



Joe Hornick

/ THE MAN WHO MASTERED CONSULTANCY IN RACING

Text by **Bertie S. Brown**
Photos by **Auto Imagery** and **Moore Good Ink**

AT THE LOWER CORNER OF THE REAR WING OF 2017 FUNNY CAR NATIONAL CHAMPION ROBERT HIGHT'S CAR THERE'S A DECAL THAT DISPLAYS THREE LETTERS, "JHE," AN ABBREVIATION OF "JOE HORNICK ENTERPRISES." Hight won last year's national championship at Pomona, California, and JHE, based in Mooresville, North Carolina, assisted his team with technical know-how throughout the year.

Since the beginning of this century, Hornick has been the hidden hand in a long series of racing successes. His business model is entirely his own: He offers his

company's complete services to just one racer in each category.

The company's complete service is an interesting proposition. JHE uses a test pool that serves to advance research and development in race engines with similar characteristics. Let's say it has four customers running blown alcohol engines in four different racing categories: a blown

alcohol pulling tractor, Pro Mod, Top Alcohol Dragster and Top Alcohol Funny Car. In the test pool program, each engine runs different components or systems and, in so doing, each race team shares a quarter of the R&D costs and receives the cumulative results from all four.

Additionally, JHE has a base of consulting customers like John Force

Racing and Earnhardt Childress Racing. It also has a race engine-builder base. "If an engine builder is an existing valve spring customer," says Hornick, "I'll help them with any engine problem at no cost. That's part of the service we provide as a spring supplier, because we have no consulting customers that compete against our valve spring customers."

"When first starting out and working long hours," recalls Ernie Elliott, renowned NASCAR race engine tuner, "I used to think if I could find an answer to a particular question, I could do so much more." Two decades passed before finding a resource. Then just before Elliott retired from the sport, he began collaborating with Hornick. "I worked with Joe for five or six years, and I learned from him, mostly through observation."

Forum contributors often cite legitimate claims that Hornick has been the greatest influence on the improvements of NHRA Pro Stock engines since the early part of this century. Indeed, proof isn't difficult to find. He delivered the power that brought Pro Stock supremacy to KB Racing during four successive years, three championships with Greg Anderson in 2003, 2004 and 2005, and one with Jason Line in 2006.

For most racing followers, his time at KB Racing is probably the most memorable. Although Greg Anderson was responsible for its origins, it was Hornick who built it—the functioning workshop, the equipment, the dynamometer—he even hired the staff. But most importantly he shocked the Pro Stock world with unmatched engine power

for the time. The astonishing success is still remembered today but, for him, toward the end of his tenure the manner of his departure will be remembered more painfully. The relationship didn't last, a subject that is plainly still unsettling.

But c'est la vie, as they say—the journey wasn't in vain. He switched to Cagnazzi Racing to empower Jeg Coughlin. From these efforts came a further two Pro Stock championships in 2007 and 2008. Prior to these, he helped steer Joe Gibbs Racing to three NASCAR titles. More recently, two consecutive NHRA national championships were won when he joined forces with Norm Grimes, crew chief for Jim Whiteley's Top Alcohol Dragster.

Several years ago, Jimmy Prock, crew chief to John Force Racing's Robert Hight, bought a Midget race car for his son, Austin, but soon realized the car, particularly the engine, was well worn. There were no grounds to suggest it might succeed. "That's when I first met Joe,"



“Our racing capital is embedded in the quality of our engineering, it's our competitive advantage,” says Rick Jackson. “Much of that advantage was created by Joe Hornick.”



“Jimmy Prock is visually alert and more audacious in his drag racing calculations than anyone I know,” says Tom “MongooSe” McEwen. A shrewd judge of talent—he co-crews with Chris Cunningham—it was Prock who invited Hornick to join Robert Hight's 2017 championship-winning campaign.

says Jimmy. “He brought it to life with better parts that lasted longer. Today, that's what he does for our Funny Car program.”

But how does one acquire these skills? They often come through failure, failure, partial success, more failure and ultimately complete success. Again and again, those involved in research are compensated by success only after they've been in a seemingly irreversible downhill slide, navigating between shadow and light.

