

Rick Kirkendall- "Fightin Leighton"

Our first legend is Rick Kirkendall who proudly goes by "Fightin Leighton." When I first contacted Rick, he made sure I knew he wanted to be called the "Fightin Leighton". That nickname came from his youth; involved in sports and his aggressive nature on the track.

Rick started his racing career at 4yrs old; racing in twin engines along the East Coast and at local Baer Memorial Park. He is proud to be the youngest driver to race a twin engine go cart. He was thrust into the limelight participating in famous TV shows like "Wide World of Sports," "What's My Line" and "I've Got A Secret."

Rick made his Mahoning debut in 1987, in what was termed back then as the batmobile renditions. He dabbled in a 56 chevy at local Evergreen for a few races before hopping in his own self-created #74 modified. #74 was his household number.

He raced consistently for 4 yrs on the Mahoning ¼ bullring. Garnering a 2nd place in points that ironically came down to the last lap on the last night. After 1991 he would also race at Dirt tracks such as Nazareth, Big Diamond and Penn National, sometimes the night before or after Mahoning with the same car. Rick admitted that people in the Mahoning circle weren't aware of his 7 heat wins at Penn National in 1993 on dirt while racing with an underpowered engine.

Rick admitted he has plenty of wild racing memories, but one night really stood out. After a heat race mishap, a current Modified driver helped him get the car back together. It needed a lot of work and was quickly pieced together just in time for the consi, barely making the lineup as the green flag flew. Starting from the back, Rick charged through the field in a nail-biting run from last to first. He made the winning pass on the final lap, in the final corner, and even crossed the finish line backwards to take the victory. When Rick pulled into the pits, his crew was shaking their heads while other pit crews were clapping after seeing what he had just pulled off. Rick laughed and said, "The car was a bleeping handful," adding that the crew told him they simply didn't have time to reattach the sway bar.

Rick also remembers one of his brightest moments at Mahoning coming in an ROC race where he beat a stellar field of Mahoning regulars and traveling invaders. He doesn't recall the exact date, but believes it was sometime in the early to mid-2000s.

Another moment that was special to Rick happened after a late June race where, as Rick put it, "I hit the wall at 95 mph and six days later after my car was in pieces I stood in Victory Lane at MVS."

Rick also talked about racing when his car was dialed in just right and he won the heat, cash dash, and the feature. "I was looking for a broom," he joked.

He's also proud of setting the track record at Mahoning not once, but twice—once in the batmobile style or high-bodied racecar and again in a pancake or the current low-slug modified. His times were 10.9 seconds in 1987—while riding on three wheels—and a blistering 9.747 seconds in 2003/2004 respectively.

Rick said his biggest competitors at MVS were Paul Bauscher and George Wambold.

When asked what advice he would give young racers today, Rick said, "You either got it or you don't—and if you don't got it, you better have money."

Rick was also asked if racing runs in the family. He shared that he has two young grandsons, Richard and Si, who may end up following in his footsteps. "They're both aggressive by nature with wrestling and racing," he said, hinting they might have what it takes.

Rick is very proud of his accomplishments in and out of the car. For more than 40 years, Rick owned and operated his own collision repair business. As he proudly put it, "I was the only employee." He also shared that he is currently being considered for the Carbon County Wrestling Hall of Fame for his accomplishments as a youth wrestler. Rick loves to camp and fish but says "it does not add up to the excitement of wheeling a Modified."

Rick summed himself up best by saying, "I work hard and play harder." He remembers the days when the garage lights would burn all night on Saturdays after racing at MVS, with 40–50 people gathered around reliving the night's events.

Rick still finds himself following Mahoning's present and future, and he hopes to race this year. During our conversation, he had an uncanny ability to bring up races he won and the exact lap times—down to the hundredth of a second.

Rick also shared, "God saved me and I'm in a good place," before ending the conversation with, "I am not done yet." We hope he can make a return at Mahoning; he was always one of the fan favorites back in the day. Rick was a pleasure to talk with and clearly still loves to talk racing.

True to his word, there's already exciting news. Rick recently picked up a ride in a Hyper Racing 600 Sprint Car with JPA Racing and plans to compete at the "Action Track" in Kutztown. The "Fighting Lehighton" is back, and his excitement came through in the conversation—like talking to a 6-year-old on Christmas morning. Rick said the team has sponsors but is actively looking for more and believes they have a lot to offer potential partners.

Despite facing several serious health challenges over the years, Rick continues to live life with an upbeat attitude and truly enjoys every day.