



NEW YORK TIMES

September 17, 2010

Danger and Excitement Intersect at Figure Eight Racing

By [JOHN BRANCH](#)

INDIANAPOLIS — Figure-eight car racing is like driving full speed through an endless loop of red lights. Luck often expires in a cloudburst of steam and scattered auto parts.

Danger is the timeless allure. Cars snake around two circles, clockwise around one and counterclockwise around the other, crossing paths twice every lap in a lawless intersection called the crossover.

The people who do this, who tenderly build racecars that cost up to \$50,000 and then drive them repeatedly into crossing traffic, know that they are wired differently.

“Common sense says you don’t take two cars and run them at each other at 70, 80 miles per hour,” said Leonard Basham, the 1988 world champion with a central-casting name.

Jack Dossey Jr. may be the best ever at weaving through the chaos. And he could have won his seventh career World Figure 8 Championship at the Indianapolis Speedrome had he made it through the crossover for the 715th time on a recent Saturday night.

He did not. Dossey smashed into the side of New York’s Roger Maynor, and his crumpled car was towed to the off-track pit area. Dossey, a tightly built, tightly wound 47-year-old whose internal thermostat seems set on simmer, marched into his racecar trailer and grabbed a dry-erase board. A dozen or so crew members in matching uniforms stayed quiet and out of the way.

“A GIFT FROM NEW YORK. THANKS,” Dossey scribbled. He propped the message atop his car’s carcass.

Maynor was still inside his mangled machine when the tow truck dropped it next to Dossey’s. The right rear panel was obliterated and the hood was shaped like a pup tent.

“Of all the people, it had to be him,” said Maynor, a 52-year-old bear of a man with a round, gentle face. His red coveralls were split in the seat, and the knees were worn almost through.

He stepped into his brightly lighted trailer, a garage on wheels. On the wall was a picture of his father, Ernie the Wrench Maynor. Father and son were racing side by side at Islip (N.Y.) Speedway in 1982 when they split around a car in the crossover.



Ernie Maynor clipped the car, lost control, hit the wall and was killed. Roger Maynor, a mechanic like his father, went on to become the most accomplished driver at Long Island's [Riverhead Raceway](#), a regional master of the figure eight.

“My father wasn't a quitter, and he would have been disappointed if I quit,” Maynor said. “My mother wasn't crazy about it. Even when I told her I was coming here, she started crying. She gets nervous.”

Fate is left to the whims of reflexes, fear and physics. A figure-eight race is a series of wince-inducing near misses interrupted by jarring collisions.

Even the tow trucks, ambulances and pace cars that frequently take to the track to restore order sometimes seem at risk of a broadside.

In the past 12 years, at least three drivers (not including one racing in a school bus) have died in figure-eight crashes in the United States. But there is no governing body for the sport, and it is difficult to surmise how the fatality rate compares with other events. Danger is mitigated somewhat by lower speeds than other forms of racing, yet insurance for tracks that feature the event is typically higher than for those that do not.

“It's definitely one of the most dangerous types of motor sports there is,” said Craig Clarke, whose Florida-based company, [Track Rescue](#), oversees safety for racetracks and movie stunts. “You're crossing the course with itself, and the potential for direct driver impact is imminent.”

According to Tim Frost, the publisher of the National Speedway Directory, about 60 of the estimated 1,000 oval racetracks in the country — three-quarters of which are not paved — run figure-eight races each year.

Nowhere are they treated with such reverence and panache as at [Indianapolis Speedrome](#), a small track across town from the far larger, more famous Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The Speedrome opened in 1941 and began holding figure-eight races a few years later on its fifth-of-a-mile oval.

Since 1977, it has held the world championship, a three-hour race of attrition. The car that completes the most laps wins. This year, the winner received \$20,035 — a huge sum in small-track racing. Most race at their local tracks for \$1,000 or less.

“For figure-eight racers, this is our Daytona 500, Indy 500, everything else, rolled into one,” said Gordon Brown, a longtime driver and car owner from Florida.

Most cars in the race were custom built around a high-powered engine (650 horsepower or more), a nimble chassis (center balanced for turns in both directions) and a sturdy roll cage (inspected, along with other required safety features, by Dennis Love, the chief steward for the Speedrome and the Indy Racing League.)



Maynor brought his trusty No. 28 (his father drove No. 82), a hefty, old-style stock car with 3,250 pounds of mass around a 550-horsepower engine.

“He brought a knife to a gun fight,” Dossey said.

Still, during qualifications the day before the race, Maynor muscled his car through most competitors. But the drive shaft was damaged along the way. Maynor had another in the trailer, but did not have welding equipment powerful enough to make trustworthy repairs.

Dossey came to the rescue. He offered the overnight use of his nearby garage and equipment, and Maynor and his five-man crew rebuilt the guts of the car through the wee hours. By morning, Maynor was at the track wearing a weary smile. He was effusive in his gratitude and reminded his crew to buy beer to repay Dossey.

As darkness fell on a Saturday night, 32 cars, lined in pairs, filled one half of the figure eight to start the race. By the second lap, cars crisscrossed through the intersection.

Once safely through, it takes less than 10 seconds to reach the intersection again. The action is relentless.

“It’s like you’re in a swarm of bees,” the driver Jimmy Kirby said.

Halfway around each loop, drivers look over their shoulder across the track to gauge which cars they will meet in the crossover. It is a high-speed game of chicken. Drivers have “a millionth of a second,” Basham said, to decide whether to go in front or behind the other car, and trust that the other driver is thinking the same way.

There are clues. Drivers establish reputations for timidity or temerity. Nose up means the car is accelerating; nose down means the driver is hesitating.

Cars sometimes arrive in packs and seem to magically alternate like shuffling cards. Sometimes, a driver sees no opening and stops, creating a chain reaction of swerves and slammed brakes.

“Sometimes, you tense all up — Woo! I don’t know how I did that,” said Ben Tunny, the 2009 winner. “You don’t know really how it’s going to work when you get there, but somehow, it does.”

Not always. After a series of mechanical problems from two early-race bumps, Maynor was running steady toward a respectable midpack showing.

Dossey, whose pink No. 20 and fearless driving stand out amid the swirling confusion, was looking to win again. He pitted for fuel and tires with 25 minutes left. He returned in third place, slipped into second and headed toward first.



Bam.

Steam blew from Dossey's ruptured radiator. The collision spun Maynor 360 degrees, but he kept going. His race ended minutes later in a six-car pileup.

On pit row, Maynor saw the handwritten sign on Dossey's car. The difference between finishing first (as R. J. Norton of Indianapolis did, with 397 laps) and finishing seventh (as Dossey did, with 357), was \$19,006. Dossey said Maynor's hesitation through the crossover cost him.

"Roger couldn't make up his mind," Dossey said, still seething, "so I made it up for him."

Several fans thanked Maynor for coming and told him not to worry about the accident. Dossey hit you, they pointed out, not the other way around. It happens.

"I feel terrible," said Maynor, who was 21st, with 171 laps. "The guy helped us. Out of all the people — if it wasn't for him, we wouldn't be here."

Long after midnight, Maynor stood in his trailer, waiting for his check for \$1,015 — or \$14 less than Dossey earned. He would like to come back to the world championship, he said, but in a lighter, quicker car. Maybe he could find one to overhaul for next year.

In the meantime, No. 28 needed a lot of repairs, and home was 14 hours away. Maynor said he planned to race the next weekend back home on Long Island. The photograph of his smiling father hung over his shoulder.