

INDYCAR: Jeff Krosnoff, Stay Hungry

15 years after Jeff Krosnoff lost his life at the Molson Indy Toronto race on July 14th, 1996, Marshall Pruett looks back at his life in a multi-part feature.

"What was Jeff's legacy in this sport? Me. I am his legacy. He touched so many lives, including mine. When my kid grows up and looks at pictures of me driving Jeff's car after he died, I'll tell him, 'Poppy was able to continue the dream of this man like I continue the dream of my father, and then you will continue my dreams one day.' That's how I look at what Jeff did for me."

~Max Papis

It's a phrase that gets used far too often, but I remember the crash that killed Jeff Krosnoff like it was yesterday. In reality, it was 15 years ago today—July 14th, 1996—but all I have to do is close my eyes to be transported back to where I was standing in the Toronto paddock on that haunting day when Krosnoff's life ended quickly and violently in Turn 3 at the Molson Indy Toronto. My reaction then is the same today when the emotions come flooding back:

*Dammit. This can't be happening. Not Jeff. Not now. F***. He didn't get the chance to show us what he could do.*

Like the thousands in attendance at Toronto, and for many watching on television, the day of Krosnoff's death was instantly seared into my memory. I've mourned the loss of many drivers—personal heroes like Ayrton Senna and Al Holbert—but Krosnoff's death struck me in a different way.



The life of Jeff Krosnoff, despite being far too brief and at the outer edge of the spotlight, was filled with the kind of determination and motivation that champions are made from. (The Krosnoff Foundation) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

Krosnoff had yet to reach the mountain top, but could see it drawing closer. Krosnoff did not have the major championships of a Holbert, or the international following of a Senna, but the potential was there.

Loss and sorrow are separate in this case. The sense of loss with Holbert and Senna will probably always be there for me, but the sorrow that lingers with Krosnoff's death is like a sharp pinch every time I think of his passing. It stings. I wince. He was a 31-year-old rookie in CART, which was unheard of for a serious prospect, but he was ready to take the series by storm. Being cut down on the cusp of becoming a star made his loss cruel and personal for those who followed him.

After more than a decade of fighting and refusing to give up, Krosnoff got his first shot in the big leagues in 1996, but tragically, his rookie season in CART lasted just 11 rounds and his fatal accident also claimed the life of corner worker Gary Avrin.

15 years later, and with the Oklahoma-born, California-bred Krosnoff somewhat of a mystery to many of today's open-wheel fans, the magnitude of his loss is hard to put into proper context.

He was an Indy car driver only for five months, but to define his legacy during that brief window of time would do him a disservice.

He was a beacon to many—living proof that obstacles could be overcome with talent and determination. He was ignored, turned down and cast aside more often than not, yet refused to complain or accept defeat. He took control of his destiny and went to extraordinary measures, including leaving his wife and family behind to race halfway around the world in pursuit of his dream. He raced in Japan, at Le Mans, Long Beach and Daytona, but was largely forgotten at home. He drove for major factories like Toyota, Nissan and Jaguar. He was educated, a musician, a photographer, a writer, a motivator, a friend and so much more than a driver of racing cars. He had a cult following that included fellow drivers and his closest rivals.

He was—and continues to be—one of the greatest role models open-wheel racing has seen, and with the help of those who knew him--and with the use of some of his own writings--the remarkable life and journey of Jeff Krosnoff can be celebrated once again.

"The earliest memory I have about wanting to be a race car driver was while I was in kindergarten," Krosnoff wrote, and who regularly contributed works like this to *RACER* Magazine. "It was a bright and sunny day at La Canāda Elementary School, and one of my favorite activities was scheduled. Not only were 'Sloppy Joes' on the cafeteria menu, but it was 'Show and Tell' for our class. On this particular day, I remember a little blonde girl brought in something quite unusual to show our class. It was a trophy her father had won.



Max Papis poses with his favorite photo of Jeff, taken by Rick Graves. Papis would take over Krosnoff's No. 25 PPI Reynard-Toyota after the Californian's death. (Max Papis) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

"To describe it is like trying to colorize classic movies—almost impossible and never quite accurate. Atop the white marble base sat a most brilliant golden likeness of a race car. When it was my turn to hold it, I didn't—or couldn't—let go. I spent the rest of the day staring at it on her desk from my seat across the room. It was then that my dream began. A dream that I pursue to this day... that girl's name was Kathy Bucknum. Her father was Ronnie Bucknum, one of the first Honda Formula 1 pilots..."

Krosnoff grew up in a southern California at a time when the Golden State—and the West Coast in general—was a hotbed for driving talent. Jimmy Vasser, Mike and Robbie Groff, Steve and Cary Bren, Mark and Mike Smith, Tommy and Bart Kendall and many others made their way from grade school to driving school to the local road courses in record time.

"Jeff lived about a mile from me in La Canāda and I think I probably met him when I was probably about nine or 10," said Tommy Kendall, whose open-wheel career mirrored Krosnoff's early in the early days.

