

It is 8 a.m. on Milk Bowl Sunday, 2008. Race cars will not hit the track for another three hours, but there are already team members and drivers waiting to get in the pit gate. There are smiles and quiet joking, but there is a general tension in the air. Today is the biggest race of the year at Thunder Road. Team members are looking at each other, wondering who will end their day in victory lane and who will see their racecar leave on the hook of a wrecker. Everyone still has a chance at this point to be the winner of the track's most prestigious race. At the end of the day, one driver will be an ACT champion and another will be the Milk Bowl winner.

The weather forecast for this weekend has not been good. Many other tracks cancelled their events on Friday, but Tom Curley gambled and so far is beating the weather gods. Despite dark clouds all day, all of Saturday's events managed to be run. Fingers are crossed that today's activities will also make it into the history books.

A heavy fog has descended on the track overnight. The fog is so thick that it is difficult to see the racing surface that is only a couple of hundred feet away. It is hard to believe that cars will be on the track at any point today, but it will be a long day and many unbelievable things will happen. Everyone has faith that the fog will lift and the sun will eventually shine.

After entering the pit gate, I walk directly to the track surface. The fog is so low that I can only see half the track. Turn one disappears into the fog and the start/finish line emerges from the fog. When I look up in the stands, there are already fans claiming their spots. I wonder if race fans are as rabid at other tracks as they are at Thunder Road.

The team haulers have remained at the track overnight. Team members are now standing by the closed doors at the rear of their haulers. Each team seems to want to roll their car out but each is waiting for someone else to be the first to do so. I am reminded that teams are always trying to out-strategize each other every moment they are at the track. Finally, one team starts to unload their car. Other teams quickly follow and the race day begins.

The pits come alive with teams preparing for their day. Each team member knows what to do. Some are performing set-ups on the cars, some are checking their pit boxes and others are heading to get their tires. Teams have been through their race day activities often enough that no one needs to be told what to do. I am amazed at the logistics involved in preparing the cars to race.

Track workers are equally busy, making sure that there is enough food and condiments for the fans. I walk by a rack of uncooked Al's French Frys [the spelling used in their advertising] that stands taller than I do. Those fries will be enough for one of the three food stands on the grounds. Restrooms are stocked with toilet paper and soap to accommodate the thousands of fans who will use them today.

The big story of the weekend is that New Hampshire Motor Speedway has loaned their jet dryer to the track. Such a luxury has never been seen at the track before. While it is not raining now, the heavy fog has left the track extremely damp. The jet dryer will circle the track slowly for the next two hours. Crew members step to the edge of the track to watch the dryer on the track. The presence of this high-cost device emphasizes how important this race is.

At 11 a.m. cars finally take to the track for some practice time. Practice at Thunder Road is a flurry of cars entering onto and exiting from the track, along with teams taking car measurements and making adjustments on pit road. Today's practice is especially tense. A last chance "B" Feature will be the day's first event at 1 p.m. Those who do not qualify through that race are done for the weekend. Teams know it will most likely be a crashfest but they are willing to take the chance just to make it into this year's Milk Bowl.

After two hours of practice, the "B" Feature hits the track. Every racer, no matter how far back they are running, thinks they have a shot of making it to the front of this race and into the Milk Bowl. Despite the fact that each car has a less than 5% chance of transferring to the main event, they race anyway. As the checkers fall, many race teams find their season now over without being in the last feature of the year. It will be a long winter for those who did not make it farther than this last chance race.

As the skies now darken, it is time for the pre-race ceremony. One of the things that is so special about Thunder Road is its adherence to tradition. The opening ceremony of the Milk Bowl brings out the event's previous winners along with the racers and cars in this year's event. Time is given to interview each previous winner. A drum and bagpipe band performs along with a military color guard complete with flags and gun maneuvers. It is the same ceremony every year and there is comfort in the allegiance to the familiar.

The last portion of the ceremony is the cars parading around the track and down the frontstretch that is lined with crew members and their team battle flags. It is a poetic sight to see the competing teams and drivers, at least for the moment, appearing in unison.

A light rain begins to fall and does not stop. The late model cars are replaced on the track by the jet dryer and support division cars trying to dry the track. Up in the stands, very few people have headed for dry shelter. Instead, they sit under their umbrellas and wait for the rain to stop. People do not leave Thunder Road until the race is over or officially cancelled.

