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John Wayne? Try Wayne Helliwell

Wayne Helliwell Jr. just might be the new American cowboy.

He's willing to wrestle a 600-horsepower open-wheel Modified. He can tame a winged-and-fast-as-lightning S uppermodified. He'll finesse a full-fender American-Canadian Tour Late Model.

And he can do it all in the same day.

Casual stock car racing fans in Vermont may have only begun to hear about Dover, N.H., native Helliwell, who just completed his first full season chasing the ACT Late Model Tour. The short track diehards, though, are fully aware of his drive.

Last weekend, Helliwell capped his latest in a long string of incredible seasons by winning five of six starts in the "Oktoberfest" event at his home track, Lee USA Speedway on the New Hampshire seacoast. On Saturday, he won qualifying heats in three different cars -- Supermodified, Late Model, and Pro Stock (a beefed-up Late Model). Helliwell then handily won the 100-lap Pro Stock feature on Saturday night, won the 50-lap Late Model feature on Sunday afternoon and finished a tight third in the 35-lap Supermodified race later in the evening.

A Supermodified track championship this season made Helliwell a title winner at Lee

USA for the fourth consecutive year, having won the Late Model crown in 2010 and 2009, and the Sportsman championship in 2008. This season he also went back-to-back as both the New Hampshire state champion in the NASCAR Whelen All-American Series and the champion of ACT's Ford "Blue Oval" Challenge Cup, each for the second-straight year.

The second-generation driver had always been a standout at Lee USA and around the Northeast, but the magic really began when Bruce Bernhardt hired Helliwell to drive his Sportsman car in 2008. Bernhardt literally grew up turning wrenches for another New Hampshire racer, fan favorite "Dynamite" Dave Dion. When Bernhardt formed his team with Helliwell, he chose Ford power, an orange-and-black paint scheme, and the number 27 -- each an homage to Dion's glory days that saw him win countless races at tracks like Thunder Road in Barre and the former Catamount Stadium in Milton.

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The results since Bernhardt and Helliwell's pairing might be considered an homage to Dion, too: In their four years together, they've won six championships and more than 30 races at Lee USA, Riverside, Twin State, and Canaan Fair speedways in New Hampshire, Waterford Speedbowl in Connecticut, the prestigious "Turkey Derby" at New Jersey's Wall Stadium, and the middle segment of the 2009 Milk Bowl at Thunder Road in Barre.

While Helliwell has yet to grab an ACT race victory, he's had podium finishes at four tracks including the New Hampshire Motor Speedway mile and in his first full ACT season this year, he was the championship runner-up behind Williston's Brian Hoar. He made two starts on the New Hampshire-based Pro Stock Six Pack Series and won them both, and, of course, there was the Supermodified title this year which Helliwell won while driving for Eddie Witkum's team.

Winning the hog's share of last weekend's Oktoberfest races was just the icing on Helliwell's cake. The 5-for-6 feat, immediately regarded by race fans as one of the more memorable performances in the last decade, was cemented into legendary status when it was revealed that the person posting live updates to Helliwell's Facebook fan page during the race was, in fact, Helliwell, typing on his iPhone from the cockpit of his race car.

With fourteen championships and a warehouse full of wins, Helliwell is a shoo-in for the New England Auto Racing Hall of Fame when his time comes. But at just 34

years old, he's just getting warmed up.

Long gone are the days of pistol-toting horsemen riding through town and blazing legendary trails in their wake as they press on into the great beyond. Here today are stock car drivers manhandling 3,000-pound machines around asphalt and clay-top bullrings on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday nights.

Sports broadcaster Ken Squier, a Vermont native who champions the common man doing uncommon deeds, has said that the only frontier left in America is for stock car racers to drive just a bit harder into the first turn.

John Wayne's time has passed. Wayne Helliwell's time is now.

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