"Our parents were friends. We went to different schools but I knew him—he was two years older than me and he got a go-kart before anybody else I knew. I remember seeing him drive it at his house and I couldn't believe, because it wasn't the little put-put karts that I'd tried. He was ripping around his driveway and I'd never seen anything like it. I was into dirt bikes before that, but that's the first time I had seen the real deal with four wheels. So fast forward a little bit to when I'm driving, and I started in karts and then went to the Jim Russell Racing Series.

“Back then, that was the only place you could really race before you were 18. And Jeff was already doing that. He was the guy that taught me what it meant to be serious about racing. He was in unbelievable shape. He never, I think in his life, he never had a sip of alcohol. He was the guy I looked up the most to and spent the most time with. I had a first-hand look at how he was preparing and I didn't know if anyone was preparing more than that, but it really gave me a lot to think about.”

Krosnoff's trek up the 1980s version of the open-wheel ladder included his aforementioned start at Jim Russell in 1983, where seven wins in the school's five-year-old Van Diemen RF78 Formula Fords signaled great promise.

He'd stay in the Russell family for 1984 as part of the inaugural Mazda Pro Series—what is now known as Star Mazda—and finished second in the championship. Selected to *On Track* magazine's “America's Choice” roster for his impressive pro racing debut in '84, Steve Nickless' entry for Krosnoff was succinct: “A teenager with boundless potential.”

While at Russell, Krosnoff would meet Paul Pfanner, who would become one of his closest friends. Pfanner, who would go on to become one of the founders of *RACER* magazine, followed Krosnoff's career from the beginning, thanks to a suggestion from Nickless.



SPEED's Tommy Kendall grew up with Krosnoff, starting out on the same path towards open-wheel stardom before their careers sent them in different directions. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

“Steve had been the founding editor and creator of *On Track* magazine. I worked with Steve years before and we were working with the Jim Russell people to produce their newsletter and help them with their marketing. Steve was doing the editing of the Russell newsletter and he had seen Jeff race in some of the Russell Series races down in Riverside. When I started to hear how quick Jeff was, I became interested in his progress straightaway. He was very quick and I then got to watch him race and I was very impressed.

Clean, precise, just looked like he was inevitable. And it was a pretty big feat with the people coming through at the time but he was a standout to me. We got to know each other. I just liked his personality. He was very funny. We were just wild pups but it makes me smile just to think of it.”

Krosnoff’s parents were successful, but when it came to auto racing—especially making a career out of driving racing cars—Pfanner says his friend was left to fend for himself. In what would become a defining aspect of his personality, Krosnoff accepted responsibility for making his own way in the sport.

“Well, he had no family connection to racing,” Pfanner continued. “His family was well-to-do but I didn’t get a sense that they were supportive either financially or emotionally of his racing. I think they tolerated it. What got me about it was his complete self-reliance in finding money and putting deals together and dogged persistence. Just the self-confidence to basically go after opportunities, to wait outside an office, make sure he got paid attention to while he was getting his results early on.

“He just was going to find a way and he wasn’t waiting for someone to write a check for him that was a family member. He was self reliant and reciprocal as well. So a lot of people had talent and they would just let the talent speak for itself, or the talent would be rewarded by the family spending more on their racing. That wasn’t Jeff.”

Paul Pfanner, right, interviews Tommy Kendall, left, at a RACER function. (LAT)
<http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

Another element of Krosnoff's character stood out while Pfanner was getting to know the young racer.

"He also had a sense of humor. I recall on his very first Formula Russell Mazda car, he put together all this money from bits and scraps and pieces from friends and he wanted to put a logo on the car, so in very large letters he just had the phrase 'Underworld Cover-up' as the sponsor on the car. People obviously asked questions, which is what he was after; it engaged them in a conversation."

With the West Coast-based Jim Russell/Mazda Pro Series growing in size and prominence, Krosnoff continued to cut his teeth in the category in 1985 and 1986, earning three wins. He'd also add a round of the SCCA Westpro Sports 2000 Series to his calendar to get his first taste of sports car competition

To complicate matters, Krosnoff was climbing his way to the top while pursuing higher education.

"25-year-old UCLA psychology student Jeff Krosnoff's victory at Tacoma," Bill Lorenzen wrote in his 1986 Pro Sports 2000 Season Review for *On Track*, "was particularly noteworthy in that it came in his very first Sports 2000 start. Krosnoff never put a foot wrong in a most impressive display with a Brisker Racing Swift DB-2."

In a touch of subtlety, Lorenzen refrained from mentioning that Krosnoff also earned pole position at Tacoma.

Battling Jon Beekhuis—the eventual Pro Mazda series champion, Mark Wolocatiuk, Johnny O'Connell and other respected drivers, Krosnoff ended 1986 on a high, but missing out on the title proved costly.

While he said nothing of the situation publically, Krosnoff's run at the title was complicated by his crew chief, Clayton Bierke, who was caught making illegal modifications to his driver's Mazda 13B engine on two separate occasions. Krosnoff was disqualified both times, forfeiting the win and points at the final round of the championship.

