

# ***Celebrating 65 Years of Hose Racing in Owego, New York***



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MEMORIES RELIVED

## Sixty-five years of hose racing

CONTRIBUTED BY STEVE  
LAWRENCE

Americans live about 80 years on average, right? Since I am a sportswriter, I tend to frame things in a sports context, thus I will put forth the contention that when we are 20 years old, we have reached first base. At 40, we have hit a double, 60 is a triple and at 80, we cross home plate. Of course, we can "stay in the game" so to speak, and I have actually known a handful of people who have made it to 100, thus getting to first base again and going 2-for-2!

I just slid into third base earlier this year, and I have lived long enough to know that opinions and perspec-



Back after a seven year hiatus, the 1968 team: Rusty Gilfillan, Bob Goodenough, Butch Short, Rick Phelps, Joe Fuller and Kevin Gilfillan.

tives can take varying paths. There are some things about which we feel the same way throughout the entire course of our lives, and other things that mean so much to us at one point in our lives, and later, we could not care less

about them. And some things – and for me, hose racing falls into this category – come full circle.

When I was a little guy, I looked at Owego's hose racing teams with a mixture

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## Croton Hose Company 3 Honors Our Fallen Brother

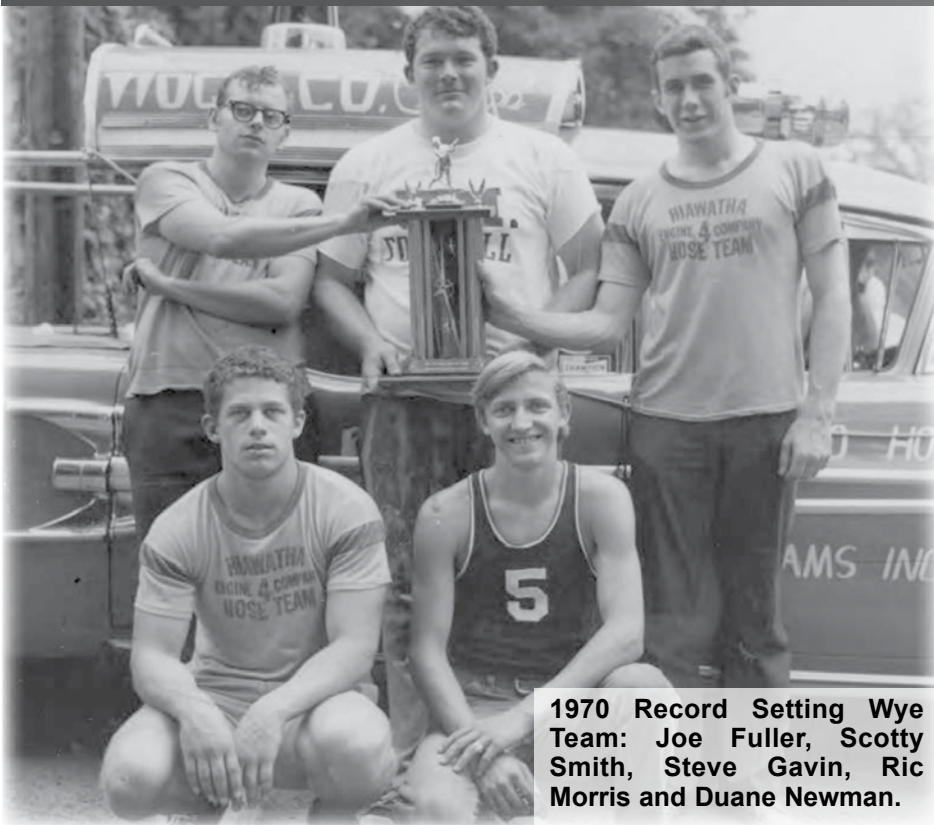


  
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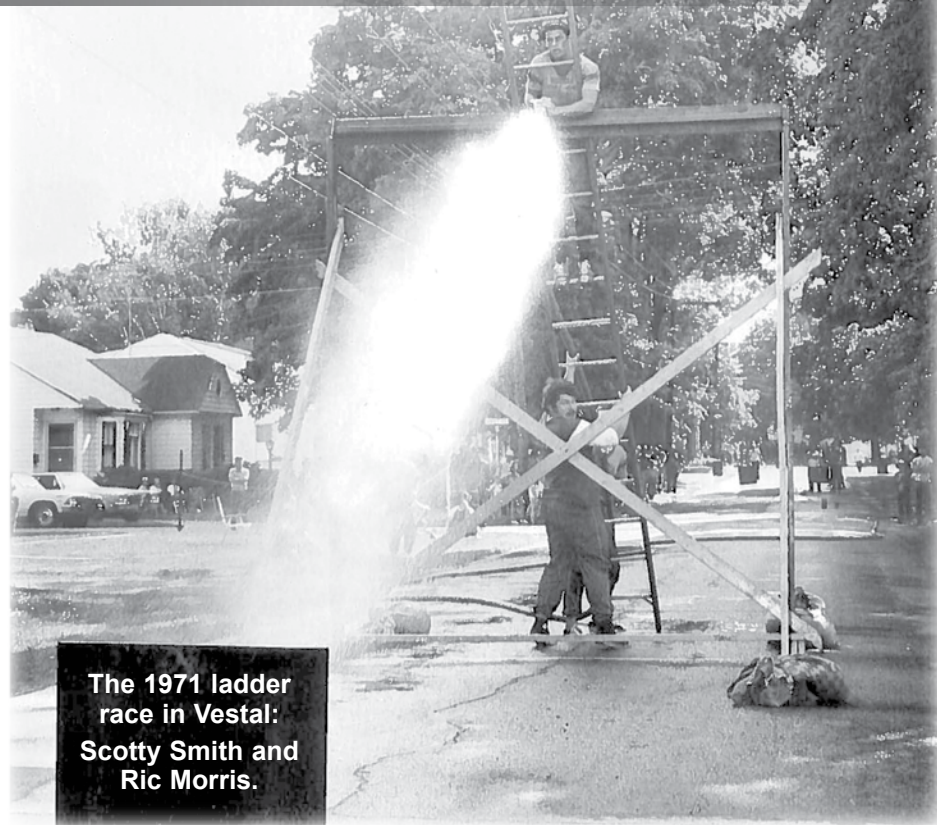
*"We Are Alive"*

