

BY DENISE MC CLUGGAGE

Memories of midget racers and the Golden Gate Bridge

The fuss over the Golden Gate Bridge's 50th birthday in May set my reminiscence mills grinding. Some of what I came up with relates in a labyrinthine way to cars—midget race cars.

All my memories find me looking up at the underside of the bridge. (Once from a small plane piloted by a guy from Ohio I had met skiing. And once from a small fishing boat that was caught in a roiling rinse cycle right under the span.)

And again a view of the bridge upward from another small boat. This one had motored rapidly across the bay on a unique rendezvous. We had an appointment with a guy who was about to jump. With a parachute, mind you. Hey, Bob Niles was a fool, but not a *damn* fool.

Bob Niles, the self-styled "Bird Man." I wonder where he is now. Or *if* he is, given his penchant for the formidable.

This is where cars come in. Jack Menges was a sports reporter for the *Oakland Tribune* and a great fan of midget race cars. I worked for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. I met Jack at a basketball game. He asked if I wanted to go to my first midget races—indoors. Sure. Some sound. Some cars.

Racing indoors on a 1/5 mile track was not something the BCRA (Bay Cities Racing Association) did regularly. Usually, they ran at Pacheco over in the East Bay and Sacramento and south of San Francisco somewhere—I don't remember now exactly *where* the quarter-mile dirt ovals were except that I was there.

What I do remember: Everybody in the infield had to wear white pants. No green *anything*. Oil smells perfumed the air. The floodlights spiraled with dusty fumes.

Pickup trucks pushed the cars off. Driver's arm in the air, dog clutch in. Blast away. I can here the monster-mosquito noises the little cars made right now, and see them flicker up the back straight. (The fences were always painted with slanted, wide bands of black and white to enhance the impression of speed.) Then the cars darted into the dusty turns sideways, the front wheels cocked outward. And on and on, lap after lap. I loved it.

George Bignotti, builder of more than a few Indy winners, came out of BCRA. So did Indy drivers Freddie Agabashian, Bob Sweikert and Johnny Boyd. Down in the valley around Fresno and Bakersfield were Bill Vukovich and the Offy midgets. The

BCRA ran mostly V8-60 Fords.

So I started going to the midget races and getting to run a few laps myself after the race in Eddie Bennett's Drake.

I don't remember how Jack Menges came to know Bob Niles, but Jack introduced Bob to the racing scene. An Oklahoma farm boy I think, or sounding like one. And a non-



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stop mouth. He'd go on and on, weaving a fabric of fantasy until his listeners caught each others' eyes and looked heavenward.

Niles was going to jump out of a plane with this bird suit and wings he had designed and glide to the ground, not opening his chute until he was within 500 feet of touchdown. He planned to light smoke bombs attached to his legs so people could watch him all the way. He was going to jump with two chutes, slip out of one after it had opened and then pull the second.

Somehow it came about that at least he was going to parachute into the infield at Pacheco before the midget races.

I must interject here that free-fall parachuting and trick jumps were not common in 1949 and 1950. Not even the blank gore chutes, which I was to jump with seven or eight years later, were invented yet, let

alone today's highly steerable chutes that look like doilies. And Bob was planning his delayed-opening jumps with military chutes meant for static-line operation.

Jack and I had grown fond of Bob, despite his verbal diarrhea, and we were apprehensive as the plane kept circling off to the side. Then: "There he is!" A dot against the fading evening sky. But where was the colored smoke? The soaring glide? The head shakers were beginning again.

Then we watched the falling figure. Plummeting now, well to the east of the field. *What* was he doing? "Pull it, Bob! Pull it!" Lower and lower. The crowd noise ceased as if a door had slammed. The figure disappeared below the horizon. We were in the shack of a press box at the top of the grandstand and could see what the rest of the crowd couldn't: a quick blossoming of a canopy and then nothing.

I'll never forget that huge molting bird they brought into the track perched on the back of a Jeep. Feathers whipped to tatters as if he'd been in a hurricane.

Bob was contrite, apologetic, embarrassed by the cheers of the crowd. After all, he had failed to do what he said he would. He was ready to go right back up. (No one would have let him.) What had gone wrong was everything—the pilot, not understanding free-fall, wouldn't fly close enough to the track. Then Bob couldn't get the smoke canisters on his legs lighted properly, and then his chute wouldn't open properly and he had to pull it out by hand.

After that, we listened when Bob prattled on—he surely had our attention.

I'm thinking now that Bob's first bridge jump—this from the Bay Bridge—had come before this jump, before I'd met him. As I remember, the *Tribune* had agreed to pay him for rights to exclusive pictures of that jump, but this was foiled when an alert *Chronicle* photographer, who just happened across the bridge, hopped out of his car with his camera and destroyed the exclusive.

By the way, Bob's technique was to lower himself off the bridge on a rope, deploy the chute by hand, wait until it had caught some air and then let go of the rope.

The Golden Gate Bridge jump was set up as a sure-fire *Tribune* exclusive. Except that Jack Menges asked me if I wanted to go along in the pick-up boat.

Let us now speak of dilemma. I was a friend of Jack's, but I worked for the *Chronicle*. Loyalties. My philosophy degree was no help. Finally I decided to split the difference. I'd tell the *Chronicle* about the jump, but too late for them to get a boat to the site. The *Trib* would have an exclusive at the water level, but the *Chron* would not be cut out completely.

Jack was forgiving. After we fished a wet bird man out of the drink, he said he would have done the same thing. ■