

When mowing the lawn doesn't move you anymore.

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• The crowd roared. The PA system barked, ringing with feedback. Another rumble from the sweating multitude. Down in the arena, clouds of dust swirled as the tense battlers for gold and glory struggled on. No quarter was asked, none given. Months of preparation and training were on the line. The crowd was fiercely partisan and did not hesitate to show it.

One could sense in the air the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat as the blue smoke from red-hot exhausts drifted over the crowd. High overhead, two hawks wheeled in the blood-red sun as the two finalists faced each other. By the end of the day, there would be only one.

The field judge signaled for the final round to begin. A hush fell over the tense horde in the grandstand. Clarence Seastrunk settled himself deeper in the saddle of his machine, slipped it into gear, felt the power surge under him and knew that it was now or never.

It had been a hellish season: a few wins but a lot of disappointments, plenty of near misses, and he hoped to God that today wasn't going to be another one. Everything was riding on the next 60 seconds, and it was too late to even pray. Through the dust he could see Elmer Wheeney, the other finalist in this, the last big one of the season.

High in the stands, Bernice Seastrunk could hardly watch. She knew what it meant to Clarence and how life would be hell if he blew this one at the end of the season. It seemed that the older Clarence got, the more desperate he got to win, and nothing she could do seemed to help when he was on a losing streak. Little Clarence Junior sucked noisily at his third Pepsi of the afternoon and hardly seemed to notice, or care, what was going on down in the dust below. Three rows below her, she could see fat Eunice Wheeney in that big floppy hat she always wore to meets, gabbing away confidently, as usual. How does she do it, Bernice thought. Look at her; you'd think she was just down at the Dairy Queen ordering a Peanut Buster, she's that unconcerned. Maybe it's a lot easier when your old man's at the top of the heap. God, I wish Clarence would quit before it's too late.

Clarence leaned forward over the wheel, his concentration almost total. Maybe that was his trouble. At the top, almost is not enough. The intense sun reflected back from his gleaming hood. He could feel it

burning his cheeks as the acrid exhaust fumes swirled about him. He carefully fed in a little more gas, easing the throttle with micrometer precision. For a brief instant his mind flashed back to the day last fall when he had decided to invest all he had in this machine. After a disastrous season when he'd been hopelessly outclassed by practically everyone, including that goddamned Elmer Wheeney, there was no question but that he had to get a ride on a top machine or call it quits. Naturally, there were no backers. After all, who wants to bankroll a loser? So there went the savings account and the trip to Disneyland.

He felt rotten about Bernice, though. Never complaining, making last year's sandals go another season, feeding them on meatloaf and boiled carrots, but you could see it in her eyes. Well, if I don't win this one I'll hang up my jock and make it up to her and the kid. At least, he thought, I gave it a good whirl. Three years now, three hard seasons, never once stooping to the kind of crap that the Claggett brothers got caught at. Jesus,

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what some guys won't do to win. Not only did they try to ring in a trick transmission, they added weights under the hood after the weigh-in and then tried to pretend that somebody else had done it. They ought to bar them for life. And that damn Duke What-sisname, with that silly red bandana around his scrawny neck, bouncing up and down in his seat right in front of the judges, to get more traction, then yelling, "Jeez, I'm just trying to ease the weight on my hemorrhoids!" when they disqualified him. They should have called that horse's ass on that three meets ago.

He felt the throttle quiver with controlled fury under his hand. Seastrunk eased it forward with a barely perceptible movement of his wrist. His back wheels dug deeper into the churned dirt. He felt his tires flatten slightly under the hard surge of building torque. His machine quivered under the strain as he poured the coal on harder and harder. Heat rose in great waves from the hood as he and the machine strained as one. Deeper and deeper his rear wheels grabbed at the earth. He eased off on the throttle a touch, and then shoved it forward again, going for broke. A cloud of blue smoke blasted from his exhaust. Faintly, through the roar of his motor, he heard the hoarse cries of a few fans who had followed him all season. A judge wearing green aviator glasses and a long-visored baseball cap watched his mighty effort with a burning, intent stare vacant of all expression. His wheels dug deeper, and he knew it was over. The judge dropped his red flag, and now it was in the lap of the gods.

As he slowly wheeled off the course, he saw Elmer Wheeney and his lethal yellow machine lumber into place. What a cool bastard, Clarence thought as Elmer spit a long, arching gob of tobacco juice right at the feet of the head judge. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Bernice sitting white-faced and scared high up in the stands.

Elmer's machine bellowed with a rasping, guttural note, blasting exhaust out of its side stacks in a mean, black jet. If that son of a bitch is stock, I'll eat my rear tires, Clarence thought. The crowd yelled in a ragged wave of sound as Elmer, his giant chaw of Mail Pouch tucked deep in his left cheek, went to work. Within 30 seconds it was over, and the PA system blared forth the sad news:

"And there's your winner, folks. For the second straight year, Elmer Wheeney riding his International Harvester Cub Cadet eight-horsepower lawn tractor pulls the top weight of 3100 pounds. I don't know how that ol' boy does it, but he sure makes that little ol' Cub Cadet get in and dig."

Elmer waved casually as he took a victory lap around the course perched atop his dusty, aggressive-looking lawn tractor.

"Folks, let's give our runner-up Clarence Seastrunk a big hand for giving Elmer such a tough fight. Clarence is on his new Sears eight-horsepower transaxle-drive Craftsman. He come damn near taking all the marbles with a clean pull of 3000 pounds dead."

There was a ripple of applause, and the season was over. Minutes later, Clarence loaded his machine on its trailer, already a veteran of the fastest-growing sport in America—lawn-tractor pulling. Around him others loaded their Wheel Horses, Bolens, Deeres, Toros and AMFs in the gathering dusk. Bernice didn't say much on the way home. As they pulled into the driveway, Clarence broke the silence.

"Guess I'll mow the lawn." Bernice hustled Junior into the house without a word. ●