  
**FLAT  
RATS**

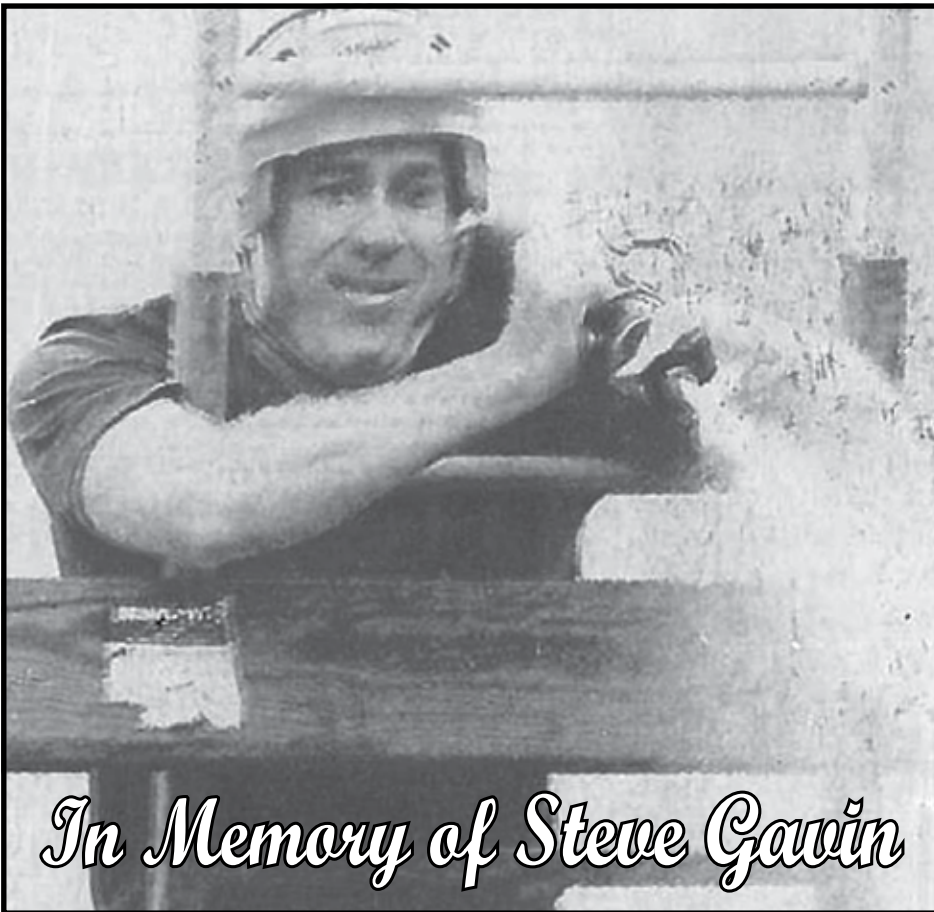




1970 Record Setting Wye  
Team: Joe Fuller, Scotty  
Smith, Steve Gavin, Ric  
Morris and Duane Newman.



The 1971 ladder  
race in Vestal:  
Scotty Smith and  
Ric Morris.



*In Memory of Steve Gavin*

THANK YOU  
OWEGO HOSE  
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# Hose Teams look to refurbish the Fireman's Fountain

BY WENDY POST

An area landmark in Owego for many years, the Fireman's Fountain, located on the Courthouse Square in Owego, may be getting a new look as Owego Hose Teams Inc., a 501c3 organization, is working to make some repairs and restore the statue to proper working order.

Work planned on the project, once monies are raised, would be to repair or replace the pump and water source to proper working order; clean, restore, and repaint the statue; redesign to incorporate new sidewalks and landscaping; and design a memorial of stamped concrete as part of the sidewalk

design to remember their fallen comrades.

The Owego Hose Teams Inc. is looking for partners that want to get involved in saving this landmark. Partners whom have already committed to this project include Suez Water, Justin Hulslander, the Marine Corps League, Global Industrial Services Inc., and the Owego Hose Teams.

It is hoped that, once fundraising is complete, the project can begin in the summer of 2017. And although the cost to perform the work is still being calculated, project organizers feel that its refurbishment is vital to preserving this historic landmark.

"We believe that the statue is an integral part of the Village as a whole, and is a



Pictured, is the Fireman's Fountain, located on the Courthouse Square in Owego, N.Y. (Photo by Wendy Post)



Joe Renda in the wye race held in Owego in 1995.

piece of history and heritage that needs to be taken care of and preserved for generations to come," said John Loftus, fire department member and volunteer for this project.