Dryness does eventually return to the track and the late models get their green flag. The rain will sprinkle the track several more times throughout the day but Tom Curley will soldier on and get in all of the day's scheduled races. It is the Thunder Road way not to give up if there is any chance of getting the show in.

Throughout the first 50-lap segment of the Milk Bowl, all eyes are on ACT points-contenders Scott Payea and Patrick Laperle. The drivers entered the event separated by a handful of points. Payea must stay in front of Laperle or at least allow him to be only a few positions ahead. Segment one ends with Laperle taking the checkers and Payea finishing seventh.

Today is also the final points race for Thunder Road's Street Stock and Tiger Sportsman divisions. The Street Stock title was up for grabs the entire length of the race, with three drivers swapping the point lead during the race as they gained and lost positions. Jason Corliss, who was not the point leader when the race began, is the title winner by one point over Lloyd Blakely. Blakely has been a points-contender

in several seasons but has never grabbed the champion's trophy. He will try again next year for the prize that has eluded him.

One of the biggest surprises of the Milk Bowl has been that Brad Leighton, who won the previous race at Thunder Road, has crashed repeatedly. For all the good luck he had earlier in the month, it has been nothing but bad luck in this race. Still, he soldiers on even though he finishes in the next-to-last position in the overall standings. Winners one week at Thunder Road are used to struggling to even qualify the next week. That is how tough the track and competition is.

Throughout the second and third Milk bowl segments Payea and Laperle work their way through traffic trying to win not only this race but also the championship. Laperle has been warned from the flagstand and over the radio that some of his moves are overly aggressive. On more than one occasion his car has been sideways on the racetrack and his bumper has made contact with other competitors. He reels in his impatience and keeps racing.

It is in the third segment that fate falls unkindly on Scott Payea. He becomes involved in a wreck, not of his doing, that leaves his car damaged. As the third segment ends Payea becomes mired in a pack of cars and is never able to advance beyond his 13th place position. In the final calculation of this race, Laperle will finish first and Payea will wind up seventh. Patrick Laperle will win his third overall Milk Bowl and second in a row. Scott Payea, who had led the points standings all year, misses the ACT championship by a single point. The season-long efforts of the #89 team will leave them one point out of the series' biggest prize.

On the winner's podium, Patrick Laperle cannot hide his emotions. Tears freely flow down his cheeks as he holds both the Milk Bowl and the ACT Championship trophies. A driver who started the 2007 season in the hospital with a potentially-fatal blood infection is now standing as a multi-time Milk Bowl winner and the first Canadian winner of the ACT Championship.

In the Tiger Sportsman race, Craig Bushey beats out Joey Laquerre for the title. Laquerre is a veteran racer, having won at least one race in each of the last five decades. It is an accomplishment that few others can claim, but the title will not be a part of his resume this year. He will try again next year.

Even though it is dark now, few want to leave the track. As is common after all the races, the gate between the stands and the pits is opened and all spectators are free to enter the pits. Hundreds of fans flood the pit area to see the cars up close and talk to drivers and crew members. It is always a nice way to end a race having fans and racers together in one place. It is especially poignant after this, the final race of the year.

In the tech area, Patrick Laperle's car sits on jack stands awaiting technical inspection. Next to it are the trophies for both the Milk Bowl and the ACT championship. The car and trophies seem lonely as the driver is doing a TV interview and the crew is celebrating nearby.

The final Thunder Road checkered flag of the year has waved. Fans this day have seen brilliant pageantry, storied tradition, side-by-side racing, close points battles, spectacular crashes and emotional winners.

As I get into my car and join the line of traffic waiting to leave the track, the rain begins to pour down. I realize then that this day at the races has illustrated everything that is wonderful about Thunder Road. How fitting that the last race of the track's 49th season would be one of its more memorable events. Considering the long and rich history of this racetrack, that is saying a great deal to be sure. And despite the fact that it will be another seven months until I return to the track for the 50th season opener, a smile comes to my face. It is perhaps the greatest accomplishment of any race track that race fans both enter and leave the track with a smile on their face. Thunder Road has been accomplishing this for going on 50 years now. I hope there at least 50 more.