Above, Lionel Johnson at Daytona in 1965. He piloted this car to a tenth place finish in the July 4th "Firecracker" 400, driving a 1964 Ford.

At right, Lionel Johnson with a few of his early NASCAR trophies. In 1963 he won the Virginia State Championship in the Sportsman Division, and in 1965 he finished tenth overall at Daytona and Darlington.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Bottom right, Lionel Johnson at Daytona again, this time in a Modified Series race in 1964.

Like the time Winfred Wyant of Greene County approached him about a car he had prepared. "I went up there and tried it out, and then he wanted me to drive the race, and I won the race and started the whole thing over again." He shakes his head in mock disgust. "The story of my life: first time I try a car, I win the race, and then that starts me all over again. And that has happened so many times."

Lionel hobbles over to the repair shop where his son, Larry and grandson David help with the repair and towing business. "I used to get a thousand calls or more a year," he says with a hint of disappointment. Now they're lucky to get 300. A picture of every tow truck the Johnsons ever had sits under glass on his desk. There are dozens of them.

It is only natural that the racing thread runs through this family. "It gets in your blood," says grandson David who is preparing a car for the season opener next month. It's called a "U-Car," his father explains. "It stands for 'You can afford racing.'" Larry pauses and adds, "but it's gettin' high-dollar too. It used to be you could get racing for under $1,000…but no more."

Inside the shop, high on a shelf sits a dusty collection of trophies. The old ones are Lionel's. When asked about how he became the unofficial Mayor of Unionville, he seems a little embarrassed: "That's just say-so," he off-hands. "Everybody says that, but there ain't no mayor to it. I've just been here longer than anybody else. A lot of people call me Mayor, but I've just been here longer."

About then, Pegasus lifts off the ground, taking one of the people injured in this horrific accident to UVA Hospital. The Mayor of Unionville, at age 79, grimly watches it go and heads back to his home. "Some days they just hurt, hurt, hurt," he says of his legs, a painful reminder of a traffic accident that nearly took his life 31 years ago.
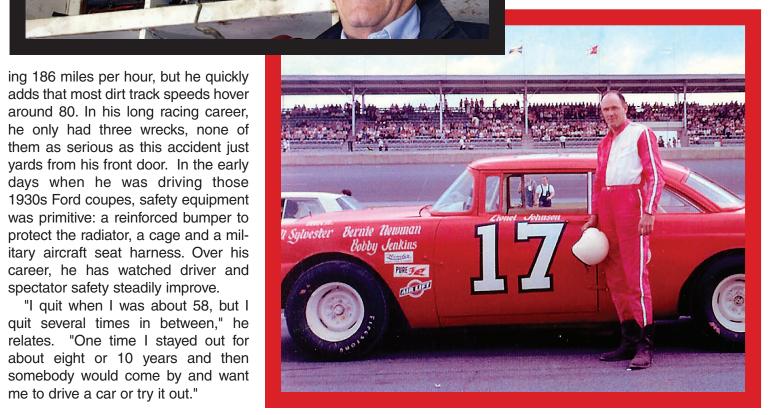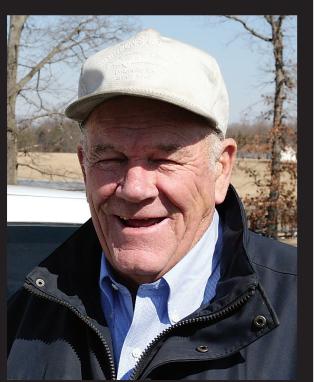

Lionel Johnson (white cap, dark jacket) stands between two wrecked cars in Unionville recently. The accident happened within footsteps of his home and auto repair shop on Lafayette Drive.

Photo by Phil Audibert

The Mayor of Unionville

The Mayor of Unionville, Lionel Johnson, has lived 60 of his 79 years here at his home and shop site just off Route 20.
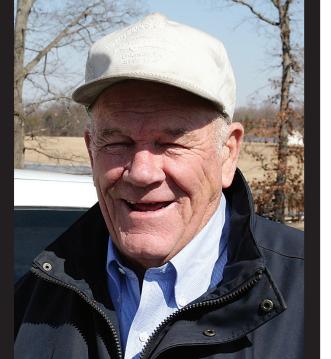
Photo by Phil Audibert

Unionville, 3 p.m., Monday, March 12–A nightmare of a traffic accident has just occurred on Route 20, only steps away from his home and shop. Lionel Johnson is standing in the middle of the road surrounded by wreckage. He seems anxious and bewildered…wanting to help somehow but not wanting to be in the way of emergency crews who are just now arriving.

His son and grandson are witnesses to this wreck; as soon as they heard it, they called 9-1-1. A tractor trailer truck literally ran over a sedan, spitting it out into the path of an oncoming car…mangled steel, broken plastic, shattered glass and leaking fluids everywhere. A bloody hand protrudes from one of the cars. Not one, but two Pegasus helicopters whup-whup to the scene. Traffic stands still for three hours.

