

JERRY SOLT: A MIND IN MOTION

"Karting has allowed Jerry to be creative: he's a very creative person. He would have difficulty making a box the way someone told him to make a box. He just doesn't make boxes the way other people do."

Marylyn Solt, on her husband of 35 years, karting pioneer and innovator Jerry Solt.

Of Lincolnesque stature and gait, Jerry Solt of Findlay, Ohio, has stood out among karters for nearly forty years. But as much as his long and lanky frame has made him easily visible in the pits, the kart that Jerry has spent nearly his whole life refining has done at least as much or more to distinguish him in karting circles. His story is a microcosm of the American dream in practice.

It was late in Ike's second term, and after stints at three of our nation's top engineering colleges, young Jerry Solt of Findlay, Ohio, finally gave up his pursuit of an engineering degree. "Frankly, I was having a hard time with calculus, but to tell you the truth, I had too many ideas in my head to sit still. So after three and a half years of classwork and no degree, and after declining the opportunity to become an engineer for Cadillac, I went home and started making go karts," Jerry now says with a chuckle toward the unspoken irony.

Back when he started out, Jerry was fortunate that his father, Russell Solt, shared his interest in these new-fangled, little speedsters. "When it came to actually making things, my father

taught me almost everything. I got the theory in college and learned to think light and strong and gained knowledge about different materials, but my father instilled in me the imagination and the push to think things out and try things on my own. In other words, he taught me not to be a follower."

Unbeknownst to him at the time, of course, Jerry's first ride on a kart--he recalls only that it was a dead-axle kart of some now-forgotten brand--that first ride set him on a course that would define his entire adult life. After that first ride, "Daddy and I thought we could build something a little better. So on our first kart, built in late 1958, we used some of our own ideas and put on what is now called a live axle. We were told that a solid axle wouldn't work, but as history has proven, of course, it did. As far as I know, we were among the first to use a live axle; at least we were in our area."

Building one kart led to building another, and then another, and by early 1960, the Solts were in the kart manufacturing business full-time. Taking over the automobile repair garage that Russell had operated in Findlay since 1946, Jerry and his father began creating and producing what became known as "SAE karts." The SAE moniker, by the way, is an abbreviation of the firm's name, Solt Automotive Engineering.

Applying Jerry's engineering knowledge, the Solts built karts which were extremely light--and fast--yet strong. The original models were round-tubed, space frames (which means they were trussed, similarly to bridgework) and they had a sheet of canvas

suspended between various frame members to create a form-fitting seat. As it was refined, the space-frame model came to be known and marketed as the "Spider", and it proved to be very successful. But due mostly to the additional cost and time involved in assembling a kart which required so many welds, the Spider line was eventually discontinued.

Supplanting the Spider was the model that was to become something of a legend in its own right and which would cloak its progenitor in a mantle of fame.

Using one-inch square chrome-moly tubing, Jerry created a kart unlike the others. All karts, of course, have four tires, a steering wheel and an engine, and their small size differentiates them from other motorized vehicles. The SAE, though, was an anomaly in all the details that distinguish one kart from another. No one who knows karting has ever seen his first SAE and not thought to himself, at least, "Well, that certainly is different." This is especially true today, this being the era of the side-mounted motor. With its engine mounted behind the rear axle, with its squared-tubed, high-riding twelve pound frame and with its seat and foot pans hanging down below, the SAE was, and still is, the antithesis of nearly every other kart. To some it was all wrong, and its detractors were vocal. To many it was, and still is, the only way to fly.

The SAE became popular. To its advocates, an SAE's looks, its traction bite and its front wheel lift gave it more the feel of a sprint car than another go kart, and the Solts' business

flourished. It grew to the point where at one time Jerry had over forty dealers promoting the SAE throughout North America.

