

FANCY FOOTWORK

*Birth defects can't keep
Wyoming teen from
racing, winning.*



J.D. Renfro, second from left, and Jonus Aragon, in front of checkered flag, made way for Joe to notch his first victory, then set him on the roof of the car for a photo of the family's podium sweep. (Contributed photo)

By Thomas Pope

Joe Renfro came into the world on July 23, 2006.

He was born without arms, and with one leg that's significantly shorter than the other.

Seventeen years later, he shrugs off the impact of the birth defects.

"I've always known that I'm different," he said. "I just try to be normal."

For the Renfro family of Cheyenne, Wyoming, "normal" means going racing—not as a spectator, but as a competitor.

In that sense, Joe Renfro is as normal as anybody. The difference between him and everyone else is that he uses his feet to turn the key in the ignition, steer, press the gas and brake pedals, unbuckle his safety harness, and to drop the window net and clamber out of the car.

Joe's racing is part of a family affair. Jim Renfro, an oilfield worker, has three sons and two stepsons—Jimmy ("J.D."), Johnny and Joe Renfro, and Jonus and Josiah Aragon. All six work out of a shop behind their home and race at dirt tracks in Wyoming and Colorado. Josiah races a 1993 Toyota Celica GT that fits in IMCA's sport compact division. Jim and the other boys run in the Warrior class that is the creation of BST Promotions' Joe Bellm.



ABOVE: When the entire Rookie Racing team is together, it includes, front row from left, Joe and granddad Jim, from Kansas, and back row from left, Jimmy (J.D.) Renfro, dad Jim, Johnny Renfro, and Jonus and Josiah Aragon. (Contributed photo)

BELOW: When Joe Renfro was ready to step up to a faster car this year, his dad opted for a 1994 Ford Mustang equipped with a fuel-injected V6 and an automatic transmission. Jim Renfro extended the gas and brake pedals so that his son could work them. (Contributed photo)





Joe Renfro's Mustang is one of six race cars prepped for competition in a shop behind at the family's home in Cheyenne, Wyoming. (Contributed photo)

Warrior pits pure stocks, trucks, enduros, hobby and thunder stocks as Bellm tries to spawn a division of 20-plus entries. "What he's trying to do is get the older V8 cars out of the weeds for guys who can't afford a \$25,000 IMCA hobby car anymore," said Jim Renfro, who will step up to IMCA sport mod action next year.

The Rookie Racing team—Jim and the boys—are loyal participants at tracks operated and managed by BST (Blood, Sweat, and Tears). The four dirt tracks in Colorado that are east of the Rocky Mountains are part of the BST realm. Bellm, whose three daughters race, can count on the Renfro contingent to show up whenever the gates are open. That requires time and money on their part, since the closest of the tracks is 2½ hours from Cheyenne, but they're not grouching about it.

