1946 DREYER MIDGET

Fast, fun and frugal

Courtesy of Bonhams

Double the sale price would not have been out of the question for this Dreyer

VIN: N/A

by Tom Glatch

- 136-ci flathead Ford V8
- Rare Edelbrock speed equipment
- 130 hp
- In/out gearbox
- Live-axle suspension with transverse leaf springs
- Rear-wheel hydraulic drum brake

This Dreyer-Ford was not only a successful racer back in the day, but New Jersey driver John Harris successfully vintage-raced it for decades. It comes equipped with extensive period speed equipment, including twin Stromberg 97 carburetors on an Edelbrock intake manifold and Edelbrock alloy heads.

The Jahar Racing Midget is authentic and intact, but it does need cosmetic and mechanical refreshment before heading to the track. Best of all, it's eligible and competitive in both vintage oval and vintage road racing, on dirt or asphalt.

ACC Analysis *This car, Lot 351, sold for $9,500, including buyer's premium, at Bonhams' Greenwich Concours d'Elegance auction on June 2, 2013.*

The Great Depression and Midget racing were meant for each other. The first Midget race was held at Sacramento Stadium on June 4, 1933, with a ragtag group of racers. The fast little machines were built from junkyard parts — motorcycle engines, old frame rails and other components — and they put on an action-packed show.

Within months, the Midget phenomenon had spread throughout the nation. They could race anywhere, and popular venues included the wooden, high-banked Nutley Velodrome bicycle track in New Jersey, Chicago's Soldier Field, and the Los Angeles Coliseum. Even the famed Rose Bowl in Pasadena hosted Midget action. Back then an afternoon of racing at Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles cost just 40 cents. Midgets were inexpensive to build, race, and watch, and racing them soon became the prominent motorsport in America.

Small cars go big-time

As Midget racing spread, and the better drivers and car owners started earning good money, many of America's top race-car builders got into the game. These were really just scaled-down versions of the cars they built for the Indianapolis "brickyard" and

the dirt "bullrings" across the nation, and creations by Clyde Adams, Louis "Curly" Wetteroth, Hiram Hillegas, and, most notably, Floyd Dreyer, soon surpassed the junkyard specials.

Known as "Pops" or "Pappy," Floyd Dreyer may be one of the few men to be inducted to both the AMA Motorcycle Museum Hall of Fame and the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America. He was also inducted in the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and the National Midget Hall of Fame.

Born in 1898, Dreyer grew up on an Ohio farm and started racing motorcycles in his teens, including a stint on Indian's team. After a serious racing accident in 1922, he moved to Indianapolis, worked at Duesenberg and Stutz, and started building race cars. When he started building Midgets around 1935, he pioneered an assembly-line process to construct the popular machines.

Offy and Ford

As the '30s progressed, two engines became prominent in the sport. Fred Offenhauser made a scaled-down, jewel-like 110-ci version of his famed DOHC 4-cylinder engine that won 29 Indianapolis 500 events and numerous championships. It was powerful and reliable — and expensive. Then, in 1937, Ford introduced a smaller "flathead" V8, the 136-ci V8-60 — an economic alternative to the famed 90-hp engine.

For those who couldn't afford an "Offy," the Ford was a best bet. Its size and power were perfect for Midget racing, and mechanics such as Vic Edelbrock and Ernie Casale soon were racing them — and forming the foundations of their performance-parts businesses in the process.

After the end of World War II, Midget racing came roaring back for the same reasons that made it popular in the '30s. But the introduction of Frank Kurtis' tube-framed, mass-produced Kurtis Kraft Midgets in 1945 relegated the older-style rail-frame cars like the Dreyers toward the back of the pack. "Pops" returned to his first love, motorcycles, opening a dealership in 1953 in Indianapolis that is still run by the Dreyer family. He died on February 25, 1989.

A different kind of racing

In the '70s, a stock car at my local track had this tongue-in-cheek statement painted on its tail: "Racing is… Fun! Relaxing! Inexpensive!" As anyone who's competed at even the lowest level can tell you, auto racing is rarely relaxing, never inexpensive, and sometimes not that much fun.

But vintage oval-track racing is different. For less than $10k, you could have owned this car. These cars raced many times a week, so they were built tough. The Ford V8-60 Flathead was equally stout, and even today is easy to maintain. Personally, I don't think I'd even freshen the appearance of this car much, since the patina they developed from competition is part of their charm. Inexpensive? Check!

Laid-back racing

There are plenty of opportunities to run these cars, too. Unlike vintage sports cars, the oval-track cars don't race as such, but rather put on high-speed exhibitions. There's none of the bumping and banging that went on back in their day, but the track time is exciting, and they show today's generation the heritage of the modern Midget and Sprint cars.

Out East, the Atlantic Coast Old Timers Club ran 15 track exhibitions in 2013. In the heartland are the Antique Auto Racing Association, the Midwest Vintage Old Timers and the IMCA Old Timers. Out West there's the Western Racing Association, and a number of historic tracks have their own "Old-Timers" clubs. The track days offer the thrill of racing these machines without the pressure or danger of competition. Relaxing? Check!

A rarity at auction

Was $9,500 too little for a vintage open-wheel racer built by one of the legends of the sport? A Kurtis Kraft Midget would command more money, as would any Midget with an Offy engine, but in August, Mecum sold seven Midgets of various pedigrees from $3,000 to $20,000, and in 2009 they sold a Kurtis-Ford for $24,380.

Double the sale price would not have been out of the question for this Dreyer, but the fact is that oval-track cars rarely are seen at auction. Owners keep them for a long time, and then reluctantly sell them to other vintage-open-wheel enthusiasts. There must be a reason for such longevity of ownership. Fun? Check!

Fun, fast and frugal. Could this be racing heaven? And don't forget the intangible benefit of preserving a piece of American racing history, all for less than $10,000. I'd call that a great deal. Well bought.

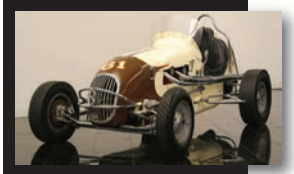
(Introductory description courtesy of Bonhams.)

Detailing

Year produced: 1946
Number produced: One
Original list price: Unknown
Current ACC Valuation: $7,500–$30,000
Tune-up/major service: $125
Distributor cap: $26
Chassis #: N/A
Engine #: N/A
Club: Atlantic Coast Old Timers
More: www.acotnews.org
Alternatives: Kurtis Kraft Midget, Solar Midget, Hillegas Midget
ACC Investment Grade: C

Comps

1950 Hillegas Midget racer
Lot 731, VIN: 473
Condition: 2+
Sold at $16,500
Auctions America by RM, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 3/23/2013
ACC# 215750



1950 Kurtis Midget racer
Lot 370162188868, VIN: N/A
Condition: 2
Sold at $29,995
eBay Motors, 7/7/2009
ACC# 120857

1948 Kurtis Kraft Midget racer
Lot SP103, VIN: 035
Condition: 1
Not sold at $23,000
RM Auctions, Novi, MI, 4/25/2009
ACC# 120297