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Racers devastated by shutdown of 136-acre Milan Dragway



Phoebe Wall Howard

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A 136-acre parcel of land about 50 miles southwest of Detroit that represents generations of memories for families throughout the region is up for sale, with offers accepted from serious buyers until the end of July.

The Milan Dragway has been placed in receivership and a Monroe County Circuit Court judge has appointed an attorney to manage the track and sell it to pay its debts.

Unpaid bills and liens total some \$2.5 million. The goal of the sale is to pay off creditors and turn over the property to a new buyer who, ideally, delivers on a vision that's consistent with the little farming community in London Township. Where some towns know the familiar sound of freighters or trains, this town has recognized the hum of race cars since 1963.

David Findling, a Royal Oak lawyer appointed by the court, has been tasked with finding a buyer and then going through a judicial review intended to close the deal. The value of the property has, until now, been defined by a quarter-mile drag strip.

But this is not just a story about a property sale or the potential for a big developer to swoop in and build a McMansion community. This is about what one family lost, how it rippled and devastated thousands of other families built around drag racing, the competition for the neglected property and dreams of bringing back what once was.

Milan is not pronounced MEE-lon, like the famous Italian city, but rather MY-lin.

It was a place where friends and families for generations created memories of cheering in the stands as vehicles lined up for a race like the kind depicted in classic films such as "American Graffiti" or "Grease." American cars line up like sprinters on a track and drivers floor the gas pedal to go as fast as possible in a straight line for a quarter-mile. Afterward, competitors and their families camped together on the property when the races ended. Milan Dragway, for

some, might be compared to hockey nights at Joe Louis Arena in downtown Detroit, an unforgettable part of our childhood.

"Milan has been in my life since I was born and to have it close, it hurts," said racer Jimmy Detrick, 55, of Garden City. "My father raced a 1966 pickup truck. He street raced it and then he raced it at Milan. I made my first run in 1981 and I've raced four days a week for many, many years."

Some races involve prize money, some don't.

"We race for money. But return on investment is very backward. Nobody really makes money doing it," he said.

Detrick, a mechanic whose father was also a mechanic, says he has gone 240 mph to run a quarter-mile in 5.77 seconds. He is a well-known driver. These days, he spends evenings delivering lost luggage for airlines at Detroit Metro.

"The TV news thinks these dudes doing doughnuts (in the street) is drag racing. That's stupidity racing. That's the dumbest thing people can do," he said. "Drag racing is a controlled environment that's safe and safe for spectators. I just hope Milan stays a drag strip and people can use it for years."

The owners announced they were shutting down drag racing back in March.

Motocross and dirt bike racing is continuing for now.

But the website says, "With heavy hearts, we must announce that we will not be opening as scheduled for the 2021 racing season. We appreciate all of your support over the years. We have always operated with the best interests of our racers and fans in mind. Current circumstances do not allow us to operate the track safely, and so we are not able to open the track at all."

Its Facebook page had more than 5,000 reactions to the March 30 news.

"My first summer job was out there 27 years ago. I can't tell you how cool it was to be 14 and saturated in cars that went fast," Ricky Roberts of Morenci posted. "Everyone deserves the experiences Milan Dragway provided for so many for so long."

What happened

Back-to-back-to-back rainy seasons and then COVID-19 dealt Milan a final blow.

William Kapolka, president of Milan Dragway for three decades, had a massive heart attack in February 2020. He is on the mend but unable to talk with a reporter, family said.

"It was exceptionally stressful," said Deneen Baxter, his daughter.

When she tried to find words for the situation at the raceway, she was at a loss.

"My son said it to me best one day. I said I can't find the right words for this, and he said, 'It's like hospice. You lived a beautiful life. Milan Dragway lived a beautiful life. Then you got sick and it was kind of like a slow death, and it just kept dragging out. We knew we couldn't get it back. It was too far gone. You had to let it go.' "

Baxter, 47, began to sob.

"I'm so sorry I'm getting emotional. I don't generally cry," she said. "I have a deep love and respect for the racing community. I very much appreciate all the years that I was able to spend out there. The racetrack is a very large part of our family. Our whole life was spent at the racetrack. And it's a part of the Motor City history, which is all about cars. This was about keeping people off the streets. Milan, in many ways, was a home away from home for people."