The village, recently,

approved the project to move forward and is 100 percent supportive of these efforts. They are now looking for area residents to get involved, and donate to make this refurbishment and repair a reality.

To donate, or for more information, contact John Loftus by calling (607) 759-9420 or by email to [jloftus1@stnyrr.com](mailto:jloftus1@stnyrr.com).

You can also visit [www.owegohoseteams.com](http://www.owegohoseteams.com). There is a PayPal link on

this site; simply annotate that the donation is for the Statue Project in the comment section. You can also send a check, payable to Owego Hose Teams, Inc., to 461 East Main St., Owego, N.Y. 13827.





From left, Merle Wright and Walt Pianosi keep score during the Flat Rats Hose Race.



Members from Company #3 participate in the hose cart race. Pictured, is Tom Donovan, Jr. and John Loftus.



The winning Owego team rides the truck during a parade that rounded out the Central New York Firemen's Convention that took place in Owego, N.Y. in 2010.



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**Congratulations to  
Owego Hose Team!**



# What is hose racing?

**Firematic hose races are timed events where firefighters test their skills. Teams of five members must connect nozzles to hoses, hoses to hoses, and hoses to the fire hydrant, and knock down targets in the quickest time in the ladder, wye, and straight lay competitions. The motor hose race was discontinued in 1999. Hose races improve basic firefighting skills.**

**Incorporated as a not for profit in 2015, the Owego Hose Teams Inc. have been competing in firematic hose racing since 1951. This year marks their 65th anniversary season. The teams have won a total of 23 Central New York firematic hose racing titles and are known throughout the state for their racing prowess.**

Firematic Hose Racing carries on a tradition as old as firefighting itself. Ever since the beginning, when ladders, hoses - and even buckets - were invented as a way to extinguish fires, there was always a spirit of competition among firefighters as to who could be the first "team" to extin-

guish the fire. Even today, there is a healthy competition to get "first water" on a fire between engine companies within a department. In the early days, a monetary reward was paid to those who were able to extinguish a fire. Out of this spirit of competition grew a unique form of racing

called hose racing.

What began long ago as simple, unsophisticated footraces have evolved into season-long competitions in some areas of the country between numerous rival racing teams, with several different classes of competition, along with officiating and modern equipment. In

Central New York the primary hose racing event is the Central New York Race held each summer at the Central New York Fireman's Annual Convention.

The races are timed and points are awarded to the teams with the fastest times. An Overall Points Winner is declared at the conclusion of the three races. The three races held include the ladder, wye, and 5 man straight lay races. The five man straight lay replaced the motor hose race in 1999. The races are where firefighters test their skills. Teams of five members must connect nozzles to hoses, hoses to hoses, and hoses to the fire hydrant, and knock down targets.

Hose races improve basic firefighting skills. Hose



**Ray Thompson and Harry Jones, who is originally from Owego and now living in Sayre, Pa., talk about the good ole' days of hose racing.**



**Pictured, is the 2010 Company #1 Team: Dayton Coney, Danny Gavin, Tim Gavin and Bill Herwerth.**

work, hose advancement, and water stream placement are all key components to hose racing that must be mastered by firefighters.

### **Owego – Firematic Hose Racing Excellence Known throughout New York State**

From Albany to Utica to Syracuse to Binghamton, when someone mentions hose racing in firefighter circles or in general, the Owego Hose Teams usually come to mind. For 65 years Owego has become synonymous with firematic hose racing excellence. The Central New York Firemen's Association (CNYFA) firematic hose racing competitions started after World War II in the late 1940s. Records indicate Owego started running in 1951 and stopped in 1961 before resuming competition in

1968. Owego hosted the 1953 CNYFA convention and the races were held on lower Front Street. Twenty-two teams competed that day in the warm and humid weather:

### **Championship Owego Teams**

#### **1959 – Owego Croton Hose Co. #3**

Owego won its first Central New York Title in 1959 in Elmira. Knocking off 30 other teams, the Company #3 team of Dick Franz, Ed Franz, Leon Halstead, Dick Hilker, Leo Lawrence, and Bob Thompson scored first place finishes in both the wye and motor hose races on the road to victory. All races were run with 2 1/2 inch hose, a feat Ed Franz was especially proud of since the ladder race is now

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## Racing

FROM PAGE 6

run with 1 1/2 inch hose.

### 1972 – Owego Hiawatha Engine Co. #4

Hose racing returned to Owego in 1968 after a brief absence. It took the Owego boys four years after this break to regain the Central crown in Sidney. Team members Joe Fuller, Steve Gavin, Ernie Reese, Mike Stella, and Jim Van Nordstrand beat out 36 teams running a first place ladder and second place wye. Fuller, the man who brought hose racing back to Owego in 1968, was held down and doused with hydrant water in honor of his team's achievement.

### 1983, 1987, 1989 – Owego Croton Hose Co. #3

Championships continued to be won in the 1980s

with victories in 1983, 1987 and 1989. The record in the motor hose race was set in 1983 in Utica where Owego beat out 24 teams in route to its third overall title. Owego hosted the 1987 CNYFA convention and won again on its home turf, knocking off Odessa and Montour Falls. The Montour Falls "Swamp Stompers" had become Owego's arch rival. A 1990 championship in Ithaca allowed Owego to retire the overall traveling trophy because they had won it three times, a first for Owego. Championship team members in the 1980s were Larry Ferguson, Tom Ferguson, Dave Franz, Joe Fuller, Steve Gavin, Rick Hinchcliffe, John Porcari, Lou Striley and Steve Tiffany.