With limited funds at his disposal and his senior year at UCLA beckoning in 1987, Krosnoff's young career was at a crossroads.

As a classic "glass is half full, if not overflowing" type, he was brimming with enthusiasm before the start of the 1987 SCCA Stefan Petroff Industries Formula Atlantic series season. He hoped his first taste of big power, bigger tires and serious downforce would set him in motion to arrive at his ultimate destination: Formula 1.

"I have always liked Atlantic and I am extremely excited to be involved in the series this year," he said in his earlier writings that were published by *RACER*. "I feel it's the best experience-gaining series around, and I look forward to learning and competing. For me, this is a dream come true. Formula 1 has always been my goal and I now feel I am on the right path with the right people."

His pre-season optimism was routinely tested as he went winless in '87, finishing sixth in the championship while driving a Ralt RT-4/85 when most of the top drivers like Beekhuis, O'Connell, Parker Johnstone, Ted Prappas and the eventual champion, Dean Hall, had '86 or '87 Ralts at their disposal.

They didn't know it at the time, but in 1987, Jimmy Vasser and Krosnoff--who would come close to joining Target Chip Ganassi Racing as Vasser's teammate in 1996--would get to know each other better while racing Atlantics.

"I knew Jeff before," said Vasser, who now co-owns the KV Racing Lotus IndyCar team. "We weren't close, but a lot of my close friends knew him and really loved him. You got the feeling we were becoming closer friends as time went on. I raced with him at the end of '87. That was when the first Swift (DB-4) chassis had come out and was dominant, and he was the first non-Swift to finish at the [East/West Atlantic Shootout]. They had something like 60 cars in our race. Paul Tracy was there...everybody was there, all the hot shoes. Jeff was quick, especially in an older car. I always knew he was quick. Man, I can't believe it's been 15 years now..."



The original Hayashi-built Mazda Pro Series cars were far from the fast, slick machines drivers in the Mazda Road To Indy have today, but the series during Krosnoff's time was just as fierce. (Marshall Pruett) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

From 1983 to 1987, Krosnoff had shown great promise, earned respect and overcame a variety of obstacles, but in an era where a dozen or more drivers like him had been produced in Formula Ford, Pro Mazda, Super Vee and Atlantics, he found himself out of the "America's Choice" conversation for 1988.

Hailed as one of the biggest drops in an upcoming driver's career at the time, Krosnoff went from SCCA's top open-wheel series in '87 to its newest and most ridiculed championships for 1988, the Coors Racetruck Challenge.

It boasted factory programs from Ford, Dodge, Jeep, Mitsubishi and Nissan, but the *'They can't be serious, can they?'* racetruck series, comprised of nearly stock mini-pickup trucks with requisite safety modifications, would be where Krosnoff plied his trade as part of Nissan's stable.

"He basically just went wherever the opportunities took him," said Kendall. "He ran out of funding pretty quickly at the open-wheel side of things. He begged and borrowed to do Atlantics. I remember getting a little grief from Jeff when I had had a similar situation where I really wanted to be an open-wheel racer but once you got past the Mazda Pro Series the next step was Super Vee or Atlantics, and that was 250 to 400 grand a year. That just wasn't going to happen. If you couldn't afford that top-dollar program, you were going nowhere.

"And then when he got the test in the racetrucks for the Nissan team--I think they did the test at Carlsbad Raceway or something like that--I remember hearing that he actually crashed the thing. He'd never raced anything silly like that... I don't think he crashed it badly, but he crashed it, but he was also the fastest by a decent margin, and so he got the nod."

He'd return to the win column with four victories and would claim second in the championship, but dropping off the open-wheel radar--to later resurface in the lamented truck-based road racing series--brought Krosnoff's career momentum to a halt in America.

Like Krosnoff, Kendall had been forced from open-wheel due to budget constraints, but his transition—to the IMSA GTU series in a Mazda RX-7—came a few years before Krosnoff buckled into his first racetruck.

At the time, Kendall says Krosnoff couldn't fathom such a proposition.



With heavy budgets and stiff competition in the 1987 SPI Formula Atlantic championship, Krosnoff fared well with lesser means but did not earn an invite to move up the open-wheel ladder. (Marshall Pruett) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

“I did some IMSA races in '85 alongside my Russell program, about four of them, I think. I remember getting some grief from Jeff and from some of the other open-wheel guys saying, ‘Why do you want to do that?’ I told them, ‘It's not really what I want to do; it's the *only* thing I can do.’ I think Jeff got a better feeling for the choice I had to make when he went from Atlantic to the trucks...”

He was racing on a different planet compared to the friends he'd grown up competing against. They were in Atlantics, or the American Racing Series, precursor to today's firestone Indy Lights Series, but Krosnoff kept his spirits high and managed to find fun and humor in being the most overqualified racetruck driver in the world.

