

Joe's Track of Courage

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What began with a plea for help from Victor Poulin nine months ago on the online slot car community website Old Weird Herald www.oldweirdherald.com culminated in an event he only dreamed about. His son Joe took his first laps around JToC. What made this remarkable was that Joe is a quadriplegic, completely paralyzed from the neck down.

Victor and Joe had enjoyed slot car racing together since Joe was seven years old and played with HO, 1/32nd and 1/24th scale cars over the years as Joe grew up, got married and became a father himself. When Joe was hurt in an auto accident four years ago at the young age of 30, life in the Poulin family was changed forever. Victor and his wife Jennie quit their jobs to care for Joe, refusing to shut him away in a long-term care facility for the rest of his life.

Victor and Joe were searching for a way to start racing again and, while they were aware of devices that enabled people with special needs to enjoy video gaming, they were unable to locate a slot car controller that would allow Joe to race competitively, giving Joe complete control over the car's entire speed range and allowing him to react in milliseconds...just what the other racers can do with their hand-held speed controls.

A number of racers and controller manufacturers responded to Vic's posts and freely exchanged ideas. Howard Smith, the developer of the Third Eye controller, offered his services if someone could help him develop a sensor system that could react to tongue or lip pressure. Jeff Goldberg of JayGee Racing had numerous contacts with sensor manufactures and set off on a search for engineering assistance...while at the same time suggested that his newly developed Linear 200 controller could be easily adapted to work with a sensor mechanism. The Linear 200 had a modular design with a separate hand control and transistor power module, connected by a detachable USB cable. Jeff reasoned that the pistol grip hand control could be replaced by an electronic sensor that could detect tongue or lip movement to create the control signals that would operate the power module.

Jeff located a design consultant who had experience developing game controls for persons with special needs, Ken Yankelevitz of KY Enterprises, www.quadcontrol.com. After much discussion, Ken suggested scrapping the sensor approach in favor of a simpler mechanical design...and proceeded to epoxy the Linear 200's pistol grip to a framework of PVC pipe that would hold the handle in front Joe's face, with a trigger extension that Joe would move with his chin. While not practical...the trigger didn't have enough range of movement due to the extension's long lever action...the design concept was correct.



Original design concept from Ken Yankelovich

Jeff removed the controller's electronics and trigger assembly from the handle, placing them in a wooden fixture that could be mounted closer to Joe's face. He modified the controller's wiper board and trigger to work with Joe's limited chin movement, and placed that assembly back in the PVC pipe framework.



Modified JayGee Racing Linear 200 trigger assembly with shortened trigger travel

Jeff and Vic reported their progress almost daily on OWH and the story began to attract worldwide interest. So much so, an anonymous donor approached Gary Gerding, one of the world's top track builders, and offered to pay for a custom routed home track for Joe. Offers of encouragement, slot cars and supplies poured in from the OWH community. Everyone was looking forward to an on-line celebration.



Gary Gerding had the track ready to go – photo courtesy of OWH



Jeff Goldberg's track testing of Joe's controller at Mid-America Raceway was complete

However, what should have been a simple two or three month project took a tragic turn. Shortly before the track and controller were to have been delivered, Joe's health deteriorated. He spent several months in the hospital's intensive care unit fighting for his life. Everyone rode an emotional roller coaster while checking OWH daily, following Vic's posts about Joe's struggles with pneumonia and infections. Finally, things turned around for Joe this summer and he came home healthy, hungry and with a renewed zest for life.

Jeff knew that the controller needed to be custom fitted to Joe, simply shipping it out to him and hoping for the best wasn't an option. He reached out to the OWH community for assistance with travel expenses and two donors stepped forward, allowing Jeff and a special member of the JayGee Racing Crew to deliver the controller and get everything working in a single memorable day.



Joe getting fitted for his new controller

There was only one unexpected hitch when Joe first tried on his controller Wednesday morning. The controller fixture wobbled slightly, causing the trigger to slip out from beneath his chin. Ladies to the rescue! With the prettier member of the JayGee Racing Crew cutting and another friend offering to sew, an adjustable neck strap was devised that would hold the fixture in place, attached to the PVC pipe with Velcro provided by Vic's next-door neighbor.



