

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

ODYSSEY: Jan Opperman's Racing Diary

By Jan Opperman as Transcribed by Joe Scalzo

Sunday, March 31, 1974

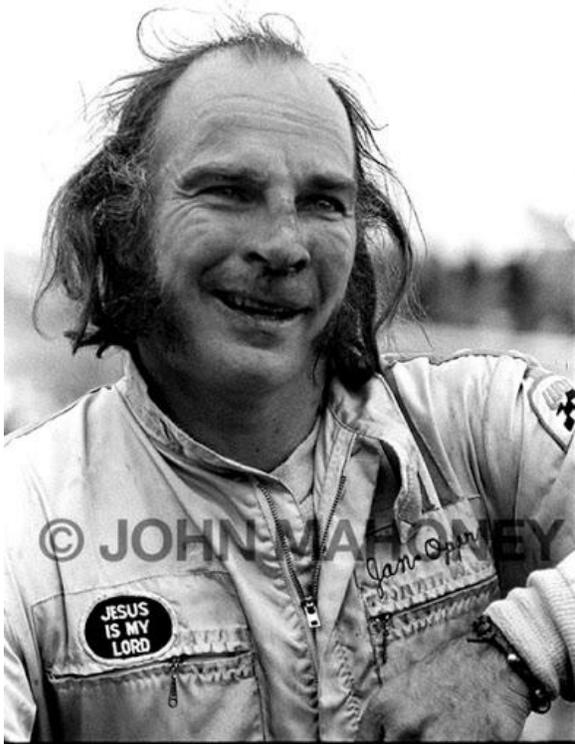


No rain this morning, but when we got to the track we found a couple of bulldozers there, trying to smooth out ruts. Ralph and I looked at each other, grinned, and felt better. Eldora was going to be rough and rowdy. We both like that type of race track, because in the rough Shitbox II is a bunch of sprint car.

Because we'd followed some guy's directions that had us going south when we should have been going north, I was late again and missed the drivers' meeting completely. This got me roundly chewed out by the USAC officials who definitely expect me to attend their meetings from now on. Then I went out to practice Shitbox II and found everything dandy except that it didn't have any brakes, the brand new motor was running sick and spitting a little oil and the throttle was sticking. Shoot!

The throttle wasn't sticking badly, just badly enough to put a little panic into my heart every time I pitched into the corners.

While Ralph and Hash and the others were working like maniacs getting things fixed, I walked down to the number one and number two corners and watched some of the USAC cars tearing off their tails and belly pans in the holes. It reinforced my feeling that I had half a chance after all. The track still was rough enough from the rain so that the USAC guys couldn't run the corners as high as they usually do. But track conditions were fast, and the



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intensely high speed and centrifugal forces gave me a feeling of flying. I liked that.

To save my neck during the main event's 40 laps, Hash found a big bungee cord that I taped to my helmet and fastened to Shitbox II. I tightened down all four shock absorbers, and noticed that on the right rear Ralph had hammered on a wide, squat, dragracing tire. This brought amused looks from the USAC boys, who all were using double-step diamonds. I knew they were haywire. Eldora was strictly a drag tire track. We cruised around on the pace lap, and I threw loose dirt on the cars behind me getting Shitbox II sideways. Probably everybody there thought I was crazy, driving that way on the pace lap, but I wanted my tires good and warm.

The start was a clean, fast one. George Snider and Lee Osborne were on the front row and I was back in the third row beside Gary Bettenhausen. Shitbox II coughed a couple of times, but I'd anticipated that and out-jumped the row ahead of me and tried to jam up the middle between Snider and Osborn.

We hit the first corner with Snyder low and Ozzie high, and I positioned myself behind George and waited for a rut to pick up his car's front end and move it around. It didn't happen, but Bruce Walkup, low and down in the mud, charged his car at mine and really came at me. We bumped wheels, and I came out of the skirmish second, with only Snider to catch.

I caught George by the next corner, dropped underneath him, went ahead of him, and held him off completing the first lap. PA was where I learned to really turn a sprint car loose early and pick up ground. In Snider and Gary Bettenhausen, particularly, I was up against some really good drivers. They still had reservations in their minds, and they weren't used to the full fuel loads in their cars, and they weren't familiar with new track conditions. In two laps, three at the most, they'd start charging and become really good race drivers again. But now, with confusion reigning in their minds, I had the advantage.

I must have been running pretty strong, because judging from Hash's signals I'd opened up a decent lead and already was picking up the first bunch of lapped cars. I could see Bill Puterbaugh's in there, and three or four other cars I didn't recognize. They were all over the race track, which is the way slower cars usually behave at a high-speed track. Somebody stood on it really hard, and his back tire brought up a mud clod that must have been twelve inches long and I don't know how thick.



It was too late to duck. It clobbered my face and it really hurt, I coughed, tasted blood, and split up some. Suddenly I couldn't see good anymore, and when I took one hand off the wheel to pull a clean goggle lens in place, I found all my spare lenses gone. Not only had

that clod knocked the lenses off, it had loosened my goggles. They started blowing off just as I was cocking Shitbox II into a corner, and just as Puterbaugh, dead ahead of me, had his radiator blow up in a giant geyser of steam.

For a second I couldn't see anything. Nothing. Somewhere inside all that steam was Puterbaugh's car, and I had a split-second to decide whether to swerve high or low. Going high would pin me between Puterbaugh and the fence – but I couldn't swerve left, either, because he might go the same way. All I could do was brake, follow his slowing car, and see where he'd go.

I heard George Snider coming before I ever saw him, and then he was zinging past me on the outside. Good move. Running a calculated risk like that in a sprint car race is all you can do when you're running second.

It took me five hard laps to get Snider back, and by jogging Shitbox II low, and between the ruts, then allowing it to slip back in front of him, I ran him down between the third and fourth corners.

I was still a little dizzy from the clod, but Ralph had Shitbox II hooking up to the race track so fabulously that the only thing worrying me was my drag tire pulling completely off the rim. If Snider had wanted to make a battle of it, I still could have run the third and fourth corners full bore. But it was no Sunday ride at the other end of the track. Three or four times down in one and two I was hammering the ruts hard enough to bicycle up onto two wheels.

By the last lap I had no fight left in me whatsoever. Maybe George got a little tired too, because he didn't pester me. It was disillusioning to pull into the winner's circle and find no dignitaries or trophy girls waiting, but maybe they reserve them for USAC drivers. At first nobody was there except Ralph and Hash, but then some of the racers came over, including Steve Stapp, who gave me a bad time for lapping Pancho Carter.

My legs were a little wobbly. Getting out of Shitbox II, I was surprised I was still dizzy. And I had dried blood and mud all over my face and probably was too grimy to expect some trophy girl to lay a big kiss on me anyway.



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