“I can't quite remember what the occasion was – but I made a remark about how slow the SCCA race trucks were,” said Pfanner. “And we always exchanged photographs and pictures with each other. So I said if he was a real man he would actually take photographs while he was racing. And he laughs and we joked about it. And probably two weeks later in the mail I received an envelope with these photographs and they were hilarious. He literally, the entire race—and I don't think the stewards would've been happy about it—he documented the race with his camera in one hand, all the passes he made... There was a flash shot I think looking over at Steve Saleen's truck and you could see the surprise that the flash was going off in Saleen's face. He did get a picture of him taking the win. Crossing the finish line in first place.

“The whole thing was documented in sequence. So he took the dare. And I think the other thing that was fun about that camera was it went everywhere with him and captured all sorts of mischief. Not the least of which occasionally, we'd head to the bathroom when we were out with the guys and he'd just put that camera over the top of the stall and would randomly catch someone, just shoot a shot, just for the hell of it, and later it would be fun to see what he got. He was just mischievous. He was just, like I said, a wild pup.”

Running well out of the spotlight didn't faze Krosnoff. To his peers, he'd taken a few dozen steps back, but Krosnoff's faith would eventually be rewarded.

“Shortly after when I got on with Mazda in a full factory IMSA program,” Kendall recalled, “I think the light went on for Jeff that it was a way to keep racing and actually maybe even advance himself because the Japanese car companies were starting to get heavy into racing in Japan and also in America. Truthfully, driving for Nissan in racetrucks was a far cry from Atlantics, in terms of enjoyment, stimulation and challenge.

“It was a huge step down, but he was smart enough to figure out that maybe it wasn’t a direct route to where he was going, but it was a route that actually had a chance of somebody else paying for his journey. Most guys were fighting to get money from a regular sponsor, but Jeff saw the logic in becoming a factory driver at a pretty early stage. Open-wheel guys just weren’t doing that back then. It was a highly original idea.”



Krosnoff turned the most improbable driving opportunity into the launching pad for an Indy car berth years later. (Nissan) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

In another piece published by *RACER*, Krosnoff tipped his hand at why the move to racetrucks wasn’t cause for panic.

“First, I am a formula driver in the purest sense of the word. Despite my gunsight training with formula cars, I do not feel that I am going backward by running racetrucks. To the contrary, I feel it is a positive step forward because what these little rigs lack in horsepower they make up in corporate support.”

Humbling himself in 1988—looking farther down the road than most young drivers are capable of—paid off in the most unexpected manner.

“Jeff would just about do anything to get in a racecar and he would go to the same auto industry trade shows, he would walk around and meet people,” said Pfanner. “That’s where he met the people from the [Speed Star] wheel company that eventually brought him to Japan. As improbable as it seems, from racing in that SCCA pickup truck series, he met people who hired him to drive Formula Nippon and Group C cars and Super GT cars as a result of just a grand bluff of self-confidence and ability. You just don’t see that happen very often anymore.”

From falling out of favor in 1987 to falling off the map in 1988, Krosnoff orchestrated one of the great career turnarounds of the late eighties.

But as we delve into in Part 2 of **Jeff Krosnoff: Stay Hungry**, pulling up roots to race in Japan—away from his wife, his family and the few Indy car owners who held a faint interest in his progress—was the most daring move he’d ever make.

“A little more than a year ago, I was questioning the most effective way to give my career a boost. At that point, I was still working hard to land a ride in a formula car, but a drive was not going to materialize unless I came into a great personal fortune. I mean, my goal is to be World Champion plain and simple, and how many F1 drivers have earned their big break in closed-wheel cars, let alone racing pickup trucks?”

~Jeff Krosnoff, *On Track* magazine, March, 1989.

It would be like Panther Racing's JR Hildebrand—years before he won his Firestone Indy Lights championship in 2009—announcing that he was headed to race in Africa with the goal of making it to the Indy 500. Or like Conor Daly relocating to Stockholm to race in Swedish F3 with an eye to becoming the next Sebastian Vettel.

That's how uncommon and risky it was for Jeff Krosnoff to leave America behind in favor of starting fresh in Japan in 1989. The Japanese racing scene had become a viable option for a limited number of European drivers in the late eighties, but it wasn't amongst the top 10 choices for an American with a dream of becoming Formula 1 World Champion.

As unconventional as it might have been, Krosnoff was faced with a few harsh realities by the end of the 1988 season. He'd impressed everyone in his rookie season of SCCA Racetrucks, but in terms of advancing his career, the stall was turning into a freefall.



While "Kroz" was in Japan, his boyhood friend Tommy Kendall was tearing up the tracks on the SCCA Trans Am circuit. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

The best times in Krosnoff's young career had come while competing with his friends in the Jim Russell Racing School, the Pro Mazda Series and again in the SCCA Pro Atlantic series. It was close, familiar and he always knew where he stood amongst his peers.

That situation was lost in 1988 as his friends headed down a path that led to Indianapolis or Sebring, while his ties to that world came to an end as he raced in relative obscurity.