Lionel sees that the poor people trapped in their cars are now in safe

Cars, in fact anything with wheels and a motor; Lionel Johnson has been fixing them, towing them, and racing them since the mid 1940s.

add up all the laps you made and it was easy to make a mistake back in the old days. They didn't have no computers or nothing."

Asked about altercations between drivers in those wild and wooly early days of NASCAR, he unhesitatingly says, "I ain't never been in no fights. I don't ever remember getting into a fight with anybody anywhere in my lifetime…I got along with everybody on the track." He pauses and adds, "I ain't sayin' I didn't hit nobody, and I ain't sayin' I haven't been hit, but I didn't do no fighting. What happens on the track, happens on the track. And I'd go on back home and forget and start next week, there's another race."

Lionel Johnson once ran a blister-ing 186 miles per hour, but he quickly adds that most dirt track speeds hover around 80. In his long racing career, he only had three wrecks, none of them as serious as this accident just yards from his front door. In the early days when he was driving those 1930s Ford coupes, safety equipment was primitive: a reinforced bumper to protect the radiator, a cage and a military aircraft seat harness. Over his career, he has watched driver and spectator safety steadily improve.

"I quit when I was about 58, but I quit several times in between," he relates. "One time I stayed out for about eight or 10 years and then somebody would come by and want me to drive a car or try it out."

INSIDER

BY PHIL AUDIBERT

MARCH 29, 2007

hands. His role here as the unofficial Mayor of Unionville is done. He shakes his head and shuffles back to his house. He has a slight limp.

This scene is fraught with irony. For one, Lionel Johnson is no stranger to bad traffic accidents. For decades he has operated a wrecker service from his auto repair shop on Lafayette Drive. He has hauled all manner of mangled steel and shattered glass at all times of the day and night. But rarely does it come this close to home.

He is also no stranger to racetrack wrecks. He was running in the Darlington 500 in 1965 when Cale Yarborough went airborne over a double guardrail and a 70-foot embankment. Unlike the three severely injured people being cut out of their cars on Route 20, Yarborough walked away from that one.

And isn't it ironic that the worst wrecks are on public roads at 50 miles per hour not on racetracks at three times that? For example, Lionel's limp was caused by a drunk driver who pulled out in front of him as he rode a brand new motorcycle in broad daylight down Route 3. Lionel hit the van broadside. "They say he waited until I got 15 feet in front of him and then he pulled right in front of me," he says flatly.

Lionel rummages through a trunk full of mementos and photos and produces an x-ray showing his left leg is held together by a nine-inch long metal plate and eight screws. If he ever flew, he would light up an airport security machine like a Christmas tree.

It was 1976. "I was in a cast for 13 months," he says bitterly. "I had a compound fracture of my left leg, and broke my ribs and broke my shoulders, and fractured my head and every other damn thing. I was tore all to pieces." Lucky thing he was only going 50 mph to break in the new motorcycle. "Yeah, I broke it in and broke it out the same time," he says, his words dripping with sarcasm. He glances back to the carnage on Route 20.

Cars, in fact anything with wheels and a motor; Lionel Johnson has been fixing them, towing them, and racing them since the mid 1940s. He used to race motorcycles until Berry

An x-ray of Lionel Johnson's left leg shows a nine-inch long plate held by eight screws (one is obscured behind another)...the result of a motorcycle accident on Route 3 in 1976. Johnson was in a cast for 13 months following the wreck.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Wiggins, the Orange County High School football coach at the time, gave him an old 1930s coupe he couldn't sell off a used car lot at the intersection of Routes 20 and 522. "I said something about racing one day and he said, 'Why don't you race that old car. I'll give it to you if you'll move it.' And that's how I got my first car," Lionel chuckles.

Pretty soon, he was racing these flat-head V-8 Ford jalopies all over the place: Maryland, Manassas, Fredericksburg. And he was winning too. He hatched an idea. Wesley Newman had a patch of land on Rt. 522 south not far from where the Lightfoot School is today. Wallace Walters had the equipment. The next thing you know they've built a 1/3-mile oval dirt track with a grandstand and lights and everything and Lionel Johnson is now manager of the Unionville Speedway!

"I'd been racing in Maryland for two or three years and knew all the boys and I went up there and made a deal with them to give them $25 or $35 tow money if they'd come down here. And I got about 50 of them and they came down here the first Sunday."

He claims that first week Unionville Speedway made an incredible $12,000 in entry fees, gate receipts and concession sales, but admits, "I get confused when I'm saying something 'cause I ain't as young as I used to be." He points to a newspaper clipping. No confusion here: the date is August 4, 1952, and the homeboy, Lionel Johnson, is tearing them up at Unionville Speedway.

