you know, way, way back...not that I could go over there and spend the weekend or anything."

Marty and Brian are together all the time, not just on the weekends at the track, but also during the week. They both drive huge grain trucks, mostly for Perdue. Typically, they will load up at a local farm in the evening, catch a few hours rest, and leave at 1 a.m. to wait in line with 100 other trucks at a plant in Chesapeake to unload. Then, they'll reload and haul to

Harrisonburg, come home, load the hoppers at the local farms one more time and repeat the whole process. Brian is usually home and in bed by 6:30 p.m.—plenty of dream time about sliding a Sprint car around a dirt track.

Brian remembers one time they decided to drive home from Charlotte after a race.

"We didn't get out of the parking lot before I was asleep." He smiles at the memory of it. "When you've done good, then you feel good," he adds with a big smile.

Marty nods in agreement. "I know he has a ball driving it and I have a lot of fun working on it."

MadLaw Racing...you can take a bet on that.