He and his wife Tracy were extremely close—she'd supported him throughout every turn or dead end that came his way—but for Krosnoff to get back in the game, extraordinary measures would be required. Shunned and forgotten in America, he not only craved the opportunity to rekindle his career, but also the chance to race in an environment where the kind of friendship and camaraderie he grew up with still mattered.

That furtive, nurturing scene would be found, ironically, in the most foreign of lands.

“Throughout the past few years I had been developing a rather good relationship with a Japanese wheel company—Speed Star Wheels—and, in fact, had run its wheels on both my Atlantic car and Racetruck,” Krosnoff continued in the March 1989 edition of *On Track*. “Anyway, towards the end of the '87 season, I had been in Las Vegas for the SEMA show as part of the Speed Star exhibit. During the show, Mr. Asai, the director of the company, had been discussing with me the possibility of traveling to Japan to test in a Formula 3 car. Soon after that, Mr. Hamada, the owner of the company, said to come over and do a test in the Speed Star Racing Team's Formula 3000 car!”

Krosnoff's test in the team's 1987 Lola late that year went well, as he got to within two seconds of Masahiro Hasemi, a living legend in Japan and Speed Star's No. 1 driver at that time. Crammed into a cockpit that was tailored to accept the much smaller Hasemi, Krosnoff impressed the team by finding speed while barely having enough room to shift gears.

He went home after the two-day test and soon got the call to join the team for the season finale at Suzuka in November. To acclimate himself with the 12-hour time change, and to get in some pre-event testing, Krosnoff's trip would last 17 days, giving he and his wife the first taste of what his new career path could involve.

Qualifying 12th out of 22 cars, Krosnoff planned to draw from his experience doing standing starts in Atlantics, but without the opportunity to do a practice start in the 500-horsepower machine, he dropped the clutch when the lights turned green and watched in horror as his car seemingly stood still, enveloped in a cloud of his own tire smoke while the rest of the field streaked away.

The NHRA-grade burnout looked spectacular, but Krosnoff fell to 21st as a result. In hindsight, the error turned out to be a blessing as the Speed Star team got to watch a great comeback drive where he made a number of thrilling passes to get back to his original starting spot.



Masahiro Hasemi was as big a racing star as Japan had to offer, and he welcomed Krosnoff into the Speed Star team--and his own car--with open arms. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

That fighting spirit—which Krosnoff possessed in copious amounts—was an intangible trait that was greatly valued in Japanese racing circles.

The march from 12th to 21st and back to 12th would soon be halted by a delaminating rear tire, but the Speed Star owners had seen enough to offer Krosnoff a full-time drive for 1989.

With that move, Krosnoff joined a small but popular underclass of foreign drivers making a living in one (or more) of Japan's three major championships—F3, F3000 and the All-Japan Sports Prototype Championship, which boasted healthy grids filled with factory Le Mans prototypes from Toyota and Nissan, along with semi-works entries from Jaguar and Porsche.

Japan's economy was strong and its three national series were awash with sponsorships and factory contracts on offer. Krosnoff made the move at the right time and thrived in Japan, but like his move to racetrucks the year before, he was almost invisible to those racing at home and in Europe.

"I didn't see him as much over there," said SPEED's Tommy Kendall, Krosnoff's childhood pal. "But he'd come home every now and then and I'd follow him as closely as I could, without the Internet being around for his first few years in Japan.

"News of his races were few and far between; I kept up mostly by reading *On Track*, but that always came out a few weeks after an event. He toiled away there kind of in obscurity but made some really deep impressions."

Being gone for great lengths of time, as his friend Paul Pfanner shares, was a constant strain on the Krosnoffs during Jeff's seven-year stint in Japan.

"I remember there were times when he'd be home for a few weeks, but he'd be [in Japan] almost the entire time the season was active," he said. "Once the season started, seeing him was infrequent. [His wife] Tracy would go over to Japan when she could, but the fact was Jeff was gone for long periods of time. It was hard on both of them. But the thing that he liked about it was that the guys he raced against were really good and it was a great benchmark and it helped establish his value. There was a standard that was maybe higher in Japan at the time."

The sacrifices made by the Krosnoff's to get Jeff's career to a point where they could reap the benefits went beyond what most drivers are willing to endure. Most of the foreign drivers racing in Japan were single, but for Krosnoff, his commitment to his wife never wavered.



Ireland's Eddie Irvine, who spent time in the top international F3000 championship, found himself in a similar situation with Krosnoff. The two would head to Japan in search of their next big break. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

"The other drivers would want to go out and act young and crazy, but Jeff was married and was in a different place in his life," Pfanner explained. "They'd try to drag him out to the bars, but he'd let them go and stay in his room to build a model F1 car, or something like that. He found that more fulfilling, which spoke a lot to the focus he maintained while he was there."

Krosnoff's life in Japan from 1989 through 1995 isn't well documented—a testament to the obscurity Kendall referred to—but the education he was receiving was absolutely invaluable. Hidden away from the world's motoring press, Krosnoff's speed, skill and racecraft skyrocketed while contesting Japanese F3000 and the Sports Prototype championship year after year.