Please see **RACING** on page 8



Owego's Hose Team Receives Championship Trophies at Award Ceremonies at No. 3's Fire Station.



The 1987 championship team – Lou Striley, Larry Ferguson, Joe Fuller, Steve Gavin, Steve Tiffany, Tom Ferguson and Rick Hinchcliffe.

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## Racing

FROM PAGE 7

### 1990s through today

More wins came about in the 1990s. The Central title was retained in Binghamton in 1991, 1994 in Norwich, and 1995 in Owego. The 1995 team of apprentice firefighters (all 16 years old) was the youngest team to win in tournament history at their first race knocking off their father's team. Team members were Brian Davis, J.T. Fisher, Rob Marshall, Matt Porcari and Pat Gavin. The year was rounded out with titles in 1998 and 1999 by the Ahwaga Ladder Co. #5 team of Mike Bidwell, Scott Bidwell, Dan Godfrey, Dave Pickering, Aaron Riegel, Joe Renda and Bubba Valentine.

Racing has declined to a dozen or so teams, but Owego has continued to domi-

nate in the 2000s. Champions have been held by different Owego teams for the longest winning streak in CNYFA history - from 2003-2014, and 2016. Oriskany knocked off Owego in 2015, ending the 11-year winning streak. Team members from this period were many, but the constant participants were Jimmy Morris, Matt Porcari, Tom Donovan Jr., Tom Donovan III, Joe Ward, Nick Jerzak, Mike MacNaughton, Lou Striley, Pat Gavin, Tim Gavin, Danny Gavin, Dayton Coney, Bill Herewith, Andy McDowell, Hank Thomas, Jason Weaver and Charlie Olmstead.

### Hose Team Vehicles

"I can think of no more stirring symbol of man's humanity to man than a fire engine." - Kurt Vonnegut.

Members of the Owego Hose Teams are often described as "characters" with character. Their grit, skill, commitment to excellence, and determination has been marveled for decades. Also associated with these characters have been their vehicles over the years.

The teams of the 1950s rode around in a vehicle named the "Purple People Eater." Winners in the races are required to also parade, per the rules, so Owego would parade in the "Purple People Eater", a retired purple hearse. In 1968 Owego replaced the "Purple People Eater" with the "Goofy Grape" (also a retired purple hearse) and the Orange Peeler. The Grape became a

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The Goofy Grape with 1970s team members Rick Phelps, Steve Gavin, Moe McDowell, Chuck McDowell, Jim VanNordstrand and Joe Fuller.



Steve Gavin and Rick Phelps run the ladder race featured in the 1979 book "Volunteers - A portrait of small town firefighters," by Raymond Pompilio.