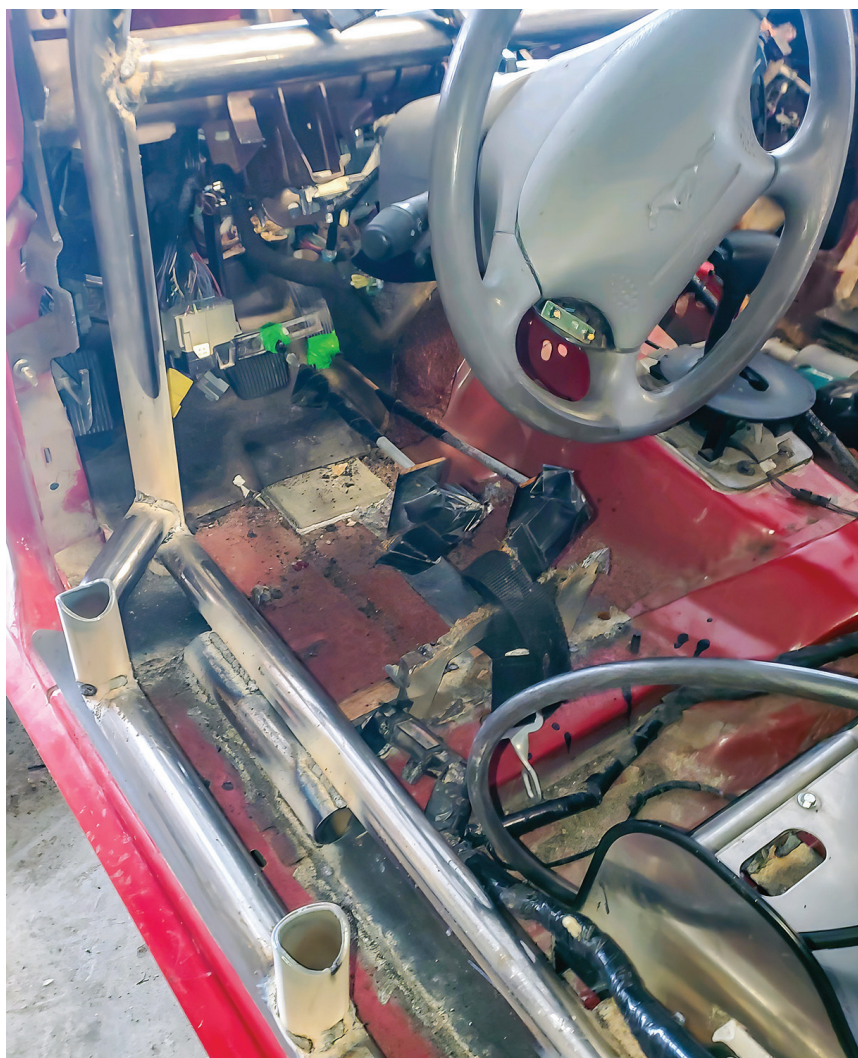
"Jim and his boys, they don't whine, bitch, moan, or groan like half my other racers, who are a buncha prima donnas," said Bellm, who currently wheels a late model in Wyoming. "Jim's whole family is good, especially Joey. I try to use him as an example. I tell my daughters, 'When you're having a bad day, just think about Joey and you'll realize life ain't so bad.' He's always happy, always smiling. It's amazing what he does and how he does it—how he does anything."



Joe drives with the sole of his right foot on the steering wheel, as he demonstrates in this pitside photo. (Contributed)



LEFT & ABOVE: Not only has Joe devised a way to drive, he is a competitive swimmer, which would come in handy if he ever fell off a fishing boat. (Contributed photo)



After stripping the Mustang's interior, dad Jim Renfro used rods and plates to fashion new brake and gas pedals that his son Joe could reach with his shorter left leg. (Contributed photo)

Joe was satisfied to cheer his brothers on—to a point.

“And then I was like, ‘I don’t want to watch anymore, I want to do it,’” he said.

To that end, Jim took a four-cylinder Ford Tempo one of his sons had raced and modified it for Joe, who steers with his sock-clad right foot and toes.

“Joe doesn’t have a knee in his left leg. The bone goes from his ankle to his hip,” Jim said. “What I did was build extensions from the gas and brake pedals with steel rods and plates, and he operates those with his left leg. We mounted the seat to where he can start the car and reach the gear shifter. He can unlatch his belts. I’ve got the window net installed where it folds up instead of down, so he can just reach over, click it, and he’s able to push his way up out of the car by himself if he had to. The only other thing he needs help with is getting in the car and getting strapped in.”

Joe’s first race was in 2022 at Intermountain Speedway, a paved track in Cheyenne. Jim said track management had no issue with Joe racing once he showed them he could exit the car on his own.

“I was nervous,” Joe said of his debut. “I had waited for a year to do it, so I was excited and nervous at the same time. That night, they did a trophy dash, a heat race and the main event in a beginner class.”

“It’s been ‘race on’ ever since,” Jim said.

Now, however, their endeavors are limited to dirt, which is just fine with Joe: “I love the dirt,” he said. “It’s so much fun, and a lot more challenging than the asphalt.”



Once Joe started racing it didn't take long to prove he was just one of the boys. (Contributed photo)

At the end of the 2022 season, Joe posed a question to Jim: “Dad, do you think I can get into something a little bit faster next year?”