Unlike so many other early manufacturers who came and were gone before the mid-sixties, the Solts' busiest years were from about 1966 through the seventies. Each year brought further refinement to the original square-tubed SAE, although the upgrades were sometimes hard to see with the eye. According to Jerry, "The later karts really don't look much different than about the tenth kart we ever built. The average person would look at a 1962 model and one today and not notice too much difference."

Because the frame of an SAE (exclusive of the seat and steering hoops) consists of only four welds on four short pieces of square-tube steel, only two of which require slight bending, the SAE has been copied by just about every backyard mechanic who had a hacksaw and a welder and who ever thought he wanted to build a go kart. Of such piracy of his creativeness, Jerry is philosophical and almost benevolent, perhaps mindful that all karts are, in the end, just copies of the first. He says today, "I don't mind people copying things, but I don't care for them copying and then selling things as their own ideas. I'd rather see people use their imaginations and create something a little different and unique. But practically, and legally, there's not much you can do about someone taking your ideas."

Because Jerry practices his free-thinking philosophy, he has spent a good portion of his karting career at loggerheads with the national sanctioning bodies of karting which, in their efforts to

provide stability and organization to the sport, have to a certain degree, made rules that have limited the exercise of an individual's ideas. One such controversy, for instance, which was finally resolved, arose over the SAE's bifurcated floorpan, which was long considered "illegal" by the International Karting Federation.

On the other side of the coin, Jerry would like to see the sanctioning or promoting of at least one "open" class without weight rules for karts with the larger two-cycle engines. In this regard, he reasons, "I know weight rules work to create competition at all levels, but there also will always be the racer who, for various reasons, does not care to add weight to a kart that works the way it is. Open racing is exciting racing! There are a tremendous number of older, larger two-cycles, now not in use, just waiting to be utilized in these kinds of open classes."

Although in his first twenty years of kart competition, Jerry found himself upside down eighteen times, he has never been hurt while driving a kart. Part of his injury-free career has had to do with a safety-conscious attitude, but credit also is due, Jerry feels, in greater part, to the way his karts are designed. "No one has ever been seriously injured in one of our karts. From the very beginning we tried to design a kart that would keep its driver from being run-up-over by another kart. The high side rails have accomplished that. The frame itself is designed to give and absorb bumps as does the suspended seat. In a head-on collision, the steering hoop, shaft and the steering wheel will collapse and give.

In fact, the whole kart, upon impact, has been designed to simply bend and absorb energy. We've had people just get up and walk away after hitting things that have stopped them cold."

Not surprisingly from one whose karting career spans nearly four decades, Jerry thinks and talks about karts being built to last. "Take for instance, nerfing bars or bumpers. On our karts, the nerfing bars are welded on. If they get bent, take a hacksaw, cut them off and weld new ones on. I've never been in favor of splinting things on with nuts and bolts or cotter keys; that's just something else to rattle or fall off. For me, welding things on makes a better product when you consider the twenty-year life of a kart. And there's no reason a kart shouldn't last that long. Nowadays, however, people only think of running a kart one or two years because something new is going to come along and replace it. That just isn't the case. You can take an SAE, or any kart for that matter, and if you've got a head on your shoulders, you can make it work."

Over the years Jerry also made many hop-up accessories. "We used a lot of different ideas to determine what would work best and yet be easy to fabricate. We actually made an adjustable right front spindle back in 1960, but my father said, 'You better not show that to anybody unless you want to put it on all of them (karts).' So we did away with it and didn't bring it back until 1975.

"We started making and using tuned exhausts in 1966. With a tuned exhaust, we had one 6.1 cubic inch McCulloch that showed

twenty-four horsepower on the dyno. Before the tuned exhausts, about fourteen horses was all we could get out of the smaller Macs. We later had one 820 West Bend that showed 30 horsepower on the dyno; it lasted about two weeks, huh, huh." The dyno to which Jerry refers and which he still has, is a chassis dyno which was manufactured by Palmini Engineering of San Gabriel, California.