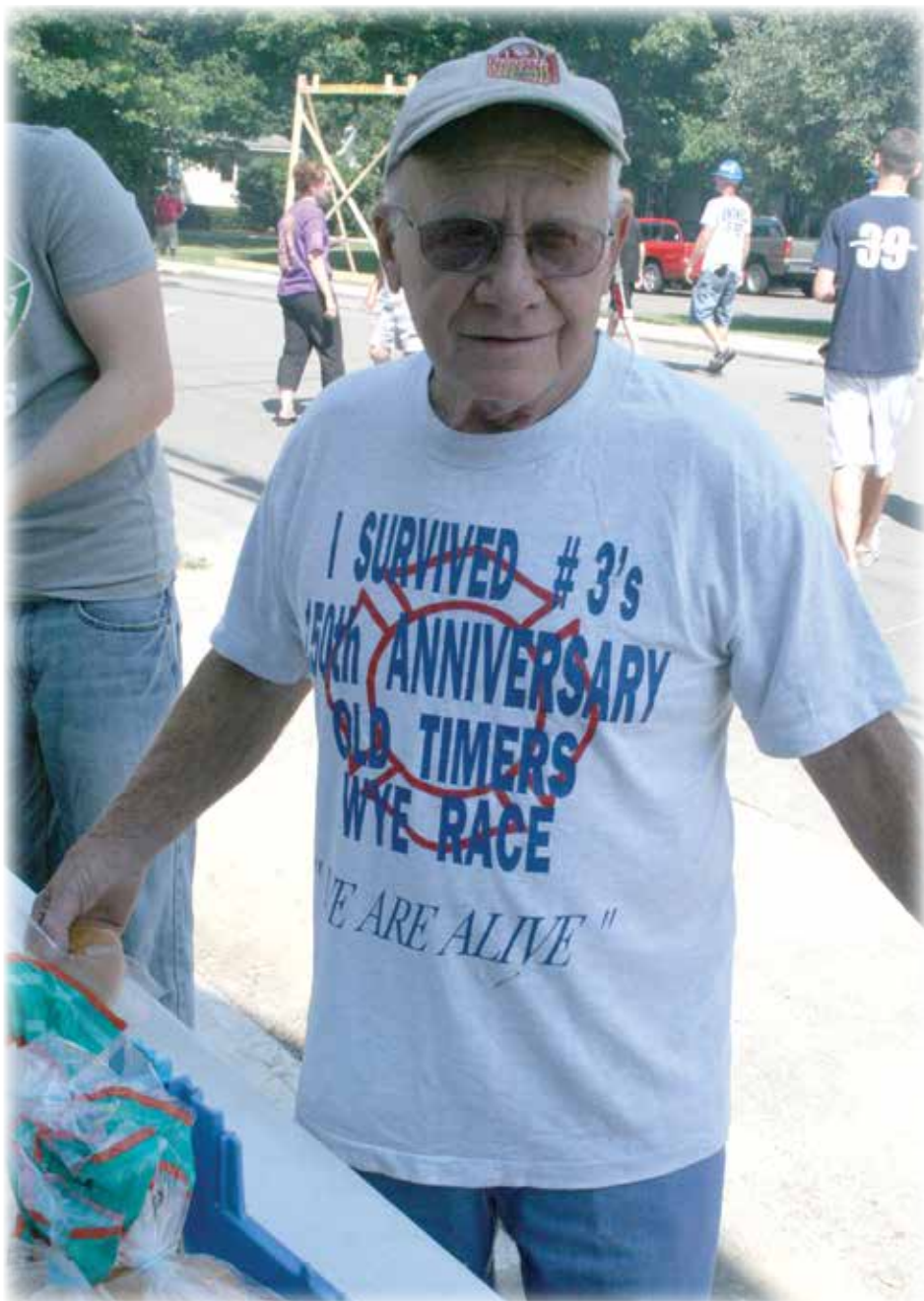


The Orange Peeler replaced the Purple People Eater as the hose team vehicle in 1968.



Saturday June 3, 2017 at Tioga Country Club  
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Pat Panetti sports an "I survived #3's 150th anniversary wye race" shirt from 1994.

Racing

FROM PAGE 8

symbol of firefighter fraternity in fun and mischief. Although the statute of limitations has probably run out on many of the adventures with the Grape, those stories will be left with those hose racers to tell who carried out the good natured

deeds.

Today, the Owego team now parades around in Owego Fire Department's former 1969 Mack pumper, much like the days of the People Eater, Grape and Peeler. The Mack is one of 61 R608 Series Pumpers manufactured by Mack

Trucks and the last gas engine off its line before converting to strictly diesel run trucks. Although less mischievous than teams prior, Owego has as much fun with fellow firefighters from around the state at the hose races as their forefathers in racing did.



Pictured, are Tom Donovan, Jr. and Mike Glasgow in the 2010 wye race at Owego.

Proud to Support the Owego Hose Team







Hose Team Official Scorer Dick Franz, 1959 champion.



The last time the motor hose race where members jump from a moving truck was run in 1999.



The 2010 hose teams in Owego.



The 1990 hose teams in Ithaca.

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# MEMORIES RELIVED



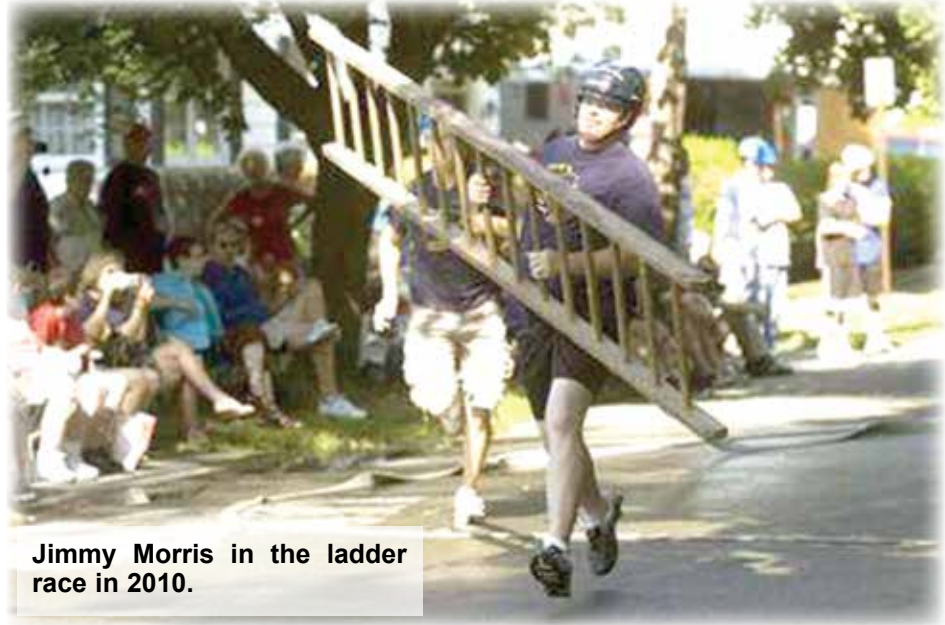
Tom Donovan III and Joe Morabito compete in the record setting Straight Lay Race in Owego, 2013.



Danny Gavin, Pat Gavin, Dayton Coney, and Tim Gavin compete in the wye race at the Strawberry Festival.



Today the hose teams parade on the Mack.



Jimmy Morris in the ladder race in 2010.



The 2014 hose teams in Owego.



Nick Jerzak and Mike MacNaughton on the hydrant in 2012.



## Hose

FROM PAGE 2

of awe, fascination and pride. My dad was Leo Lawrence, and I had heard the whispers that he was a Korean War vet, and had trained for the Navy's elite Underwater Demolition Team. People told me that my dad was a two-way starter for Owego Free Academy's football team in the 1940's, and that he was a tough-as-nails center and linebacker. My dad was one rugged guy, and someone told me that he and his buddies - Dick Franz, Ed Franz, Leon Halstead, Pete Porcari, Bob Thompson and Dick Hilker - had represented the Croton Hose #3 station at the 1959 Central New York Firemen's Association (CNYFA) hose racing state championships, and had brought home the first-place trophy. When they talked about that achievement, they did so with obvious pride.