The answer was yes. Jim bought a stock 1994 Ford Mustang equipped with a fuel-injected V6 and an automatic transmission, and he again made the needed pedal modifications. There was a learning curve, of course, with the higher-horsepower car, but Joe made steady progress.

On Aug. 12, Joe, J.D., and Jonus hit the road for the three-hour drive to El Paso County Raceway in Calhan, Colorado. They and Nash Conner made up a four-car Warrior field, and in the late going, Conner slowed to a stop with carburetor issues. The feature restarted with one lap to go, and when the front row of J.D. and Jonus drifted high and low entering the corner ...

“I thought, ‘I’ve gotta go, I’ve gotta get it,’” Joe said of his first chance to notch a win. “Then it was, ‘Oh, I’ve got a shot right here,’ and I took it.”

And with it, the checkered flag.

It was the culmination of a plan Joe’s

brothers hatched earlier in the season, but there hadn’t been an opportunity to help Joe get a win until that Saturday night, their dad said.

“It was something they wanted to do for him,” Jim said. “There’s no way that V6 is going to outrun the V8s in those Novas, so they made it happen when they got the chance.”

The gift of brotherly goodwill was endorsed by Conner, who is the same age as Joe.

“They are an awesome family and I respect them so much, and how much inspiration for kids and this generation they have,” Conner said. “It is really cool to see Joe go out there and drive with his foot like he’s done it a million times.”

The three cars stopped on the frontstretch the next time around and “the crowd was cheering so loud I couldn’t hear my own car,” Joe said. Jonus and J.D. got him out of the car, perched him on the roof of his No. 11J Mustang, and posed for a family photo in victory lane with their podium sweep.

“They told me how proud they were of

me,” Joe said. “By the time we got home, I was exhausted, I was sore.”

Jim was unable to attend the race because of work, but he got plenty of text messages informing him of Joe’s win, and he saw the trophy when he walked into the kitchen Sunday morning. Later that day, Joe bid an end-of-summer goodbye to his stepmother, Kristyne, and his dad, loaded up his 2014 Jeep Patriot, and began a four-hour drive west to Rock Springs, Wyoming.

That’s where Joe lives during the school year with his mother, Katherine Jetmore. He is a senior at nearby Green River High School and a member of the Wolves swimming team. Colleen Seiloff, his swim coach and math teacher at Green River, knows him very well. “I held him as a baby,” she said, adding words such as “nice,” “intelligent,” “handsome” and “leader” to describe him.

“He doesn’t let things hold him back, he just gets out there and does it. He does everything with his feet—writes, draws, uses his phone,” Seiloff said. “He’s an inspiration not only for other students in our school, but to the other (swim) teams



Joe Renfro sometimes uses a wheelchair for mobility—classmates at Green River High like to chauffeur him around, his math teacher said—but he also has a prosthetic from a Shriners hospital for his left leg that allows him to walk. (Contributed photo)



When Joe Renfro doesn't opt to use a prosthetic left leg to walk, he has to adopt this posture that creates pressure on his spine. (Contributed photo)

around the state. It's pretty amazing. He's a good student, good person, has a good heart, and he's a jokester. He's just a very positive influence."

Obstacles, he said, are merely challenges to be overcome. For instance, to walk with legs of uneven lengths, he has to contort himself into a stance where "I'm pretty much in a squatting position with my right leg."

However, that constant overcompensation created a curvature of his spine, and as recently as three years ago he underwent corrective surgery at Shriners Children's Philadelphia. Doctors inserted eight screws in his back and attached something akin to large rubber bands that help maintain spinal alignment. Early versions of prosthetics for his left leg weren't to his liking—"a lot heavier and a lot clunkier," he said—but his current one that's made of lightweight carbon fiber "helps me walk pretty much normal."

Joe wants to do "normal" things after he graduates from Green River High, such as pursuing a college degree. He'd like to follow in Seiloff's footsteps and teach high school math.

And he hopes his future also includes racing at a higher level.

"I'm hoping to go, like, all the way," he said. "I wanna race a sport mod, a late model." **FSW**