

Prologue to **MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH ITALY, AMERICA AND ROSE**

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If you had told me a year ago that I would be spending a weekend in the mountains, not camping, hiking or sightseeing, but absorbing the sight, smell and, especially, the sound, of 43 super, souped-up stock cars of up to 800 horsepower tearing around a triangular track of two miles and a half in circumference, driven by 43 crazies with an apparent death wish, vying for the honor of being the first to survive 200 laps, sprinting at speeds of up to 200 mph, inspired by a lusty crowd of 100 thousand plus other crazies duded-up in racing hats, shirts and jackets---well, I am not a betting, and I try not to be a swearing, man, but you can imagine. It was my first auto race and it made quite a first impression.

It is Sunday, June 10, 2007, the culmination of a 3-day weekend at Pocono Raceway and the event is called the Pocono 500. It is located in the boonies of Long Pond, Pennsylvania, on a plateau 2 thousand feet high, approximately 20 miles long and 10 miles wide, encompassing 1200 square miles of magnificent, mountainous land, decorated with millions of sweetly scented, picturesque pine trees. The raceway is surrounded by thousands of acres of state forestry game land. It lies midway between New York City and Philadelphia, 90 miles west of one and 90 miles north of the other. People, diehard fanatics who die harder than the fans of any other sport except professional football, roll into the countryside like a tsunami, surging and covering the landscape with cars and pickup trucks and motor homes and tents and barbecues, laughing and singing with excited, uncorked anticipation. Surveys say there are as many women as men, and they bring their children too, some of them dressed as miniature race car drivers. They come from many states: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina.

What they come for is speed. Watching these powerful, metallic beasts fly around the asphalt at dizzying, nauseating speeds of more than twice those an ordinary human being would ever attain in a lifetime of driving gives them a vibrating, visceral, vicarious thrill. They have their favorite drivers and they not only know the names of their heroes, they wear the number of their cars on their persons. They know all they can about them. When their champions are driving, they are driving with them. When the driver wins, the fan wins. If he does not win, they still love him and watch and hope.

Where they come is one of the premier superspeedways in the United States of America, “the Indianapolis of the east.” It is in the middle of nowhere and it arose out of a spinach patch. How this happened is a splendid story, a blend of new and old: new world, American entrepreneurship, imagination and perseverance, backed by old world, European character, fortitude and inherited work ethic.

The man responsible for it is a dentist by profession, another incongruity to match the incongruity of such a colossal complex constructed of concrete and other materials that are the building blocks of cities, standing in the midst of nature’s realm: man’s work in the midst of God’s. The man is named Joseph Mattioli, affectionately known as “Doc” in the world of scalding cars. I walk with him the morning of the race as he casually, authoritatively tours the facility, routinely surveying his handiwork as he perfunctorily checks on everything and everybody with the efficacious ease of a European, old world monarch.

Everywhere he goes, everybody knows him. A woman from New Jersey asks him to autograph her hat, puzzling him as to why but he obliges. In the media center, he meets and greets employees, gives brief interviews to journalists from NASCAR Scene and the Associated Press. His son, Joseph III, informs him that an announcer from Sirius NASCAR wants to interview him on live radio in a few minutes, an interview that he gives on-air, with no change in personality or style, appearing to be the same man with a microphone in his face as without it. Then he heads for the garage area, comprised of 60 self-sufficient enclosures filled with highly paid mechanics and highly sophisticated technical equipment, pulsating with tense, coiled readiness. Doc leaves the drivers and mechanics to themselves, but stops to chat with the woman behind the snack counter in the area. He also notices a middle-aged, disabled photographer who he says takes “the best damn pictures of the track.” The man’s face softens into a tender smile, obviously touched by the attention and compliment. He says, “You don’t know how good that makes me feel. Thank you, Doctor.” As we walk away, the man turns his wheelchair so that he can follow Doc with his eyes, still smiling.

He keeps walking and talking, people constantly stopping him for autographs, impromptu photo sessions, hugs and hellos. The same woman from New Jersey whose hat he signed earlier sees him again and sheepishly requests another autograph, this time of her program. Doc complies again, still surprised that his handwriting sample is in such demand. We continue through the cafeteria, the hospital, the radio room, the track superintendent’s office, the photo lounge, the firehouse and the commissary. Everywhere he shows his face, other faces brighten, the bolder

people thrilled to exchange just a few words with him, the shyer ones content just to stop and watch from a distance and smile while he talks to others, happy to soak in some of the glow from the boss. He is, even at 82 years of age, a man of great warmth and charisma.

Taking this brief, 2-hour tour with this magnetic old lion easily answered any questions this writer might have had as to what kind of man it took to bring this imposing landmark into existence. Doc has the stuff. Why and how he did it is the rest of the story.