As a kid not quite old enough to play Little League baseball, I sometimes tagged along when my dad went to meetings at the #3's firehouse on Tal-



**Pictured is the Central #1 Fire Hydrant on Delphine Street in the Raftis' front yard. This is the where the teams practice each year.**

cott Street, which the legendary "Flat Rats" used as their home base. I watched some football on television and played on the pool table, and that state championship trophy - like my dad - looked about 10 feet tall.

As mentioned, I had also been to some parades and watched my dad and his friends ride in and walk alongside that famous "Purple People Eater." The guys were cheered loudly, and while I applauded along with everyone else, I didn't yet understand the community's collective affection, gratitude, and respect for volunteer firemen.

The late 1960's were a time when my buddies and I would jump on our bicycles on weekends or summer mornings and find a baseball game at Nick Raftis Field, go fishing in the Owego Creek or bother girls. Our parents didn't worry about us, and they knew that eventually we'd get hungry enough to find our way back home.

Sometimes, as I was pedaling from one adventure to another, I would see a bunch of guys practicing their hose racing drills, and I could see that some of my own friends were anxiously awaiting their opportunity to represent the "Flat Rats." John Por-

***Co-Author's note:*** *When Pat Gavin reached out to me earlier this year and asked me to write a story about the Owego Hose Teams on the occasion of 2016 being the 65th anniversary of the teams' founding, I said I'd love to help out. There are some memories that take us back a decade, some that take us back a half a lifetime, and some that register among our earliest memories ever.*

*For me, being reminded that the Owego Hose Teams won the state championship in 1959, when I was three years old, brought back an amusingly unsettling memory. The following year, I was standing along North Avenue in Owego as a four year-old parade watcher, and I recall being told that the purple hearse I saw rolling down the street was known as "the Purple People Eater." I think I clutched my mom's hand a little tighter, and I was worried about my dad. He was, after all, walking in the parade, and that damn Purple People Eater thing was 10 feet behind him, gaining ground.*

*I told Pat Gavin that I'd like to be a co-collaborator on this project, as I believe my observations and perspective as an "outsider" will be enhanced greatly by the view from the inside. I can bring, in Janis Joplin's words, "A little piece of my heart" to this story, but Pat can do a lot better than that.*

*I'd like to thank Pat and several of my lifelong friends for the honor of sharing some thoughts paying tribute to the Owego Hose Teams. Writing this brought back some wonderful memories, and reconnected me to some very special people.*

**- Steve Lawrence/Sports Columnist, Ithaca Times**

cari made it clear that he wanted to follow his dad Pete into the brotherhood, as did the Franz brothers. I grew up with these guys, and while I felt a connection with all of them, I

lived on Glenmary Drive and was therefore not an "official" Flat Rat. It was a strange sort of limbo - I lived 100 yards from the Flats, but I was an outsider. As the years passed, the

torch was passed as well. In the 1970's, the Franz boys, the Ferguson's, Louie Striley and other guys my age were coming into their

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**The 1983 championship Team - David Franz, John Porcari, Lou Striley, Steve Gavin, Larry Paffie, Tom Ferguson, Rick Hinchcliffe, Larry Ferguson and Joe Fuller.**



**2013 Wye Race with Joe Renda, Larry Ferguson, KC Tripp and Aaron Riegel.**



## Hose



2016 Ladder Race with Pat Gavin, Tom Donovan III and Joe Ward.



1972 team members Scotty Smith, Ernie Reese, Duane Newman, Steve Gavin, Ric Morris, and Joe Fuller pose in front of the Newark Valley Methodist Church.

FROM PAGE 12

own as hose racers, mentored by the new breed of leaders like Joe Fuller and Steve Gavin. I had found my own niche as a baseball player, and I was planning to play in college, so any thoughts I ever had about joining the #3's and the hose teams went by the wayside.

My dad didn't really push me toward being a volunteer firefighter, and I knew I would be going off to college, so I didn't pursue it. I did have a bit of envy for the guys who followed their dads into this tightly knit fraternity, but it never came together for me to be a part of it. And, by the mid-70's, I had become a member of Owego's baseball "town team," and given we drew big crowds on Sundays, I was getting my needs met from the standpoint of being recognized for being good at something and being a



### The Hose Team Logo.

part of a team. As baseball players, we joked that some sports – like hose racing – were for guys that couldn't hit a curve ball.

I went off to college for a few years, and relocated to California from 1979-'81. When I came back to take a job at Cornell, I attended many of the Memorial Day parades in Owego, and I saw that the "new guys"

were carrying on the hose racing tradition. Tommy and Larry Ferguson, Louie Striley, Dave Franz, Rick Hinchcliffe and Steve Tiffany were all involved, and some holdovers like Joe Fuller and Steve Gavin were still going strong.

I recall an Owego Penny-saver story boasting that

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The 1995 champions JT Fisher, Matt Porcari, Pat Gavin, Rob Marshall, and Brian Davis celebrate at the Porcari's pool with nonalcoholic champagne. They were the youngest team to win in tournament history.