In addition to his annual line of karts and parts, Jerry has made many "one-of-a-kind" karts to accommodate people's special requests. One such "special" was an especially light kart with a 250cc Yamaha motor mounted upside down in the rear, which project was featured in the August, 1961, issue of KART magazine. Other unique designs have included a kart with dual engines mounted in-line along the side of the driver and another kart which was powered by a 350cc Kawasaki motor for use in a local unlimited class.

For all the importance that karts themselves have played in Jerry's life, one can't help but get the feeling that it's been the people of karting that have been the most important thing for him. As a kart builder and racer, Jerry competed with or against all the top go-ers in the Midwest, people such as Don Surwall, Ken Burden, Dick Collier, Pete Berlt, Mickey Rupp, Denny Gerber. As a shop owner, however, it wasn't always the big names that came through his door. But Jerry was as likely to spend a long Friday night with a no-name customer as he would with one of the "big boys". In fact, he admits that one of his problems over the years was that he always worked on his customers' karts first and his own last, and

consequently he often would be late for the races.

Of all the people with whom Jerry has been associated, none have been more important to him than the members of his family. It was noted earlier that Jerry credits his father for a great deal of his success, and he talks with pride of the pleasure it was for him to work side by side with his father for many years.

But Jerry's mom also did her part. "If an out of state delivery needed to be made," Jerry says, "She'd take a couple of ladies along and a couple of karts on the roof of the car, and they'd make a day of it, getting stares all along the way."

For Marylyn Solt, being married to someone who is still thought by some in the community to have spent the last forty years just "tinkering with those go karts", well, it has been both a blessing for her and also something of a challenge. Even though she knows otherwise, "To the general public", Marylyn says, "Karting has never earned its place as a profession or a career as have other forms of racing. People still don't realize that karts are not toys. I don't know how to change that because karting has been a wonderful career for Jerry."

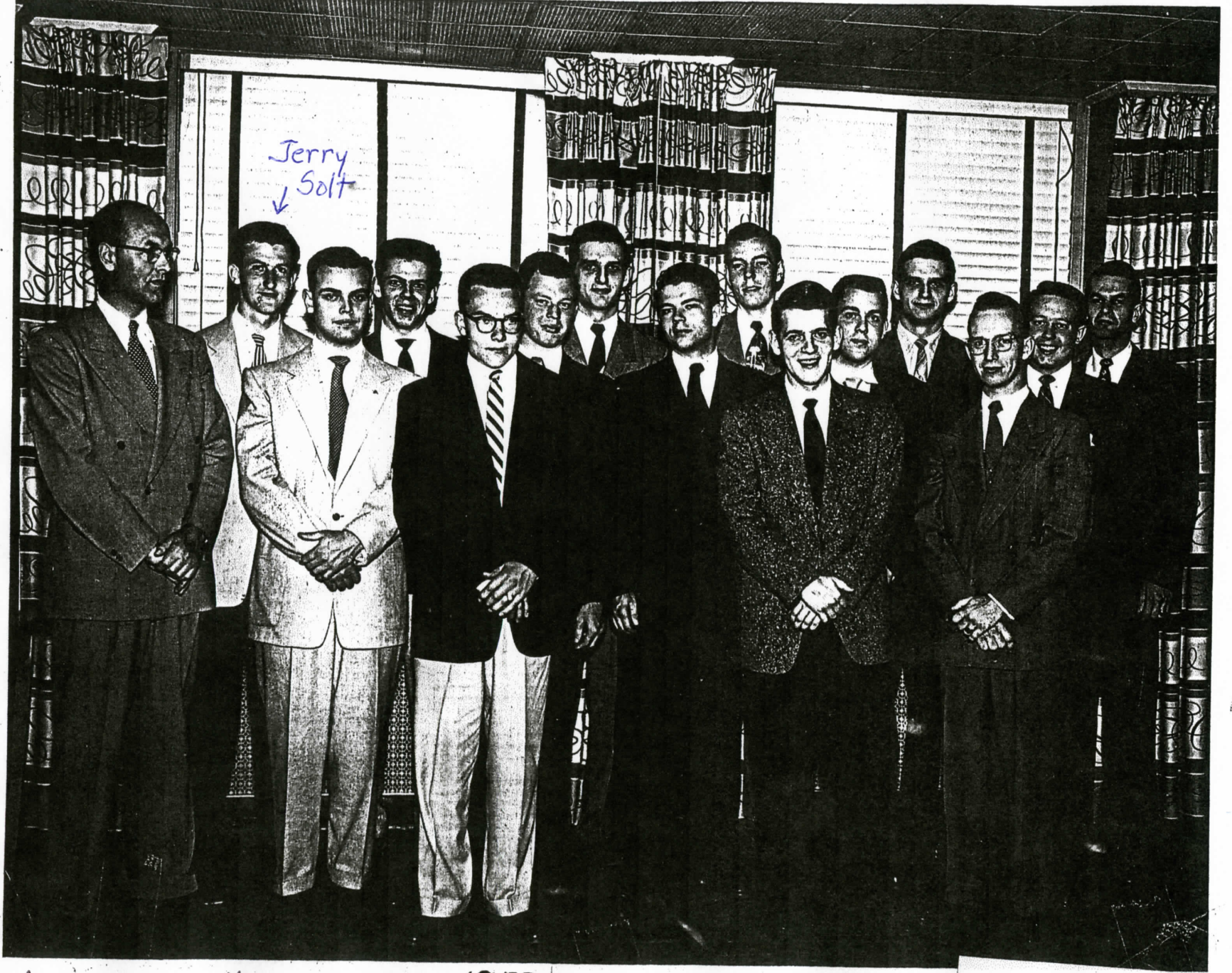
And now Jerry's career, after producing nearly 3,000 karts, is on temporary hiatus, at least from a kart manufacturing standpoint, until his new workshop is completed in 1998. Due to the march of progress, he had to vacate his shop at 305 Taylor Street where he had been located for thirty-five years. And while he'll soon resume making karts, the dealerships and marketing will remain things mostly of the past. Now in his sixties, Jerry's karting

