

At 6 feet 5 inches tall, it is easier to believe that Matt Kobyluck is a giant rather than a giant-slayer. In 2008, though, he played the part of David versus the Goliaths that are the well-financed and Cup-backed Camping World East Series teams.

The climb to the top of the CWES heap started with relatively humble beginnings. Matt Kobyluck's driving career began in a Late Model at Waterford Speedbowl in Connecticut. Success in that division led to success in a modified and finally on to a Pro Stock at Stafford, CT.

It was a fateful night in a Pro Stock at Stafford, however, that threatened not only his racing, but his life.

Racing for second place on the last lap of a feature early in the 1998 season, Kobyluck was turned around by another competitor. "When we got in turn three he dove in way too deep and hit me in the left rear," Kobyluck remembers. "I went way up the track and came very close to hitting the wall, but I kept it off and I was able to recover. As I came around to turn four, I came down the racetrack and he hit me again. The car turned right around and, unfortunately, I didn't miss the wall that time. The car went right into the wall on the driver's side."

Kobyluck spent the next six hours unconscious. First taken to a local hospital by ambulance, it was eventually determined that his injuries warranted his being airlifted to a bigger hospital in Hartford, CT. During the helicopter ride, Kobyluck stopped breathing.

"My lung was punctured and I was drowning in my own fluid," Kobyluck explained. "I remembered hitting the wall, and although I don't remember much until I woke up in the emergency room, I do remember bits and pieces from things that transpired in that six hours."

Kobyluck injuries included a punctured lung, broken collarbone, broken ribs and a knee injury. He also chipped every tooth in his mouth. Kobyluck spent two weeks in the hospital and three months in physical therapy.

His injuries, though, could have been worse. "I had the best safety equipment available" he says. "I had head restraints, rib restraints and I had a brand new helmet. I felt I was behind the wheel of a race car that was the safest it could be." Indeed, without quality safety equipment Kobyluck could have ended up dead or at least permanently disabled.

Kobyluck's return to racing that August was also his first time in a Busch North car. And at Loudon, no less. Going Busch North racing was a plan sketched out before the accident and now seemed a bit unwise. Kobyluck, however, was confident in his abilities. "Everybody thought I was kind of crazy to get back behind the wheel like I did," says Kobyluck. "Having been through that [wreck], I think it made me a smarter driver."

With backing from Mohegan Sun Casino, Kobyluck started 25<sup>th</sup> and finished 33<sup>rd</sup> in that first start. It wasn't a great outing, but it was enough to convince all involved to go full-time with the series starting in 1999. Despite decent runs, it wasn't until Kobyluck's 47<sup>th</sup> series start that he earned a top 5. His first win would come in race start number 51.

A battle for the 2002 championship left Kobyluck nine points shy of eventual champion Andy Santerre. Wins, including the Toyota All-Star Showdown in 2006, were combined with top 10 and top 5 points finishes in the years since. A championship, however, eluded the popular driver.

2008, though, proved a different story. A 23rd place finish at the Greenville-Pickens opener was not impressive, but it laid the groundwork for a championship year. “The reason things changed in 2008 was because of Matt’s patience” says spotter Scott Tipley.

By season’s end the team had four wins, nine top-fives, and 12 top-10 finishes in 13 starts. “We certainly had our challenges this year, but we were always competitive,” said Kobyluck. “As many low points as we had during the season, my team stepped up to the challenge. The high points made up for them threefold. We got to victory lane at Watkins Glen, Lime Rock, Adirondack, and Nashville - and we finally got out of New Hampshire without a scratch on the car. For these guys to go out there and do what they did - be leaders among teams that have many more resources - says a lot.”

“This has been a dream season for us and one that has been a long time coming” Kobyluck told the crowd at his Championship Banquet. “I always thought that winning races was the best feeling in the world. I was wrong. Winning a championship rates way above that because this is forever. “It’s in the history books. It’s really good!”

The championship also had cultural significance. A member of the Mohegan Native American Tribe, Kobyluck was the first Native American to win a NASCAR Series Championship. Besides being Kobyluck’s longtime sponsor, the Mohegan Sun Casino hosted the Championship Banquet. Mohegan Tribal Chairman Bruce “Two Dogs” Bozsum explained to the crowd about “the tribe’s core value of giving back to our communities.” “It’s always good when Native sons rise and achieve such honor” said Bozsum. He then concluded his speech, in Mohegan tradition, by singing The Honor Song.

Besides receiving the CWES Championship, the 40 team was also given the CWES Sportsmanship Award. The award was an unexpected honor for a group that Kobyluck describes as “giving an individual commitment to a group effort.” “This NASCAR Camping World East Series Championship is an incredible achievement and couldn’t have been accomplished without a group of very talented people,” said crew chief, Perry Waite. “I am very honored knowing the level of competition that our team was up against this past season. There was a lot of great racing and camaraderie.”

In January the # 40 team loaded up their cars and headed west to the NASCAR Toyota All-Star Showdown in California, as they had for each of the event’s five previous runnings. A blown tire in practice forced the team to a backup car. It appeared that their chances of winning a second Showdown had evaporated.

Kobyluck started 23<sup>rd</sup> and, just as he had done in the regular season, stayed out of trouble on the way to the front. On the last lap, Kobyluck was in third when leader Peyton Sellers and challenger Joey Logano crashed. “I saw it coming,” Kobyluck said afterward. “We were running three-wide for like three laps. It was absolutely crazy. I laid up a little, got on the brakes and cut

to the bottom so that I could miss it all. The writing was on the wall. I've been here and doing this enough to know what the outcome was going to be one way or the other. I just didn't want to get caught up in it. I drove to the bottom to get under them (Logano and Sellers)."

Logano went on to cross under the checkers first, but was shuffled to last in the final rundown after being penalized for rough driving with Sellers. Kobyluck was given the win.

"It comes down to the last lap every year" said Kobyluck. "[The win] did not happen by accident, though. My guys worked hard all week. We unloaded our backup car, never turned a lap on it and went out and won the thing!"

Despite sweeping changes in the series over the last several years, Kobyluck and his team are doing things more or less the same as they did starting over a decade ago. In a series that has become dominated by Cup-affiliated teams, Matt Kobyluck is one of the very few who still maintains independence. "Our sponsorship is less than 1 million per year" says crewmember Scott Tapley. "We have four full-time employees and four volunteers. Our newest car was built in 1996. Our engines run the entire year without being refreshed. Our bodies are done in New Hampshire with no wind tunnel or any other help." Rather than seeing all this as a disadvantage, Tapley adds "we just dig in deeper and get the job done."

Through the end of the 2008 season, Kobyluck had 157 career starts that earned 16 wins, 55 top-5's and 83 top-10's. He is also the only driver in series history to have won at least one race on a short track, a super speedway *and* a road course in addition to a series championship and the All-Star Showdown (twice).

At 39 years of age, with a wife and three kids and a successful family-owned construction business as well, Kobyluck is not looking to do any more in racing than what he does now. 2009 will bring more of the same recipe that has gotten the team this far in racing.

Looking back at 2008, "We accomplished the impossible!" Kobyluck says. Indeed, even "the little guy" gets a break every now and then.