

NICOTRA PLEASANTLY SURPRISED BY HIS SUPERMODIFIED SUCCESS

By: Keith Shampine

CORNELIUS, N.C.

John Nicotra never thought it would go down like this. Four years ago when he decided he was ready to try owning a supermodified race car, Nicotra had two things in mind — help the dwindling supermodified car count at Oswego (N.Y.) Speedway and give his good friend Davey Hamilton another chance to win races.

Two track championships and an International Classic 200 win later, Nicotra's team, led by driver and chief mechanic Otto Sitterly, inarguably sits atop the non-winged supermodified world. Nicotra, 56, owns three of the best non-winged supers in the country, in which Sitterly, Hamilton and Bobby Santos III have seen the cream of the crop in American open-wheel racing at the helm.

But Nicotra didn't intend on any of this. His main objective was to help ensure Hamilton could have a competitive ride for the International Classic at Oswego, the sport's signature event.

In 2006, the supermodified car count at Oswego had reached a low of 16 cars per race and the division was in desperate need of some new blood and more cars. Nicotra's initial thoughts were simply purchasing a new frame and working a deal for Hamilton when he was informed that 2006 Oswego track champ Sitterly had run out of money and sold his operation.

Nicotra immediately contacted the popular Canajoharie, N.Y., chauffeur.

"I knew Otto was the guy," Nicotra said from his Homestead, Fla., home. "When I heard he was getting out, I knew I had to call him and try to work a deal. Otto was a low-buck guy, a good guy — on top of his game, confident, energetic and hard working. He's all the things you want in a partner and a great driver, too."

Nicotra purchased two new Hawk Jr. chassis — one for Sitterly and one for Hamilton when he could make it to Oswego. Nicotra would try to find sponsors and pay the bills, and Sitterly would maintain the cars and handle day-to-day operations.

"I told Otto it's a one-race deal. I would buy the cars and pay him to put them together. Then he could race the car at Oswego for one race," Nicotra said. "That was all I owed him. After that first race, I had no idea what was going to happen."

What happened is a partnership that in three years has become one of the finest pairings in 60 years of racing at Oswego. Driving blue Nicotra cars No. 6 and No. 7, Sitterly enters 2010 as a three-time defending track champion and defending Classic winner. Sitterly is consistently the man to beat at Oswego and he's cemented himself as one of the best supermod racers in the country.

Nicotra, an upstate New York native who makes his living as a produce broker in South Florida, is now one of the most important car owners in the class. Never afraid to speak his mind, Nicotra continually states he's only a fan trying to help the class he loves.

When Kasey Kahne was at Oswego last August for his USAC Silver Crown Steel Palace Classic, Nicotra had his supers on site for Kahne to drive. Nicotra has silently aided other teams at Oswego, and he's been instrumental in working with speedway management and the racers to ensure Oswego continues its 40-plus year status as the Home of the Supermodifieds.

After a strong 2009 season, the track expects consistent full 24-car weekly fields when racing resumes in May.

The success came fast for Nicotra. It's not often someone who's owned race cars for only three years ponders, "What's left to accomplish?"

But that's a valid question when speaking with Nicotra.

"The main thing is getting Davey a win," Nicotra stated. "It would mean the world to me to help Davey get his first win after his injuries. I also want to say that I'm very proud my dad has been here to see all this. He thought I was crazy when I decided to do this, and I don't blame him. For him to be here to see what we've accomplished is very rewarding."