"Winning his sixth race at Unionville Speedway last Sunday, Lionel Johnson piloted car 41 to victory over all other contestants in the 50-lap while driving with his left hand. Holding his right hand aloft to keep it from pounding too much after an operation nine days before, Lionel gained the lead in the 48th lap. He was passed repeatedly by Jimmy Dunn of Richmond but won out in the last stretch by a car's length. The crowd saw a spectacular race on the track's closing day. Everyone went wild."

The article continues: "Johnson who lost out on the curves with only his left hand to grip the wheel would speed up beside Dunn on each straightaway only to have Dunn get away again on the next curve. But in the 48th and the final stretch, it was Johnson's race. Dunn placed second and Tommy Price third."

So what's Lionel's trick to winning so consistently?

Actually, there are two. He sits behind the desk in a cramped office so cluttered with parts and manuals that the shelves actually run across and obliterate the window. This is the hub of the auto repair and wrecker business he started almost 60 years ago.

"You don't shift gears," he explains. "I stayed in high. My car had a quick change on it. I could put any gear ratio in it that I want." He holds up two gears that go in the rear end of the car. There are about 150 different possible gear ratios that he can select. "It don't take but five minutes to change them."

The trick is to select the right gear ratio for that car and track. He points to a tachometer. "If your motor's peak horsepower is 7,000 (RPM), then you want to gear it so it will run 7,000 at the end of the straightaway," patiently explains Lionel. "You don't want to overwind it and you don't want to under-wind it… you want it to be right on the peak."

And then there was another little trick up Lionel's sleeve: alcohol and nitro. "I ran it for about five years, but they didn't know I was running it," he says with a sly grin. "Now, let me tell you something," he leans forward in his chair, "from the beginning of time when the races first started, there were no restrictions on fuel because nobody knew there was any other fuel than gasoline." But Lionel knew. "When you run alcohol and 10 percent nitro you double your horsepower." Another sly look, and then he makes his point. "You have to have all the tools if you're going to play the game."

The old Unionville speedway is somebody's backyard now… all grown up in bushes and trees. And Lionel Johnson went on

"You have to have all the tools if you're going to play the game."

Lionel Johnson takes a victory lap at the Unionville Speedway in 1952. Driving a 1937 Ford Coupe, Johnson not only managed the local dirt track, he consistently won there.

Contributed photo

to greener pastures in the racing world. The years went by, Lionel working on cars, driving a tow truck to pull the wrecked ones out of the ditch and racing on weekends: Fredericksburg, Manassas, Waynesboro, Natural Bridge, Marlborough and Pamunkey, MD. In 1963, Lionel Johnson won the Virginia State Championship in the Sportsman Division. A year later he was in the big time, the Grand National series. This was stock car racing…NASCAR when it was only six years old.

In 1964, Lionel ran in a modified class at Daytona. He did everything himself. "I built my own car, I built my own motor and I done the drivin' and I done the towin'," he says matter-of-factly. "That's what I done, put it on a flatbed trailer and took it on down the road. Mama went with me every time."

Mary Johnson, Lionel's wife of 60 years this month and mother to their three sons, groans audibly. "It wasn't no fun going 'cause that was a 24-hour ride without getting out," explains Lionel. "It used to take us 24 hours to get down there, non-stop." Interstate 95 had not yet been completed. "We had to switch roads I'd

Roaring down the stretch, Lionel Johnson's Number 41 car was a familiar sight as the leader of the pack. Much of his success came from making correct gear ratio choices.

Photo by J.M. Ward

say 25 times between here and Daytona."

And once there, they had to stay a week to qualify and undergo inspections, which included a hard look at Lionel's brand new racing helmet. "It wasn't NASCAR approved. They took a hammer and beat it to death and handed it back to me in threads… brand spanking new. I coulda shot him," spits Lionel in disgust….150 bucks down the drain…"$150 was a lot of money then."

Lionel Johnson didn't even have sponsors to speak of. A pit crew of volunteers would fuel him up, and "as far as changing tires, I ran the first whole race on one set." A sympathetic team lent him a spare set that he would only pay for if he used them. At the end of the day, he returned them unused.

And so it's July 4, 1965, the Daytona "Firecracker" 400. And Lionel Johnson from little old Unionville, Virginia comes in 10th with an average speed of 150 miles per hour over two hours and 39 minutes. The race was won by racing icon A.J. Foyt, but Johnson actually ran with and outlasted other NASCAR legends Cale Yarborough, Bobby Allison and Junior Johnson that day. He won $1,000. The ride home to Unionville was much more pleasant than the ride down.

Come September 6 that same year, Lionel was at it again: Darlington, South Carolina, and he came in 10th again!

Actually, he thinks he was closer than that to the leaders. "They stayed within sight of me during the whole race. I don't know how they got so many laps ahead of me. Somebody mixed up with a pencil that day...They had two scorekeepers, one writing it down the other calling it, as you go by, and they would go down and

Yes, there really was a Unionville Speedway in the early 1950s. It was located on Route 522 about two miles south of the Route 20 intersection.