Her son, Chase, now 23, and daughter Krysti, now 28, sold tickets and sold hot dogs growing up. Krysti ended up the race director, foregoing a graduation ceremony at Central Michigan University to be there for her racers and Motor City Mayhem in 2013.

"This isn't a foreclosure deal where we're ripping out the cupboards on the way out," Deneen Baxter said. "My grandma had an ice cream shack out there called, 'Granny's Ice Cream.' I was part of operations, the vice president, and did everything outside the guardrails — ticket promotions, scheduling, sponsorships."

"One rainy season you can recover from, not three in a row," Baxter said. "We can't run in the rain. There was no recovery."

The dragway depended on revenue from ticket sales, track fees, sponsorships and concession and souvenirs.

Still, hope remains.

"I'm excited for the future of the Milan Dragway — for new ideas, new hands, fresh funding," Baxter said. "I'm looking forward to the upgrades they're going to make, the programs they're going to have."

What's at stake

Drag racing is not run on a circular track like NASCAR or other popular televised races. Drag racing is often the texture of small-town America. It's lining up vehicles at the starting line while each racer waits for the seven lights in the "Christmas Tree" to count down to green. Two racers, each in their own lane, compete to see who can go the fastest for a quarter-mile.

These are modified cars or custom-built bodies, engines and suspensions. They are not street legal.

Detrick declined to reveal any secrets or tips about what kinds of modifications are made.

"It takes lots of money and lots of knowledge," Detrick said. "Every single part is different from the factory parts. All hand built."

The racing community is tight, traveling to different Midwest communities to compete. Competitors camp together. Families grow up together.

"I was probably 6 or 7 when my uncles and my father starting taking me out there to Milan. It's generational," said racer Steve Timoszyk, 51, of Belleville, a HVAC technician who has been racing at Milan for 35 years. In our class, we run quarter-mile in 6.1 seconds, going 225 mph."

Milan is really like a big campground with a drag strip in the middle.

"When we go there, we spend Friday through Sunday. We're basically family, hanging out and racing in between," Timoszyk said. "Now, probably 50% of the racers can't afford to drive 2.5 hours to other tracks with the fuel expense and other things."

Who will buy it?

Meanwhile, Milan Dragway is in financial distress and needs to be rescued.

A string of potential buyers from Michigan have expressed interest.

One guy is a car enthusiast with a concrete business.

One guy had a Honda Motorcycle dealership and likes dirt bike racing.

One guy runs a Pro-Am race team with professionals and amateurs.

Then there's David Ploucha, 53, of Saline — another prospective buyer. He's an engineer first and a drag racer second. He wants to take the track back to its glory days.

"This is an asset sale, to pay off debtors. Hard stop. It's that simple," he said. "This is about fewer people walking away with empty pockets. My goal is, I don't need to make money. I'm here to not lose money."

He's putting together a team with experience in running a track, to handle things like sponsorships and licensing, to do what they know well.

"This is a racetrack. It's not rocket science. This is about creating a great experience and running it like Disney and getting people to come," Ploucha said. "Once this track is gone, it will be nearly impossible to build another one."

He's a self-described blue-collar kid from Taylor whose mom Geraldine worked as a nurse at Wyandotte General Hospital and dad Gerald worked in manufacturing at the General Motors Romulus Engine Plant.

Ploucha, who started drag racing in a 1970 Chevelle Super Sport, went on to be a powertrain software and calibration manager at the Chrysler Chelsea Proving Grounds. When Chrysler was struggling back in 2008, he had a midlife crisis and left to start a successful software company that serviced major automakers and eventually employed 250 people. It sold in 2015 to Delphi for "nine figures," he said.

So Ploucha has the financial strength to resurrect Milan.

"We'd go there, my buddies, and it got rough with the lack of investment. It's just tired," he said. "It used to be a premier facility. The track was in great condition. The grass was well-maintained. The bleachers were safe. You're in the middle of nowhere when you go to this place. There were real fans walking around in the pits. You could bring your Jeep Grand Cherokee and run it."

Now, everything is just falling apart.