focus has turned toward operating a racetrack.

In the early 1990's, Jerry and Marylyn purchased forty-three acres of land west of Findlay. A portion of this ground is devoted to the solar-heated workshop he is constructing and also to his kart track where, as you might expect, the "open" class is the premier event. A larger and more beautiful area of the Solts' land is maintained as a nature preserve complete with wetlands and appropriate habitat for various forms of wildlife and vegetation. Marylyn, now retired as Director of Nursing at the Blanchard Valley Hospital in Findlay, oversees the nature area and Jerry.

Any regrets, upon looking back four decades? To that, Jerry muses, "I had other opportunities, including a job offer from Mercury in the development of its snowmobile line. But apparently other things weren't part of the plan. The way it's worked out, I think I've enjoyed what I've done more than I would have enjoyed working at anything else." Unlike so many of us, Jerry has withstood the temptation to conform, and with dignity and with a quiet yet firm faith in himself and in his Creator, he has followed his own mind to the end of happiness.

Quentin R. James

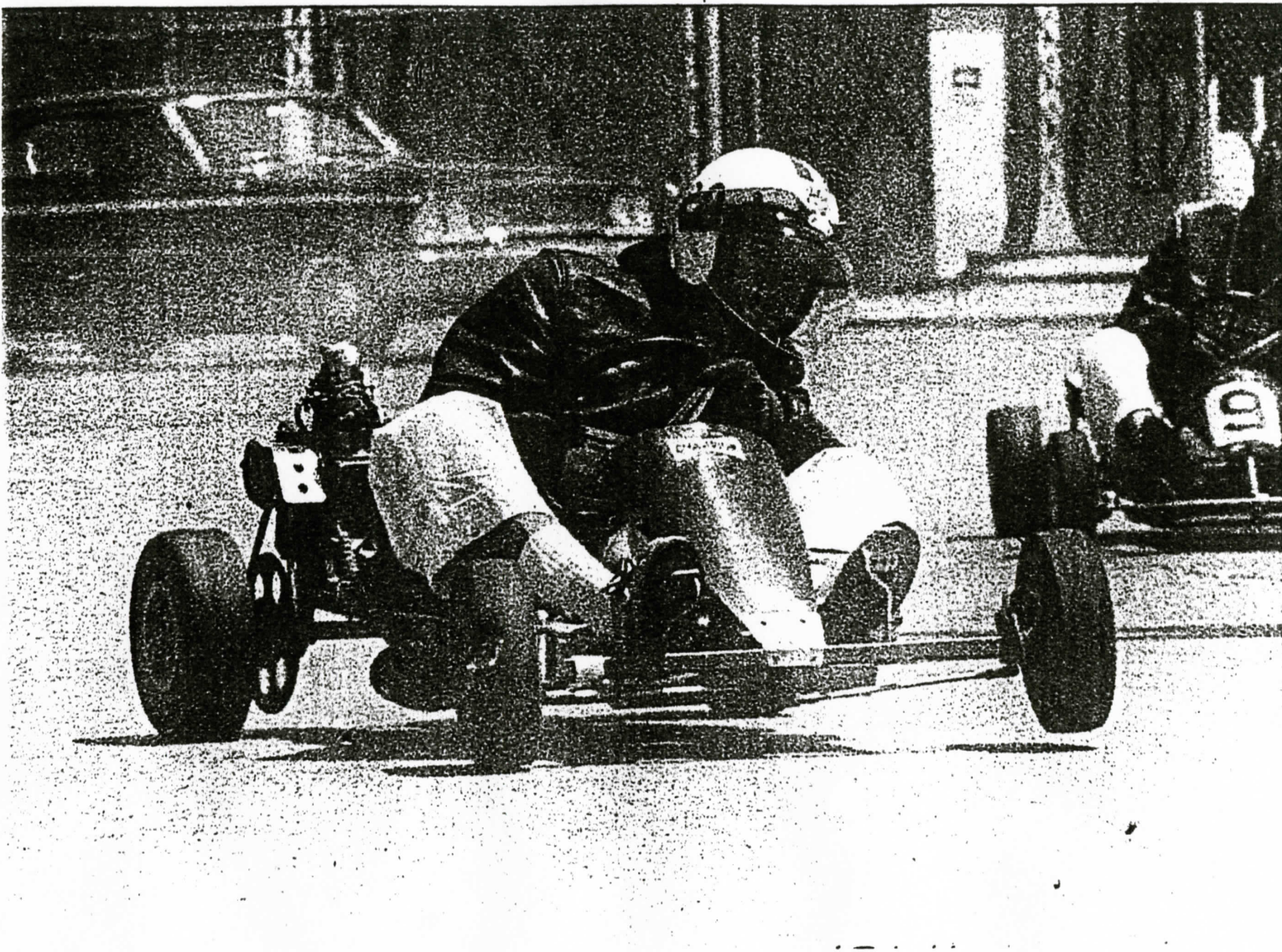


As a student at the prestigious ¹⁹⁵³ General Motors Institute (now Kettering Institute), Jerry is shown here with fellow students in the Cadillac division. Jerry also studied engineering at both Ohio Northern University and the University of Michigan.

Russell Solt (l) and Jerry (m) pose with a father/daughter team in front of their kart shop in Findlay.

