

# Gambling Man: Saturday Night Earnings Nearly Pay For Race Car

## Christopher Hits The Jackpot With Atlantic City TQ Midget Victory



By BRETT DEYO  
ATLANTIC CITY, NJ - Call it a product of Ted Christopher's continuing education.

Christopher, the versatile talent from Plainville, Conn., used his growing indoor racing knowledge to score a milestone victory in Saturday night's "Gambler's Classic" 40-lap TQ Midget/600cc Micro-Sprint A-Main on the floor of Boardwalk Hall.

For Christopher, the defending NASCAR Whelen Modified Tour champion and one of the Northeast's most decorated pavement drivers, it marked his first-ever victory inside the historic Atlantic City facility.

"This is our third season giving it a full effort ourselves," offered Christopher while enjoying post-race laurels. "We're getting it figured out. It's hard to believe at 50 years old I'm still learning."

Christopher was driving a Shadow-built TQ Midget he purchased with Don Preece three years ago.

The car is maintained by veteran NASCAR Modified car owner Ralph Solhelm in his Nutmeg State shop.

Christopher said they paid \$4,500 for the car, \$750 for the engine and invested \$1,000 for upgrades.

His \$5,000 take on Saturday night nearly covered the cost of the car, trimmed with TC's trademark black and silver No. 13.

"How often does that happen?" he smirked.

"We've made changes on the car every year. There is so



much contact in indoor racing - it's so intense - you almost have to build a 'battle wagon.' We went over the scale 50 pounds overweight tonight, but you've got to last."

Christopher's victory came in unlikely fashion.

Starting 14th - behind many of the indoor race favorites - TC was spun in a lap-six restart pileup.

Rejoining the pack, he carved through traffic to emerge behind race-long leader Matt Janisch of Nazareth, Pa., and Canadian challenger Mike Lichty prior to halfway.

Janisch, an unheralded ATQMR regular from Nazareth, Pa., paced the event from the pole for 22 laps before contact with Lichty sent him spinning in turn one.

Officials placed Lichty at the rear, turning the lead over briefly to 2005 race winner Jeff Heotzler.

Christopher immediately disposed of Heotzler using the outside lane on the restart and was never seriously pressured over the final 18 circuits.

Following Christopher under starter Warren Alston's checkered flag was two-time "Gambler's Classic" race winner Joey Payne of Fair Lawn, N.J., who authored his own spectacular drive in the event. Payne's No. 26 Spitfire mount overturned in the aforementioned lap-six tangle.

Heading pitside for repairs, Payne, who had originally started 16th, arrived in second with 11 laps remaining.

Lichty, a Supermodified talent from Innerkip, Ont., recovered from the lap-22 penalty for third. Wallkill, N.Y.'s Heotzler, a big-block Modified star at N.Y.'s Orange County Fair Speedway, nursed Mike Sweet's slowing 'FOUR' car to



fourth.

Ryan Smith of Kunkletown, Pa., was fifth in a 600cc Micro-Sprint owned by Jason Van Doren. Smith - who started 12th - was the first Micro across the line, trailing four TQ Midgets.

Janisch actually finished third, participating in on-track interviews, but was penalized by race officials for over-aggressive driving post-race. He was scored eighth (the final car on the lead lap).

**SURPRISING START:**

Perched alongside talented Stewart Friesen for the start of the A-Main, Janisch turned heads by immediately wheeling his Blu Metz-owned No. 48 into the lead. Meddled by brake issues, Friesen fell into the clutches of the 25-car field while Janisch pulled away.

**THE BIG ONE:** The opening six laps clicked off on the Pepsi-syrup-coated concrete floor of Boardwalk Hall before the first caution led to a wild restart pileup in turn four.

Defending race winner Mike Tidaback's No. 43 overturned on the backstretch. Other victims included Christopher, whose No. 13 got spun around; Payne, whose car landed on its roof; Lou Cicconi, who retired from the event; and Bob Watkins, whose No. 91 was precariously perched atop another car.

**NOT WORRIED:** Despite involvement in the crash, Christopher didn't lack for optimism.

"I wasn't worried," quipped Christopher. "When I came out of that deal, I was running in basically the same spot I had been. It wasn't too bad - it really could have been worse."

**PLAYING PATIENT:** Christopher didn't just learn setup tricks over the years in Atlantic City. He tucked away knowledge about his approach to indoor racing in the rough-and-tumble early laps.

"I've learned to slow myself down," he said. "I try to be patient and let it settle down a little bit. Sometimes, I get a little too intense."

**DEVELOPING STAR:** As Christopher fought traffic, Janisch, a 22-year-old Drexel University mechanical engineering student, thwarted all challenges at the front of the field.

Janisch began to believe he had a shot at the huge upset victory.

"I started to think I had the race won," said Janisch, who races a dirt-track 270cc Micro-Sprint in the summer during open weekends on the TQ schedule. "I seem to run competitively when I'm here."

"This was the first year I had a legitimate shot at winning it."