"When you're working on your car, you're laying on gravel. The fence is dilapidated. Weeds are growing everywhere. And when you're not investing in the bathrooms, you've given up,"

Ploucha said. "The closest track to Milan is Summit Motor Sports Park in Norwalk, Ohio, a second-generation track. They work to make sure kids have fun, they're running junior dragsters, they have amenities and make sure food is decent with healthy options. It's common to have a nice RV park and a campground for weekend stay."

Driving more than two hours to any track, especially for spectators, is too much of a hassle for too many, he said. As a result, folks are listing their drag cars on Facebook Marketplace for \$50,000-70,000 because they're just not using them, Ploucha said.

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In recent weeks, an event in Norwalk included 80 junior dragsters, kids under age 16, attracted thousands of family members and spectators, he said.

"Some guys like fishing, some guys like art and some guys like cars," Ploucha said. "It's what I do."

These are the Downriver boys and girls who spent weekends working on their motorcycles and cars. They drove cars like the 1969 Pontiac GTO, a 1970 Chevelle SS, a 1965 Buick Gran Sport and a turbocharged 1969 Dodge Dart.

These are the teenagers who cruised Telegraph, Joy and Plymouth late at night.

These days, Findling is coordinating property evaluations to ensure there are no known underground storage tanks or other issues. There are bid packets available. And the property is being sold as-is, no warranties for anything.

"After I decide the purchaser, I have to get the sale confirmed by the court," Findling told the Free Press.

The goal, he emphasized, is to get as many outstanding bills paid as possible. He said the debts total about \$2.5 million. And the process will include discussion and negotiation in an attempt to get the highest and best price. In the end, Milan could no longer get money from traditional sources of financing and lacked money to pay taxes, utilities and for maintenance and upkeep. The track had to resort to borrowing money from pawnbroker and reality TV star Les Gold, Findling said.

Now it's collection time.

Dates at Milan

Kristina Sawyers, 34, of Warren is a paralegal for the court appointed receiver.

She remembers her first dates at Milan Dragway 17 years ago with the man who would become her husband. They were spectators, and Ryan Sawyers raced his SRT 4 Dodge Neon with its new motor, turbo and nitrous oxide. Later, they took their daughter Gabriella until she was 4 or 5.

They stopped as it fell into disrepair.

Findling, the man trying to find an owner, himself raced a black 1979 Trans Am at Milan. He and his brother Daniel both raced. And since then, David Findling has taken his little boy, Noah.

"This is part of our roots," Findling said. "Milan is as much a part of the culture of our community as Vernors or Faygo."

Henry Lenden wrote on the Milan Facebook page, "Let's hope someone buys it with a plan to succeed. No drag strip in Southeastern MI is a travesty."

Milan hosted national drag racing events as well as swap meets, car shows, and rock concerts, wrote Hagerty.com in a June article titled, "Michigan's Milan Dragway is on the ropes."

"A pond on the property supported marine drags and corners of the facility were groomed for mud racing and motocross events," said Hagerty, the world's largest insurer of collector vehicles. "Both Car and Driver and Automobile magazine rented access to Milan for occasional car tests."

The 'roar' of springtime

Residents who live near Milan are quietly hoping things turn out OK.

"London Township, this is a rural agricultural community that wants to be the epitome of country living. They don't want big stores or big shops or malls or grocery stores," said Ron Youngblood, zoning administrator and code enforcement officer and deputy township supervisor.

"The majority of what I hear is that people like peace, tranquility, country, corn, soybeans," he said. "The dragway has been missed. People say it's not even spring until the engines roar."

When Milan closed in March, residents knew it would mean a sale and hoped someone would put money back into the operation and make it great again. When told of the vision outlined by Ploucha, Youngblood said, "That gives me the chills. That's exactly what I want to hear."

This, to some, is like a house flip, where someone has a dream and can see potential.

The town doesn't want somebody just buying the land but somebody who believes in it.

"Our big employers are trucking and farming," Youngblood said. "This is more a farming community than a racing community but it's like it goes hand in hand. The dragway left such a mark. Many of the residents have worked there. Many of the residents have raced there. People miss the sound. You get used to hearing farm equipment and race cars."

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Contact Phoebe Wall Howard: 313-618-1034 or orphoward@freepress.com. Follow her on Twitter@phoebesaid. Sign up for our autos newsletter.