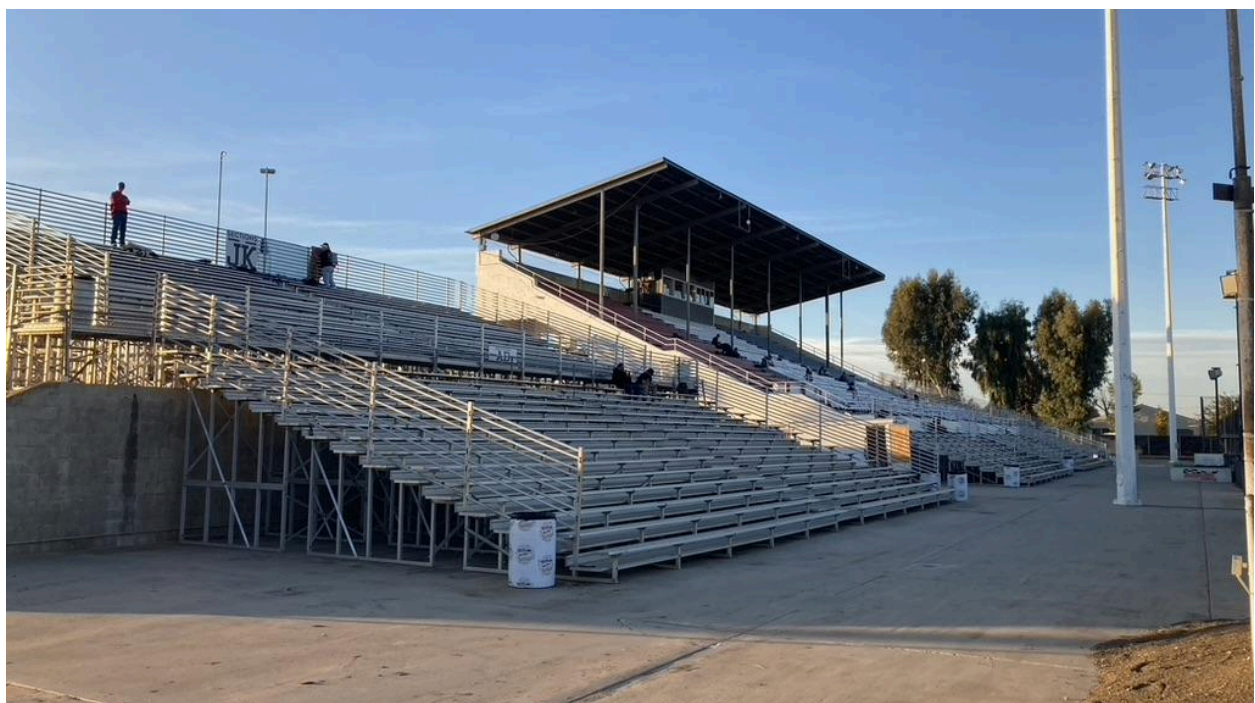


11-20-24: Tulare Thunderbowl Raceway

The one new track for me on the 2024 USAC western swing was Tulare, conveniently less than 2.5 hours north of LA. I left early to avoid traffic and bought a ticket from the box office a couple hours before gates opened and worked from the Starbucks a few blocks away before going to the track. There weren't a lot of people there and I was first in line waiting for the gates to open about 5 minutes early.



They sell two different tickets for something like \$2 difference in price, one for the "bleachers" which is the bottom section of the center stands and both sets of stands on the left and right, and the "grandstands" that are the upper center section that have seatbacks.



The view from the top of any of the stands seemed perfectly good - you'd have a small bit of glare on the fence in turn four and entering one and you'd miss a tiny bit of the exit of four, but they're acceptable. The central stands were all good views. There were poles for the roof but I didn't mind them, they felt unobtrusive.

The track is right in the middle of town, one where you can see a Burger King right from the grandstands. There seemed to be plenty of parking for this show, but when the Outlaws come I wonder how the parking situation would be.



I tried to get a burger for dinner but apparently the fire crew was late to show up and they weren't allowed to start grilling until they did. I later on got a sirloin sandwich that was decent but a bit overcooked and not fantastic for \$11. The \$6 burgers looked pretty solid.

The track is a paperclip $\frac{1}{8}$ mile with a mild amount of banking. There's a nice catch fence with an overhang around the whole track. There were tractor tires embedded into the berm inside each turn, something I haven't seen before that also seems unnecessary unless they're there for visibility.

24 USAC National Midgets signed in for the first event of the Western Swing (after the Placerville rainout last weekend). 18 King of Thunder winged sprint cars were the support class. At 5pm when hot laps started, there were very few people in the grandstands. Maybe it's due to being a relatively early start on a weeknight but I was surprised how few people there were there. It did get busier as the night went on but was nowhere near full at any point and I had the entire top row to myself as most people were sitting in front of the poles. Sometimes I care about poles blocking my view and sometimes I don't, and in this case I didn't mind them at all, they were unobtrusive.

The night started with hot laps for the 360 sprints, which ran all over the track top and bottom. They pushed off efficiently behind the backstretch and came out onto the track under power so the push tracks didn't have to circle the track. Midgets hot lapped next, with a number of cars under the track record, which was subsequently officially broken in qualifying by 5 different cars and three tenths of a second. My only complaint is they ran two cars at a time, which almost completely defeats the fun of qualifying for me since it's supposed to be a chance to focus on only one car and see how every different driver attacks the track.

The sprint cars ran time trials as well, with the cars going one at a time and mostly running the top of the track, nearly on the wall in three and four which was very fun to watch.

It was great watching them kicking up a ton of dirt along the cushion, especially visible along the white walls.



The sprint cars started heat racing, running three heats of six cars. They strung out very quickly, mostly running the bottom as three and four quickly lost grip up top and the cushion seemed to mostly go away, though the top remained a bit more viable in one and two. The midget heats had a lot more passing as the cars were able to run closer together, again mostly on the bottom but there were a few cars working the top.

They rolled in the top of the track and pushed off the sprint main at 7:15pm for a 25 lap feature. The top was back in three and four again, with a very thin cushion but it was there the whole race. Tyler Courtney was consistently the first one up there and it's always fun watching him race.

There was a good bit of attrition throughout and of the 18 we were down to 8 by the end. One backed into the wall hard in four, getting two wheels off the ground in the hit. Two cars got upside down - one climbing the wall in four and getting all the way up on the wall, and another a lapped car that got put into the fence really hard by Carson Macedo feeding him a right rear.

It was lots of fun to watch as they were right on the wall in three and four, banging the right rear on the wall at points. It's amazing more cars didn't make contact with the wall with how close they were to it on the razor-thin cushion. It's exactly the kind of winged sprint car race I want to see.



The midget main took the green at 8:10pm, impressively early for it still being a full show. The track was pretty wide in one and two, less so in three and four but some cars were sticking to the high side and making it work, Corey Day in particular. He ran the top the whole race, nearly getting into the wall but never quite making contact, it was very fun to watch and very impressive.

Both features put on a good show and it was an efficient and fun program, and I got out before 9pm for the 2.5 hour drive back to LA.