**CONTROVERSY:** A lap-22



THE GAMBLER'S CLASSIC win went to 1) Ted Christopher! 2) He celebrated in victory lane after the \$5,000-plus triumph; 3) On the way to the hard-fought triumph, "T.C." (No. 13) raced close with Mike Lichty (inside) and Matt Janisch (No. 48); and 4) Jeff Heotzler Sr. (outside), Joey Payne (No. 26), Ryan Smith and Lichty; 5 & 6) Defending race champion Mike Tidaback took this wicked ride in his No. 43. (Photos by: 1: Lee Smith; 2: Ace Lane; 3: Joe Simpkins; 4: Bob Armbruster; 5: Ed Malik; 6: Jim Smith)





Janisch saw his hopes for Boardwalk Hall glory vanish. "I got taken out," he said bluntly. Janisch wished officials would have granted him his position back. However, indoor race rules call for all cars involved in the caution to file in at the rear of the field. "I thought the officials were gonna do the right thing and put me back out front. I slowed down (under caution) and let the field catch up hoping they would leave me there." Christopher said he knew trouble was brewing up front in advance of the tangle. "I knew something was gonna happen," he said. "That's why I laid back a little."

**HOW SWEET IT IS:** Through the mayhem, Heutzler emerged as the leader with Christopher on the outside for the double-file restart. Immediately, Christopher surged ahead of Heutzler to lead the event for the first time.

While TC didn't agree with scoring that placed Heutzler ahead of him for the restart, he said using the precarious high lane to take the lead meant a lot to him.

"I was kind of ticked off about that," Christopher said of Heutzler's restart advantage, "but to

caution period changed the race's complexion. Janisch led Lichy, who had regained second spot two laps earlier following a position-swapping battle with Christopher.

Entering turn one, Lichy attempted to dive to the inside of Janisch. Contact sent Janisch's car spinning in front of the field. Race officials placed Lichy at the rear for his in-

volvement.

The 21-year-old Lichy said the contact was not intentional - rather a product of racing in tight quarters.

"It's indoor racing," he said. "He (Janisch) ran me out to the wall (on the restart). I caught him, got into the tail of him and he spun. It was nothing intentional - I wanted to loosen him up a little."



drive by him on the outside like that made the win even more satisfying."

**CHECKING OUT:** Once he had the lead, TC flashed his speed, opening up a sizeable lead as laps clicked off.

"The car was so good," Christopher said. "I knew we were good the other night when we turned an 8.60 (second lap) right away. The racing here is so intense - even when you have a car like we had you are only inches away from that (inside) rail and outside wall."

In fact, Christopher did impact the outside wall in a shower of sparks on a lap-20 restart but managed to continue, sans serious damage.

**SATISFYING:** Christopher's racing resume will likely never be matched - he's won big races, championships and has even competed at NASCAR's highest levels. A win in Atlantic City holds a special spot on his list of accomplishments.

"You come here and deal with Lou (Cicconi) and Joey (Payne). They are masters at this - how long have they been doing it?" Christopher said.

"I've won a lot of things over the years, but this one surely ranks up there as one of the best. This race has so much history and it's a hard event to win."

**BACK IN THE MIX:** Payne, after pitting for repairs from his flip, became a factor prior to the final caution of the main on lap 29. At that point, the NEMA Midget/Supermodified talent had climbed back to third.

Moments after the restart, Payne slid by Heutzler for second but never got the opportunity to seriously challenge TC.

"It really couldn't have been better," smiled Payne after giving Christopher a champagne bath in Victory Lane, adding "actually, it could have been better - we could have won. But from a flip to second, I'll take it."

Payne picked up the \$555.55 Doug Craig Memorial Hard



Charger Award for his advance through the field.

**BITTERSWEET:** Third-finisher Lichy knew his shot at "Gambler's Classic" glory fell when he was penalized for the contact with Janisch. However, he took solace in the strength of his car.

"We had a fast car tonight," Lichy said, noting a switch to fuel injection allowed him to summon additional speed.

**PRELIMINARY:** Earlier in

the evening, four qualifying events set the second half of the A-Main starting field. Frank Fisher (Flemington, N.J.), Christopher, Pat Bealer (Walnutport, Pa.) and Payne were victors.

**TQ Midget/600 cc Micro Sprint Feature Finish, 40 Laps:** Ted Christopher, Joey Payne, Mike Lichy, Jeff Heutzler, Ryan Smith, Timex Morgan, Tim Proctor, Matt Janisch, Glenn Heverin, Jeff Kot, Bobby Santos III, Jon Holquist, Billy Pauch, Joseph Lord Jr., Chris Arnold, Stewart Friesen, Ian Cumesn, Heath Hehny, Frank Fischer, Pat Bealer, Don Zrinski, Lou Cicconi Jr., Mike Tidaback, Brent Marks, Bob Watkins Jr.



**AT BOARDWALK HALL,** 1) the feature is ready to go! 2) Racing close are Matt Janisch and eventual winner Ted Christopher; 3) Jack Conover's car flared up; 4) "Liquid Lou" Cicconi, one of the pre-race favorites, was done for the night after this crash; 5) Heath Hehny slams the wall in a tangle with Frank Fischer; There was plenty of action in turn one, including 6) a tangle between Mike Iles (No. 7-11) and Amanda Quinones (No. 00); and 7) a multi-car wreck.

(Photos by: 1: Bob Yurko; 2: Scott Moyer; 3: Ed Malik; 4: Cliff Moon; 5: Ace Lane; 6: Howie Hodge)