He was getting by on raw talent on the open-wheel ladder in America, with the responsibilities of life--from finding sponsorship to attending university to being a husband--making it hard to focus on his growth and development as a driver. Compared to his contemporaries, who had little more than driving to concentrate on, Krosnoff went as far as he could while maintaining the roles of husband, student and marketer.

Once he landed in Japan for the 1989 season, Krosnoff's career went vertical in an instant. The Japanese F3000 series, at that time, was unlike the rest of the national and international F3000 categories. With heavy funding and engineering resources being invested by a number of Japanese tire manufacturers, Krosnoff and the rest of the drivers had a dream scenario on their hands.

Compared to the control tires used in the other F3000 championships, Advan (Yokohama), Bridgestone, Dunlop and other brands spent fortunes on beating each other, which gave Krosnoff the chance to test constantly. With a championship that usually spanned March to November, [Krosnoff was in a car constantly](#), trying new rubber compounds, new chassis and aero components and anything else that could provide an advantage. He was already known as one of the finer technical minds in the sport, but endless amounts of lapping and evaluating new bits further cemented his status as an elite development driver.

Simply put, Krosnoff reached his full potential while in Japan, developing into a hardened racer and a highly sought after commodity. And with boyish good looks working in his favor, the 'California Kid' was a fan favorite from the outset.



With qualifying tires that were worth 3 seconds per lap, drivers like Eddie Irvine, shown here, and Jeff Krosnoff learned to live on the outer limits for two laps at a time before the tires gave up. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

Being away from home never became easy, but the cast of characters Krosnoff ran with in Japan provided plenty of amusement to keep him distracted. He wasn't the only American racing in F3000—Indy 500 winner Eddie Cheever's younger brother, Ross, nearly won the 1989 Japanese F3000 title—but during an era where the likes of Michael Schumacher, Jean Alesi, Eddie Irvine, Mauro Martini, Roland Ratzenberger, Jan Lammers and a host of other European stars competed in Japan, Krosnoff grew closest to his counterparts from Italy, Ireland and other foreign nations.

As “*gaijins*,” the Japanese term for those who hail from outside Japan, Kendall says Krosnoff loved the tight-knit community of castaways and dreamers he became part of.

“They all lived in this one hotel,” he said. “It was called the ‘Gaijin Racers Club...’ Or ‘Crub’ as Jeff would say it with the Japanese pronunciation of it in English. He was really close with Martini and Irvine. He would tell me about Irvine and the fun rivalry they had. Later—Eddie was already in F1, he heard Jeff got his Indy car ride, so Irvine called to mess with him, and said something like, ‘Congratulations, but remember, you might be ‘mega star’ now, but I am a ‘giga star...’ They just had this razzing back and forth.

“It was similar to the camaraderie we had in the Russell Series of spending so much time together. It was the same with Roland Ratzenberger, who was a friend of his. He left Jeff's outgoing message; he was Austrian so he had him do the Terminator voice. I'd call Jeff and get, ‘This is Jeff, *I'll be back*,’ on his answering machine. It was clear they had a lot of fun over there, but Jeff was also clearly the adult in the room...”

Irvine, one of the sport's most notorious playboys, and who would go on to drive for Ferrari alongside Schumacher, recalled a great period of his life in Japan where Krosnoff was one of the central characters.

“I can't even remember the first time we met, but he walked over to me and said, ‘Hi,’ at one of the tests at Suzuka,” he said. “Super friendly guy, you know, typical kind of California guy, laid-back. In Europe everyone is kind of uptight in the racing circles, everyone is fighting for the few places that there are in Formula 1, and all the sort of exiles from Europe ended up in Japan. So when I went there everyone's kind of looking at me like a new boy's taken one of our possible drives. So it's a little bit weird to start with. And Jeff was the first guy to come over and say, ‘Hi,’ to take that edge off and welcome me as a mate. And then we got on really well because obviously we were quite different. He was very sensible and enjoyed my wildness and I enjoyed his calmness. We even went on holiday to Guam together. I went mad and he watched the madness.”

Irvine says his time in Japan with Krosnoff and the other drivers in the ‘Club’ rate as some of his most treasured experiences in the sport.



A young, curly-haired Tom Kristensen, left, chats with Dario Franchitti. Kristensen flirted with a drive in CART in 1999--years after racing in Japan with friends like Krosnoff. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

“Well, to be honest, I stayed in Japan a lot, like Jeff. Jeff had a wife to look after and he was trying to put away as much money as he could, as I was. Because in motor racing you never know when the money's going to stop coming so I was super cautious and Jeff was reasonably cautious as well. It was a lovely time. I remember it really affectionately. Like, if I didn't get to Formula 1, I would've been happy staying in Japan. We had great racing, we were earning really good money and I had a great life. It was a much more friendly set up.