## Hose

FROM PAGE 13

the hometown boys had hosted the 1987 CNYFA convention and had won yet another championship, this one made sweeter by the fact that they won it on home turf, and two years later, they won the trophy for the third time and were therefore allowed to retire it. That was another first for the Owego boys.

It was sometime in the 1980's, soon after my return from California, that I happened to be in Owego when a big fire broke out. Like many others, I was drawn to it, and I saw some volunteer firefighters in action. They were focused, they were fearless, and the skills they had honed during the hose races were on full display. As I watched them, I

acknowledged my own foolishness. Maybe these were guys that couldn't hit a curveball, but the time they had invested in learning to fight fires sure seemed a lot more useful than any skill I had learned on a baseball field.

\*\*\*\*

I sat down with Pat Gavin to get this story telling process moving, and I was struck that he was not the kid I once knew. I grew up with Pat's mom, Toni – we were neighborhood friends and classmates – and I held his dad, Steve, in very high regard. Steve and I were not close friends, but I knew he was a hard-working guy, a loving father and a dedicated firefighter. When Steve passed on from a heart

### Jason Weaver, Mike MacNaughton, Joe Ward, Nick Jerzak, and Tom Donovan III compete in Hamilton in 2014.

attack after fighting a fire, I mourned with the people

of my hometown. He was only 52 years old.

Pat and I clinked our Ithaca Beer bottles together, and I said, "There sure are a lot of multi-generational names on this hose racing history you sent me." Pat said, "Yes, it's definitely a rite-of-passage for a lot of these guys. You turn 16, you join the fire department and you run hose. In my family, there was my dad, Tim, Dan and me. There's Dick Franz and his sons David, Jimmy with sons Pete and Richie, Bobby, and Tommy, Ed Franz and sons Mike and Chris, Billy Franz and sons Craig and Dan, Walt and son Eric Pianosi, Pete Porcari with son John and his son Matt, the Donovans, Ed, Steve, Mike and Scott Bidwell, Chuck, Moe and Andy McDowell, the Reese, Riegel and Fairlie brothers. It's a long list, for sure."

Pat thought back and added, "My dad started hose racing with Scotty Smith, and Scotty came out

of retirement to hose race after my dad died. That was really something special. They were really close."

Pat looked around the room, as if someone might be listening in, and added, "I remember hearing the story when they were racing in Cortland in the 1970s and Scotty ripped out a parking meter and carried it around on the truck like a trophy!"

Pat and I talked about some other friends, who had passed on too soon, and he said, "I remember when John Porcari passed (in 2000), and we had the John Porcari Memorial Race on Delphine Street. Matt (John's son) was really involved in that, and then he passed on too."

Pat, while only in his thirties, sat back and offered up one of those "Back in my day..." stories, saying, "When I first started, we were 16 and we practiced every night. We'd even do indoor practice at the Boys' Club during the

winter months. There was a time when there were hose races throughout the area every weekend from May through September, and now we only get to a few races per year. Then, there were about forty teams and now, you're lucky to see a dozen."

Pat is well aware that times have changed. People have kids, two jobs, other responsibilities. Pat shrugged and said, "Yep. Life gets in the way."

I brought up the fact that my narrow-minded perspective had changed dramatically when I saw the guys working together to fight an actual fire, and Pat offered, "Yes, the whole premise of hose racing is to sharpen basic firefighting skills. Seconds matter. We might save someone's property, or even their life."  
\*\*\*\*

A few weeks after I had a cold one with Pat (no conversation about my dad and his buddies would

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on page 15



In Memory of  
**Chief Ed Franz**  
"Gone, but not forgotten"

Ice Cream  
**WORKS!**



## Hose

FROM PAGE 14

have any credibility without a cold beer), and I climbed the familiar stairs to the second floor of the #3's firehouse on the Flats. One of the first guys I saw was Bobby Thompson, one of my dad's best friends and a guy I have loved and respected since I was a kid. I wanted to give Bob a big hug, but a handshake was what happened instead. The last time we had seen one another was in a waiting room at a doctor's office! Well, I suppose that beats some other possibilities. As a member of the early teams, Bob brought a

unique perspective. He said, "We didn't have schools to learn, or older guys. We learned from our fathers, how to 'set up' a fire, how to hook up a hose." I asked him if the guys took a lot of pride in this multi-generational connection, and he said, "We sure did."

Dick Franz, another close friend of my dad was there too, and I got a little teary-eyed seeing those guys - now well into their 80's - at the old fire house. My dad passed in 2007, and seeing his friends always makes me realize how much I miss him.



2014 Straight Lay Race with Tim Gavin.

Joe Fuller made the trip too, as did Louie Striley, Jim Morris, Chris Franz and Mike McNaughton. I had asked to meet with some guys from the various decades dating back over the 65 years, and the Croton Hose guys complied.

Bob kicked off our trip down Memory Lane, recalling that, "We bought that old retired hearse and put it together as the Purple People Eater. We had three teams from the #3's then, and in '50 we won the state championship." He nodded toward me and said, "Leo was really good on the ladder."

Bob then started speaking hose racing language, and I will leave it to Pat to translate all that in his segment. Bob did mention something that brought back some very old memories, saying "We practiced every Friday night and we had some big fun afterwards! The beer on tap was always Iroquois!"

Dick Franz took us even farther back, saying, "When I came on board, Bob Hand was a part of it, Fred McKeel, Junior Ferguson, Bill Andrews, Ray Smith and Ray Thompson. It was amazing that Dick Ferguson ran hose with us and he had lost an arm. A lot of these guys were coming back from the war, and Mario Pannetti would have

been there with us too, but he and Channy Moreland died in the war."

