

Many New Englanders have never heard of Joey Becker. This is sort of the way he likes it. "I don't like to publicize myself" he says. "When you start putting yourself in the media, people think you are bragging."

Sorry, Joey, this article isn't going to help.

Joey Becker is what many refer to as a "throwback racer." It is no coincidence that Joey's favorite driver is Dale Earnhardt Sr., as both drivers have that working-man's drive. Despite a car owner who can buy him any kind of racing shoe he wants, Joey still wears workboots at the shop, at the track and in the racecar. Despite all of the technology that is in that racecar, you'll also find a piece of weathered plywood directly under his pedals. "I like the feel of it under my boots" he says.

On a Thursday night this past January, the thermometer says it is -18 degrees. Joey Becker has been at the race shop (30 miles one way from his home) since around 7pm, after getting out of his full-time job and stopping for supper and other errands on the way to the shop. He and crew chief Brendan Pease will leave sometime before midnight. They meet at the shop several days a week whether it is racing season or not.

There is no part of the car that Joey Becker does not work on. A fabricator by trade, he has learned to work on building and repairing his racecar as much as he works on driving the machine. "Sometimes" he says "actually getting to drive the thing is more relaxing than trying to work on it in the pits and at the shop."

Joey Becker first strapped into a racecar in the Street Stocks at Thunder Road in 1993 and won 2 races his rookie year. The next year he won 3 more races and finished 2nd in points. From there he moved to Flying Tigers and over the next 7 years won 11 Tiger features and finished 2nd in points 7 times between Thunder Road, Airborne, NY and the ACT Flying Tiger Tour. He developed a reputation as a hard but fair racer (earning the nickname "Berzerko") and wasn't really looking to do much more than finally win a Flying Tiger championship.

Early in the 2003 race season, however, driver Dave Wilcox abruptly left the #16 late model team. Car owner Rick Green was caught off guard. "When Dave left the team I had about 20 drivers that called and asked if they could be considered as my

next driver” Rick says. “I called Tom Curley and told him I was looking for someone that had the talent and desire to be in a late model but would never be able to make it happen financially. Joey’s name came up. When I went to talk to Joey he was a little shocked that he was being asked but said he would like to try it. He has been our driver ever since.”

Joey remembers what it was like at first. “When I came on board, Rick’s first driver had left and we had no idea how to do anything with a late model.” he says. “Dave had done most of the mechanical stuff on the car and we were lost at first. I was running both a Tiger and a late model on the same race nights and they were very different—hard to get used to.”

But “get used to” it he did, grabbing a 2nd place in his very first late model feature at Airborne Speedway and 10th a few days later at Thunder Road. Joey finished out the year running both Tigers and late models and then switching to just the late model in 2004.

The start of the 2004 season also brought the start of Joey’s late model wins, with a first place in the prestigious ACT Memorial Day Classic 100 at Thunder Road. An ambitious schedule of full ACT, Thunder Road and Airborne competition followed, with another win at Thunder Road in 2005 being the highlight. However, there were lowlights like lots of torn-up cars and a very weary driver and team. “It was really hectic” says car owner Rick Green. “Too much to do, not enough time to do it and not enough help. The team got really tired.”

In 2006 the focus changed back to the full Thunder Road schedule and limited runs with the ACT Tour. Joey and his team began to solidify themselves as serious contenders. There were no wins, but at season’s end the team finished 5th in points at Thunder Road with 10 top-10 finishes out of 14 races. The season was not without heartache, though, as a brand new race car was destroyed in an ACT race at St. Croix during the car’s 2nd ever race. The front clip of that car now hangs on the wall of the race shop as a reminder of what the team has been through together.

2007 saw a win in the Casella Waste management 50 at Thunder Road and a 3rd place in season-long points with 8 top 10 finishes in 14 races. Says Gene Gagne, photographer and operator of OutsideGroove.com, “Without any real fanfare, Joe hung out in the top five all year. He had to start near the rear more often than not,

but he and the Rick Green team just did what they did all season - - they worked hard, kept plugging and kept passing cars. If not for a couple of wrecks that were not of his doing, he might have won the title.”

Joey himself says of the 2007 season “We won the season opener but struggled in mid season. Just when things were turning around we got caught in a wreck and had our only DNF but still finished 3rd in points.”

Although it took some time to get to this point, many in the offseason were picking Joey to finally win the Thunder Road championship in 2008. The team, too, spent the offseason riding a wave of confidence and finally feeling like they had figured things out with the car, their driver and their approach to racing. The addition of veteran car chief Neal Woodard to the team means, according to Joey, that they will finally have someone on board who “knows more about setups than we do.”

Located just 10 miles south of the Canadian border, the Rick Green race shop is not on a popular route for racers. Joey says “We could do a lot better with more help, but people don’t want to travel to the shop. On the other hand, that also keeps out the spies and people who are there just to hang out and do nothing.”

Joey is quick to point out that the team’s success is based on the team, not just the driver. He credits his car owner, his teammates (including his Dad, Richard) and Dave Smith from Race Basics with being part of a group that makes the racing program both more fun and more successful.

Many think that Joey’s driving style has matured since he started strapping himself into a late model. “I’m not sure I have a style” he says. “For the most part I’m a respectable driver but if you rough me up you can expect to get it back. I think I’m pretty good at car control but controlling my temper I’m not as good at.”

Friend and fellow race Rich Watson says of Joey “It’s funny they call him “Berzerko”, because his driving has changed so much from the Street Stock and Tiger days. I believe there is still some of that [Berzerko] in him, but Rick does a great job keeping him calm on the track. I think at some point a little of the Berzerko aggressiveness is going to mix with the late model driver and he’s going to be unbeatable. Rick has given him great equipment and the boys do a great job as a team. I think a championship is just around the corner.”

“We don’t play points games.” Joey says. “We race every race to win. Rick is patient with us, and we usually need that. For all he has put into this effort for us, Rick deserves wins and championships.”

“If I could give Joey anything” Rick Green says “I would give him more confidence on the track. He really is a lot better driver then he gives himself credit for. I love it when Joey takes a 10th place car and drives it to a 5th place finish. Sometimes when Joey has a bad finish or a wreck he and the team feel like they let me down. I have never felt let down by Joey. He always gives 110% on and off the track. When he puts the car in between two other cars on the track, when I know it won't fit there, or he drives around someone on the outside and almost scrapes the wall at Thunder Road, all I say on the radio is “Joey, you the man.”

Note:

Joey suggested the title “Vanishing Breed” for this piece. He asked how we came up with a title for articles and I told him I left that up to you. He said they did an article on his Dad once called that and he liked it. Not sure if it works for this piece, but I told him I would pass on the suggestion.