“Once you got in, once you were in the gang, we all went out and had a really good time. Tokyo is a big place but was very small for us because we all went to the same sort of five places. So it was a really wonderful time, I have to say, compared to Formula 1, which, okay, you've got the fame and the money and the most amazing cars and all that sort of stuff; you didn't have the camaraderie that we had out there in Japan, which was something, looking back, you need a lot more than the other stuff. The other stuff will disappear. That won't.”

Irvine and Krosnoff had become elder statesman amongst the *gaijins*, and as 8-time Le Mans winner Tom Kristensen shares, the friendly Californian went out of his way to welcome the young Dane to Japan.

“I was a little bit younger, from the Formula 3 generation, if you call it that, and Jeff was the Formula 3000 generation. I remember him as always very open, and you could always ask him about stuff. He was always friendly, he was very natural – a very positive man. Sometimes we went to restaurants in Tokyo together but it was normally, we would be like four or six people. But when you were in Japan, he stayed there, obviously, quite a lot.

“And to have success in Japan with a different culture is, for me, you need to be a humble person with a passion for what you're doing. Sometimes in Formula 3000 he didn't have the best material, maybe he had one tire and the other tire company was the one to use that year, but he loved what he was doing and he wanted one day to go back to America and to prove himself. I think for an American to go via Japan, that's not really a normal way and I think a lot of people respected him for that.”

Krosnoff's sports car career was also flourishing in Japan, although racing in the equivalent of the Super GT category and also in the Sports Prototype championship was not his central focus.

His first taste of proper sports car racing came as a member of the satellite Jaguar factory team, TWR Suntec Jaguar. Piloting a variety of turbocharged, V12- and V8-powered prototypes for the heiress to the Suntory Brewery fortune, Krosnoff made a strong impression on TWR's Tony Dowe.



Krosnoff's distinctive blue helmet is seen inside the Suntec TWR Jaguar XJR-11. Sports car racing would help bring Jeff's name into the international limelight. (Jaguar) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

“He was selected by Mrs. Yamazaki from Suntory because he was quite a big name in Japan,” he said. “He knew all the Japanese tracks and although it wasn't a high priority program for us—we had full-blown efforts in IMSA and the World Sports Car Championship, Jeff did a really good job for us. Our engine shop was into the Japanese series because it was all but unrestricted there. We sent them a qualifying engine once—it was going to be a basket case after two laps—but Jeff did a great job with it, just wore it out.

“He was on the road to becoming a TWR driver, I believe. He would call me when he would pop back to America, wanting to do IMSA with us. When we started that program [in 1988], we had to work through all the promises we'd made to all kinds of drivers, so they got the first drives, but we were getting to a point where there wasn't going to be an impediment for Jeff to drive for us.”

After many years of local success in Japan, Krosnoff would put his name on the world stage for the first time in 1994. Teamed with Irvine and Martini in a factory SARD Toyota 94C-V for the 24 Hours of Le Mans, Krosnoff and his F3000 friends nearly won the race, recovering to finish second after a gearbox problem developed while the Californian was leading with 90 minutes to go.



The Toyota 94C-V that nearly delivered Krosnoff a win on his second trip to Le Mans. He raced a Jaguar XJR-12 with David Leslie and Mauro Martini in 1991, but the car failed to finish. (UltimateCarPage) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/> "Well, to be honest, we were leading it and we would've won it," Irvine said with absolute conviction. "We were leading it by a mile and we would've won it and Jeff had that problem with the screw coming out of the gear lever at the back of the gearbox. He had the wherewithal to get out of the car, get underneath it and jam it in gear. And the bad luck of it was he was stuck in first or second gear so we had to do the next lap, obviously, very, very slowly. If we had had some luck and it jammed in third or fourth or fifth or something, we could have probably still won; but I thought it was one of the best races in my life, from a personal point of view. It was one of the most pleasurable races in my life because I was doing Le Mans with two good friends."

With most of the racing world watching, Krosnoff, Martini and Irvine delivered an unforgettable performance. Of the three, Krosnoff's stock rise the most, while Irvine, already in Formula 1 with the Jordan team, earned more praise for nearly stealing the race back from Porsche.

"I overtook one of the [two] factory Porsches in the last corner in the last lap for second. That was one of the best highlights of my career, to be honest, that last stint. It was absolute madness because of all the cars going slowly and the Porsches and me, it was just basically me and two Porsches racing because for everyone else the race was over pretty much. We had a really good time and, again, it was the camaraderie thing where it's us three against the rest, up on the podium looking out on a sea of people and laughing about what we'd achieved. Jeff did a great job. He was super consistent, fast, and made no mistakes."

As Krosnoff would find upon his return to Japan, it was that consistency and speed that started to attract greater interest. One more year of F3000 and sports cars beckoned, but as Kendall recalls, Krosnoff's unwavering belief that racing in Japan would lead to bigger opportunities was starting to pay off.

