



## **MOTOR SPORTS**

By Michael J. Marrer

# **Heat wave burning out dirt tracks**

This summer saw a weather pattern emerge that was unusual for the Binghamton area, but became the norm as the weeks wore on.

Each day the thermometer would go past the 90-degree mark in the morning hours, and would hover there until sundown.

At local auto race tracks, the teams would be perspiring profusely as they labored in the sweltering heat to set up their vehicles for the evening's events.

At the same time, promoters Jim Randall and Seward Rice were surveying the scene and were also sweating—although the temperatures were not the reason for their discomfort.

Both were wondering if the clay surfaces of their facilities would hold up through another race card after yet another bone-dry week.

Preparing a dirt track is difficult enough in even the best of times, and this year's drought has wreaked havoc with their weekly preparation.

Despite its name, a dirt track depends on water for its existence.

Both promoters have managed to keep their tracks fairly racea-

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# Dirt-tracks need water, too —

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ble, but it hasn't been easy on either of them.

Many people think that there's nothing more to maintaining a dirt track than just watering it a few hours before race time. The work actually begins on Monday morning when the track is smoothed with a grader, then the watering process begins.

"The main thing you want to do is get moisture back into the ground," Randall said. "That's what has hurt us this year. You just can't believe how much water comes down in a rain storm. To duplicate that with a water truck, you're talking load after load."

Seward Rice, promoter of Penn Can Speedway in Susquehanna, Pa., keeps his water truck running every night.

"We start Monday night wetting down," Rice said. "We totally saturate the track starting Tuesday night and every night — especially Thursday night — until it is running right off the track. Then on Friday we just try to maintain the dampness."

When Mother Nature doesn't do what you want, she can sometimes be prodded with the help of chemicals.

"Right now we're using what they call a 'Formula-L,' which is supposed to be a super dust grip," Rice said.

A dust grip is a chemical that acts like a detergent and helps break down the dirt.

"Consequently, the water will soak into the track better," Rice said. "A lot of tracks use just plain soap; in fact some tracks use powdered soap."

When a rain storm happens to occur on a race night, it causes more grief than just lost admissions. The whole week of track preparation has literally gone down the drain.

"That's the sad part," Randall said. "A lot of people figure that (the track is still ready) because you didn't run that week. But you take a lot of tow vehicles and trucks coming and going across the track, and they put ruts in it."

Surprisingly, as the high powered stock cars tear away at the track surface during a race evening, the clay they uncover is not damp.

"No, just the opposite," Rice said. "The moisture leaves down into the ground as well as coming up out. The more they get down in there, the drier it gets. That's why your race gets dustier as the evening progresses."

Bringing the water truck out between races to soak the track is one thing you don't want to do, as Rice once found out the hard way.

"We have a very fine clay and when you get any water on it at all, it makes it slippery," Rice said. "It's like grease— you can hardly stand up on it let alone drive on it."

"One time for an experiment we put water on before the modified feature. As the cars pulled out of the pits they slid all the way across the track. It took almost a half hour to work the track back into raceable conditions."

The lack of moisture has Rice concerned. His normal sources of water — the spring-fed ponds on the track property — are drying up, and he doesn't have other alternatives.

"Everybody says go to the river, but the river here is about 30 to 40 feet high to any road, and our pumps won't lift that high," Rice said.

Randall admits he has had a hard time figuring out this summer's weather patterns. As dry as it has been, Five Mile Point has already suffered through seven full or partial rainouts.

Marrer is a free-lance writer whose motor sports column appears on Fridays in the *Press & Sun-Bulletin*.