Dick said, "That was when we came up with our slogan that has been in place for a long time, and that is 'We Are Alive!'" He added, "Back in those days, the Flats was a big commu-

Please see **HOSE** on page 16



Matt Porcari does his famous "swan dive" into a lake after losing a race in 2009 in Old Forge.

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## Hose

FROM PAGE 15

community with a lot of festivals and clambakes. It was *“Flats Against the World!”*

As Dick told his stories, I asked Chris Franz if he was proud to be carrying on the Franz family’s long tradition of service, and he said, “I sure am. It means a lot.”

Joe Fuller shared some of his recollections, saying, “I was active from ’68 to ’96 and some of my mentors – Bob and Dick – are sitting right here – and of course Eddie and Bill Franz, Pat Panetti, Pete Porcari and Leon Halstead.” Joe added, “I brought in Steve Gavin and Jim Van Norstrand in 1970, and we added more teams. The first time we won was in 1972. In fact, that was the year we broke the ‘Y’ record. It was 24 seconds, and we got it down to 20.9.”

A decade later, the #3’s set a motor hose record that still stands.” Joe said, “We held every record at one time.”

By that time, the Purple People Eater had given way to the Orange Peeler, and Joe said, “We had it

from ’68-’71, and a funeral home saw it and sold us another hearse we named the Goofy Grape! In fact, when I got married, I came out of the church and there was that purple hearse.”

That got a laugh from Louie Striley, who grew up on Delphine Street and watched a lot of the practices. The number one fire hydrant in Central New York sits on the corner of Delphine and Charlotte Streets in the front yard of Jim Raftis’ home.

Louie said, “When I came on board, Joe Fuller and Steve Gavin recruited me. I remember when John Porcari and I were 12 and 13 years old, and we said we couldn’t wait to be old enough.” That was fine with Joe, who added, “We needed some fresh legs!”

Joe admitted that one didn’t have to be a Flat Rat to run hose, saying, “We found some guys downtown – like Mike Hilker, Tom Simon, the Gilfillan (Kevin and Rusty) and Reese (Ernie and Wilber) brothers and Rusty Fuller.” He added, “I grew up on Williams Street, and I



Tom Ferguson and Lou Striley celebrate the 1987 championship in Owego.

remember one year they had a convention on Front Street. I thought that was the greatest thing.”

One memory really stood out, and Joe offered, “I watched a guy from Montour Falls dragging hose with a cigar in his mouth! I remember all the teams had their own mystique – Apalachin Hose Twisters, Cortland, Preble, Montour Falls Swamp Stompers, Watkins Glen Hose Lines – and I remember the races, and the parades and the respect.”

Louie, who was one of the guys who came up after Joe, pulled a few more stories out of the cobwebs, and I watched him look at Dick and Bob with respect and affection that went back a half-century. The elder statesmen are for Louie – and the other guys sneaking up on 60

– a link to the past, and it is clear they took seriously the task of carrying on the proud tradition.

That pride was not limited to Louie and his pals taking the proverbial torch from Dick, and Bob, it was also evident when the guys in their 30’s spoke about Louie, and John Porcari, and Tom Ferguson. When Pat and I sat down, he, too, spoke of his predecessors with great respect.

Jim Morris and Mike McNaughton waited their turn, and when asked what drew him to hose racing, Mike said, “I was told there would be beer!” He laughed about the “Body of Water” tradition, and said, “If we lost, it always had to be someone’s fault. In ’09, we were in Old Forge and Matt Porcari said, ‘If we lose, someone’s jumping in the lake!’ Well,

we had a connection fail and we lost. The next thing I knew, Matt was taking off his boots and he jumped in.” Addressing a more serious component of the team, Mike added, “When you answer a call, you’re always racing a fire, so hose racing is good preparation.”

Jim said the teamwork concept drew him in. “I was told that when you joined the #3’s, you weren’t just a part of the hose team, you’d be doing a lot of things as a group, as a team.”

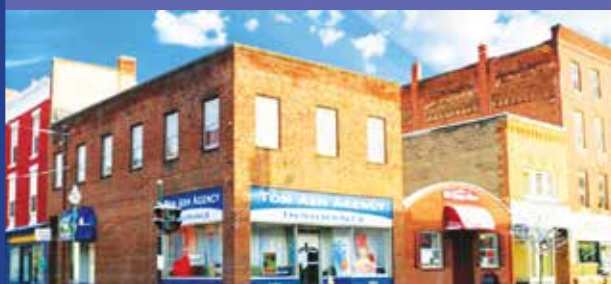
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As we wrapped up our gathering at the #3’s, I looked around the room at the several dozen trophies. I knew each of them had a story attached to it, and I wished I could stay longer and hear them.

I took one last look at the photo albums Louie had brought, and I saw the Purple People Eater again. I saw a photo of Louie and John, young guns ready to roll. I thought to myself, *“I’d love to go back to that time – unless, that is, I had to drink Iroquois Beer.”*

One last look at the photos offered a look at that fire I saw the guys fighting 30-some years ago. I remember thinking as they got the fire under control – surely saving some property and likely saving some lives – how much their dedication really mattered. These were volunteers, guys with kids, guys with jobs, but they were out there putting their lives at risk. I realized that my feelings about hose racing – and about volunteer firefighters – had indeed come full circle.

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