Joe's checkered flag neck strap will make a real fashion statement

With that issue resolved it was time to move out to the garage for track testing. The next step was to ensure that Joe could move the trigger from full brake to full throttle comfortably and consistently. The controller was wired up to track power so Jeff could see how easily Joe would be able to move the trigger under race conditions. Jeff ended up shortening up the trigger travel to about half the normal amount, with the controller still being able to make a car just barely creep along when set to the softest throttle sensitivity. This was expected...a simple adjustment of the brake stop and bridging of a few more controller bands was all that was required.



The excitement was building as Jeff made the final adjustments with Joe's son and Joe mugging for the camera



Joey Jr, Joe, Jennie and Victor Poulin...one happy slot car racing family

After almost nine months there was nothing left to do but wire Joe up to the track, stand back and pause for a moment to reflect on what brought the OWH community here.



Victor, Joey Jr. and Jeff look on as Joe gets ready to take his first laps

A short opening ceremony was arranged to commemorate this event. The ceremony and Joe's first laps were captured on video and posted on YouTube. Just click on this link to view both videos: www.youtube.com/user/JGRACING1

Afterwards, Jennie set out a feast that was heartburn heaven...hot wings, pizza and a cold bottle of Chardonnay to put the fire out. Joe must have the constitution of an Iron Man.

The night was winding down but there was one more gift to present to Joe. You see, Joe doesn't just want to race on Joe's Track of Courage...he's planning on showing up at local raceways properly attired "Chicago Style".



Proper racing attire, compliments of Mid-America Raceway



This look on Vic and Jennie Poulin's face says it all.

I'd like to share some personal thoughts and acknowledge the folks that helped me on this project.

Words, photos and videos can't possibly impart what it was like to see Joe's first lap on Joe's Track of Courage. Like experiencing the majesty of the Grand Canyon on a cool morning when the air is perfectly clear or the utter desolation of Mount St. Helen's lava covered moonscape in person, one can't possibly ever know what it was really like in the Poulin family garage that Wednesday afternoon without being there in person.

I expected to feel elation, a rush of adrenaline at a job well done. Instead, I felt humbled...honored to be there to see the sheer joy on Joe's face as he raced against his 14-year old son, Joey Jr. To hear the shouting and laughter as Vic and Joe traded paint...with Jennie, Joe's designated turn marshal, pit crew and gopher, grinning from ear to ear as she cheered everyone on. You see, we just didn't help Joe today. We, the OWH community, gave something back to the entire Poulin family...something that had been lost for almost five years since Joe's accident.

We gave them joy and hope...a chance for them to live and play as the family they were before Joe's accident. Now Joe can DO something, not just passively watch from his bed or wheelchair as the world goes by. Joe can play with his son, something he looked forward to for years. And Victor can race with Joe, as they had been doing since Joe was seven years old. And there I was listening to Jennie, in her own words describing herself, "I'm just a mom" as she blinked back tears while telling me what this all meant to her and her family.

To everyone who helped out and weren't there to experience this event in person...you all should share this deep sense of satisfaction for your part in making this day happen. Ken Yankelevitz of KY Enterprises, the consultant who developed the controller's chest plate, gave me invaluable suggestions at the inception of this project. Mike Rhea provided the custom standoffs I needed for the controller's fixture. Tony Hobart and an anonymous donor made it possible for Mary Ann and I to deliver the controller in person, making the needed adjustments in a single day. Thanks guys...you did well.

There were so many folks that helped in other ways, individual racers, raceways and slot car distributors that built cars and provided supplies, the same anonymous donor that opened up his heart to pay for the building of Joe's track, and everyone else that provided inspiration and hope to Joe during his long battle with infections...just proves that there really are good people in this world.

All that's left now is for Joe to practice and build up his strength...and to learn not to laugh while driving his car. A fair warning to all you guys in the Northeast...there's a new hot shoe in town and he's got a kick-ass raceway. I expect to see frequent race reports on OWH this winter from Joe's Track of Courage with plenty of guest racers in attendance.

- Jeff "JayGee" Goldberg

The logo for JayGee Racing features the name "JayGee" in a large, bold, blue, italicized sans-serif font. Below it, the word "Racing" is written in a smaller, red, cursive script font. The "R" in "Racing" is particularly large and stylized, with a long tail that loops under the word.