"Well, when Jeff went to Japan, the analogy was like it was a huge pit and all these drivers are down it and it's just sheer granite walls and there is no way out," he said. "If you've got the money, they helicopter you out of there. But most people in there eventually give up and say, 'Well, I can't do it.' And Jeff was the one crazy guy who said, 'No, I'm going to climb that wall and get out.' It's literally no toe-holds, no foot-holds, and everybody's like, 'There's no way you can climb that wall.' That was what he faced. He was being told constantly: Japan is not the way out; you can't get out that way. He had to go off of pure determination and to hold onto every little thing he could.

"He went that way even though there was no light at the end of the tunnel and he's just said, 'I'm not going to stop. I'm just going to go wherever this leads me.' The top European guys got out of Japan because there was always a market for them, but as an American? There just wasn't a market for a guy like Jeff in the eyes of F1 teams. He was a curiosity. After Michael [Andretti] came home from F1 [in 1993] after things went badly with McLaren, an American wouldn't even be considered. And, like I said, there was this confidence about him that emanated from him that he was going to make it somehow, some way. And so, it finally came around full circle. It just wasn't the invite to F1 he'd spent all those years chasing after."



Irvine would go on to become Michael Schumacher's teammate at Ferrari, winning four races for the scuderia. (LAT) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

By the time he was 31, Krosnoff had spent most of his twenties racing

professionally in Japan. He'd finished as high as second in the F3000 championship, but with 1996 drawing closer, and as Krosnoff watched from afar, a healthy crop of young drivers were on the move back home.

A promising Canadian by the name of Greg Moore, who had risen up through America's open-wheel ranks in Krosnoff's absence, would be making his debut in CART in '96. Tony Kanaan, coming out of Italian F3, and Helio Castro Neves, a graduate of the British F3 series, would be heading to America to try and earn the Firestone Indy Lights crown that same year.

Scotland's Dario Franchitti would have a year of DTM to look forward to before joining the CART series in 1997, but whether it was happening right then or in the years to come, all of the open-wheel talent outside of F1 seemed destined for their shot in Indy car racing.

In the game of Musical Chairs, Krosnoff wondered if he'd have a seat back home when the music stopped, and fortunately, one of his old friends was worrying about the same thing.

"You know, I just really enjoyed Jeff Krosnoff as a person, separate from what he was able to do on the racetrack," said Mike Hull, Managing Director for Target Chip Ganassi Racing. "We were both from southern California, and we developed a relationship with each other over time. He was racing Formula Mazda when I first met him, and we kept in contact over time. Then when he continued to race and he wasn't able to find a drive in the United States, so he went to Japan and raced and we kept in contact as much as we could while I was working in CART. At the end of '95, [Chip Ganassi] wanted to make some driver changes here and he came to [his management and engineering team of] Tom Anderson, myself and Morris Nunn. He called and said, 'I'd like to come down to Indianapolis and sit down with you guys and talk about having a driver test to determine who can drive as a teammate with Jimmy Vasser in 1996.'

"And so Chip came to the building and Tom, Morris and myself sat down and Chip said, 'I want to have a driver test, you guys determine where we can do an oval and road course test, where it makes the most practical sense, and set the schedule. I have somebody I would like you to test. He comes recommended from Adrian Reynard and Rick Gorne. His name is Alex Zanardi. Now, if any of you sitting here want to have somebody also, we'd like to have a comparative test, so if there's anyone any of you would like to have, speak up or let me know who you'd like it to be and make arrangements and get that person there so we can have a proper comparative test.'"

They'd only seen each other on rare occasions during his long adventure in Japan, but Krosnoff had made enough of an impression on Hull that when it came time to offer a candidate in what had become one of the most promising seats in Indy car racing, one name stood out above the rest.



Krosnoff was filled with an endless supply of enthusiasm, which got him through tough times in Japan and helped deliver him back to America. (The Krosnoff Foundation) <http://speedtv.com/gallery/>

“So Morris had a choice, Norberto Fontana, who was racing in Europe in Formula 3000, and Tom chose not to join in on putting a name in the hat. So we tried to get Fontana to test but he had a Formula 1 testing contract and they wouldn’t allow him to come over. So it was down to me and I contacted Jeff, who was still in Japan, and I made arrangements for him to come and be part of that test evaluation process. We organized ourselves to go to Homestead so we could go on both the road track and on the oval. This was going to be a proper shootout.”

It had been a long time since Krosnoff had been met by an outstretched hand in America, and after so many years in Japan—watching new friends come, succeeded, and left for greener pastures—he was beginning to wonder if the best days in the sport were behind him.

“Contemporary motorsports is a difficult business, and as hard as I worked to reach F1 or Indy cars, nothing was happening,” he wrote in his final submission to *RACER* magazine. “It was especially hard to take at various times and so, near the end of [1995], I was having to come to terms with the fact that my career might not ever reach the lofty expectations I envisioned for myself as a snott-nosed youngster.”

Doubts aside, and thanks to the continual encouragement from his wife and an old friend with leverage in the Ganassi camp, Krosnoff was about to make the journey home.

The heavy sacrifice was about to pay off, and his life would never be the same.