These are often the inconvenient facts: “In research work,” says Joe, “you might fail fourteen times before making a gain. But by those failures you learn what not to do and, crucially, you need to retain your enthusiasm throughout.” WD40, the ubiquitous penetrating, water-repelling lubricant, succeeded only after 39 defeats.

A native of Madison, Minnesota, when Hornick arrived in the South more than two decades ago, he gained a reputation as a fabulous virtuoso in race engine preparation. His reputation was supported by the successes of the race teams he joined; he was an enterprise unto himself.

Hornick is a deeply reflective interpreter. He listens, he learns. “Most racers want to flourish,” he says, “they want to be propelled to prominence.” Jason Scruggs, Rick Jackson and Norm Grimes are three such candidates. Sometimes, the latter two contest the title in fields of 30 cars or more. All three carry the promise of victory.

Jackson, who runs John Lombardo Jr. in his Top Alcohol Funny Car, admits that he's been on a far firmer footing since first contacting



✓ Hornick delivered four unforgettable NHRA Pro Stock National Championships to KB Racing from 2003 to 2006. Then he joined Cagnazzi Racing for two years, where Jeg Coughlin perpetuated Hornick's supremacy by becoming the Pro Stock champion in 2007 and 2008.

Hornick five years ago with valve gear concerns.

Hornick's attitude toward the race car, particularly the race engine, is very serious. Says Grimes, "If there is vulnerability, he rarely shows it. He uses a fine-grained analysis, pruning away until he arrives at the solution to the problem."

Nevertheless, his engineering knowledge was greatly reinforced by immersing himself each year in thousands of hours of testing (dynamometer, Spintron and track). Mind you, heading a cup team with an annual multi-million dollar research budget can be the ideal vehicle for any ambitious spirit that wants to make an indelible mark in racing. Yet, for Hornick and his innate thirst for knowledge it presented a much more compelling option: an opportunity to learn more. An inveterate observer and questioner, he is constantly seeking and sifting information.

Of course anything can happen throughout the course of a racing season. "Things go wrong," explains Richie Gilmor of Earnhardt Childress Racing, "but

no matter how bleak things look, Joe's presence tends to bring an expectation that all problems have their solutions, and he'll find them."

"In my community—that is in professional drag racing," says John Medlen, "I noticed that he'd tackle anything, from top professional teams to off-the-beaten-path teams. He'd even hop on board with obscure racers trying their best to succeed, so long as they didn't compete with his regular racing clients. That's when I got to know him."

Moreover, it's easy to become indoctrinated by your own dogma, your own beliefs. NHRA Pro Stock Motorcycle multi-time champion George Bryce once said that Hornick was the central figure of every Pro Stock team you ever cared about that suddenly experienced an upturn in performance.

The old phrase, there is no stupid question, is not one Hornick readily accepts. "A stupid question," he says, "is one that has had no

forethought before being asked. I appreciate those who try to think through the problem for themselves before asking the question, rather than idly posing it." Of course this is a salutary reminder to most of us; it evokes that marvelous quote by E. M. Forster: "Spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon."

Yet for the serious-minded who need help in becoming more competitive or maintaining their presence at the winning edge, Hornick has demonstrated repeatedly that you are stronger having access to someone who can determine the critical factors that bring a successful solution to a given problem. **DR**



✓ Norm Grimes with Jim Whitely assisted by Hornick won the NHRA Top Alcohol Dragster Championship in 2012 and 2013, and in 2015 with Joey Severance.

Sources

ERNIE ELLIOTT
Ernie Elliott Inc.

RITCHIE GILMOR
ECR

JIMMY PROCK
John Force Racing

JOHN MEDLEN
DSR

NORM GRIMES
Norm Grimes Racing
(TAD)

GEORGE BRYCE
Star Racing

RICK JACKSON
Rick Jackson Racing
(TAFC)

JOE HORNICK INC.
155 Bevan Dr.
Mooresville, NC
28115
704.664.7322
Jheinc.com