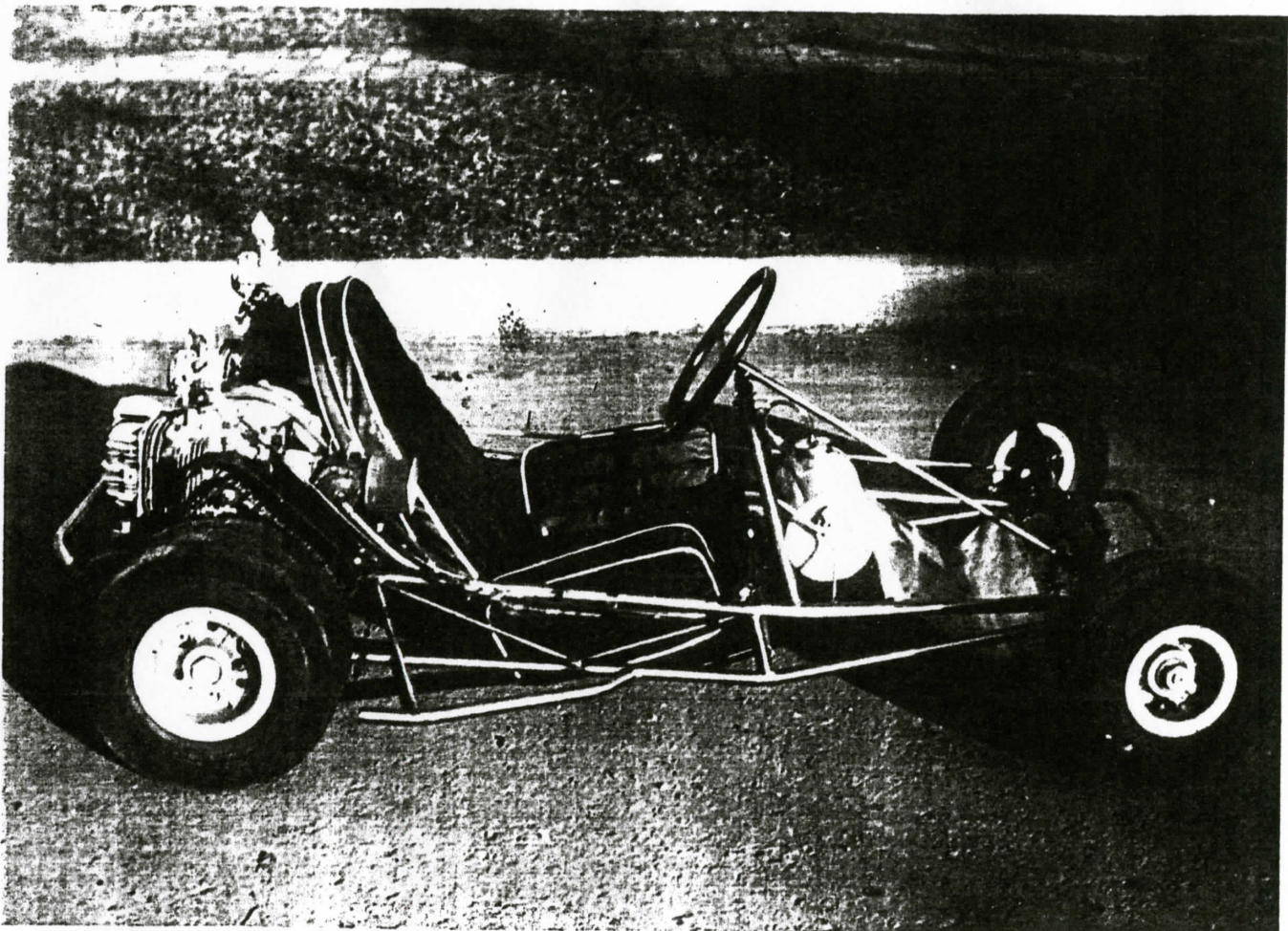
SOLT AUTOMOTIVE ENGINEERING

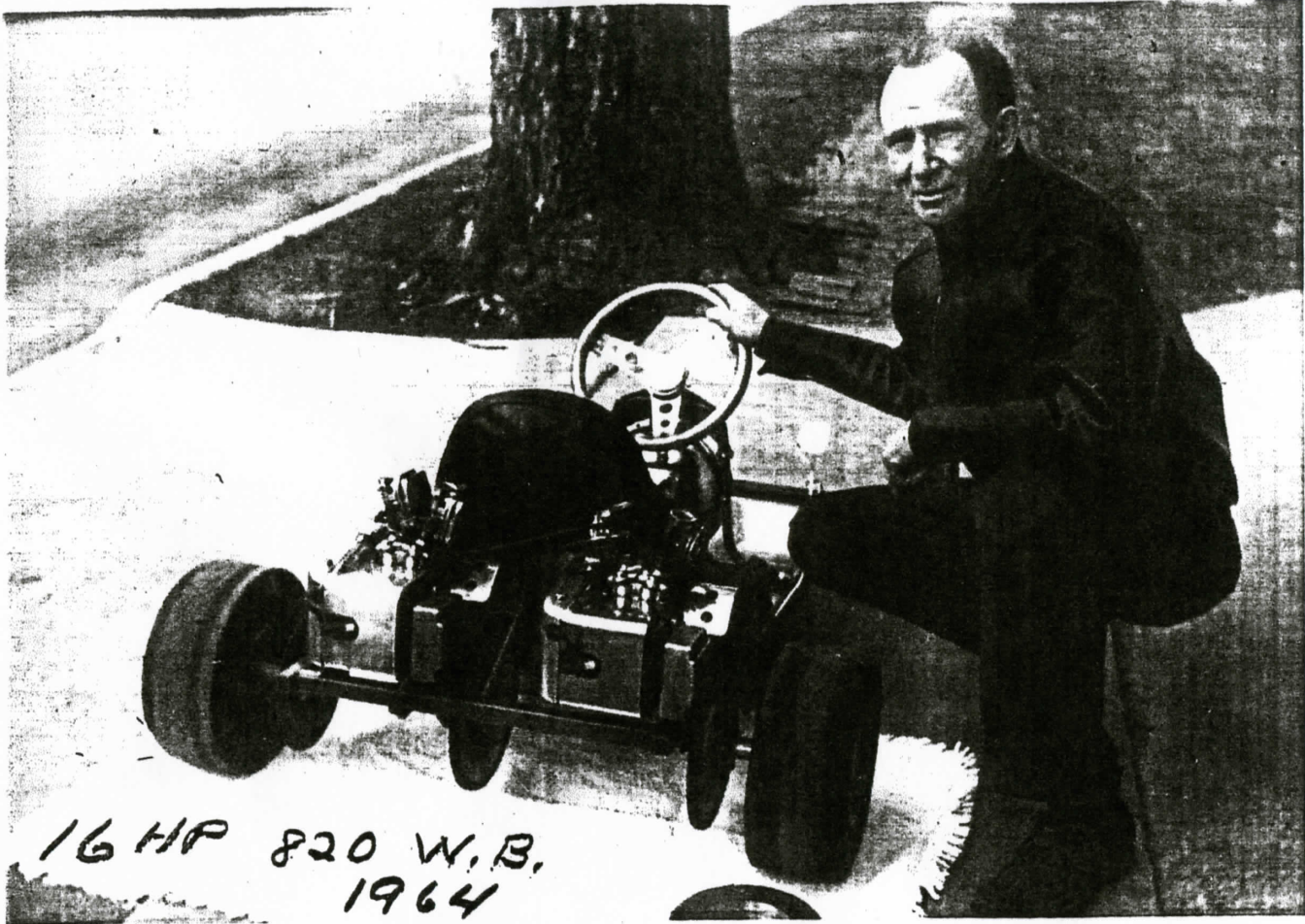




SAE driver Jake Moran leads Dart Kart driver Dick Collier around a temporary course at the Detroit Fairgrounds.

An early 1960's Spider model. Its many bends and welds made it impractical to mass produce.





Jerry's father, Russell Solt, posing with an SAE with twin West Bend 820's each sporting the Solts' own V-16 manifold.

In 1960, 6'4" Jerry Solt folds himself into the kart he built especially for his 4'4" friend Ralph Frech. This is one of Jerry's very first karts.

