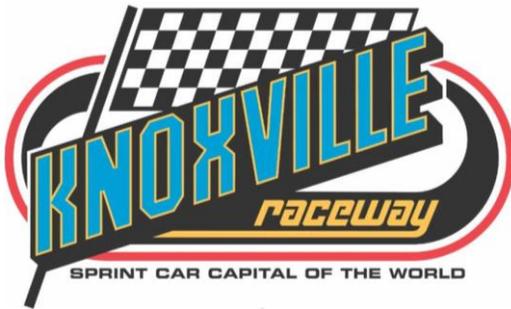


# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### The Nationals

It became a command performance – almost a summer ritual. First the long trailer transport with the Indiana license plates carrying the stern and quiet man leave Bloomington, in the southeastern corner of the state, and enter Iowa to negotiate the farmlands and come rumbling across the broken blacktop into the residential outskirts of little Knoxville. Then it falls into the endless line of enemy transports from 30 sprint-car racing states and Canada and Australia massing at the mouth of the Marion County Fairgrounds for another running of the hot-blood race of every sprint car season, the Knoxville Nationals.



The four furious nights of time trials, heats, last-chance consolations, and sudden-death eliminations attained a violent climax late Saturday night or early Sunday morning when the two dozen surviving sprinters plunged into Knoxville Raceway's first corner at warrior speed; and with 23 nervous and frightened drivers hoping that No.11 wouldn't again blow all of them off and win still another Nationals.

And No. 11 would win; most assuredly it would. Over 20 Nationals only five sprinters had managed to defeat it, and many of them were flukes.

No. 11 – a new No. 11 for every Nationals – was the only sprint car owning the fearsome reputation as the Knoxville juggernaut. And its fearsome reputation was honestly earned. At the water Nationals of 1987, for example, the skies over Knoxville flooded the dirt infield into a muddy swamp. And No. 11's man, who could be cranky, at last grew fed up with pushing its bulk through all the mud to the transport. So he left No. 11 parked out in the black soaking infield and let pelting rain hammer it for three of the four days and nights. And came Saturday evening No. 11 still was packing more than enough muscle to destroy another Nationals field by lapping all but six cars and drivers, many more than once.

Knoxville hated No. 11 more than it admired it, and felt the same way about the man.

**For all four days and nights the Knoxville faithful used to sound off on the subject, complaining that by winning all of Knoxville's prize money and glory, making everybody else look stupid, and putting the grandstands to sleep with their dominance, No. 11 and the man were ruining the Nationals.**



**In contrast, a handful of the rest of Knoxville's faithful stubbornly insisted that No. 11 and the man were enhancing the Nationals because nobody better grasped the difficulties and mysteries of sprint car racing than the man; nobody else had discovered more ways to make a sprint car run fast than the man; and nobody else was more obsessed with winning.**

**The foes of the man, however, far out-numbered his friends. Taunts, hisses, jeers, and old-fashioned boos rang from the grandstands at the mention of his surname over Knoxville's public address. Graffiti discrediting him could be read on walls and automobiles clear to mid-city Des Moines. At one Nationals a fanatic put up the money to rent a bi-plane which flew over Knoxville Raceway towing an antagonistic slogan about him.**

And the man paid no heed. None. He wore a “No Trespassers” expression and throughout Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights let nothing get between himself and the perfection of No. 11. Yet by Saturday night, when everything was on the line, and when he dramatically rolled No. 11 to pole position on the half-mile of gleaming black earth for the coming diabolical eight minutes, a change came over the man. Eyes shining, he for the first time appraised all the opponent sprint cars, car owners, mechanics, and drivers. And then his face slowly but unmistakably hardened into an expression which seemed to say, all right, son-of-a-bitches, lets go.

**Steve Kinser? No, Karl.**

Long before becoming the symbol of the Knoxville Nationals, Karl Kinser first demonstrated he was an ancestor of the tough Kentucky mountain men who settled the upcountry Hoosier region by working in a manner which would have driven most humans to their graves, including dragging timber to sawmills behind wild horses.

He'd gone straight to work at sixteen because that was the age he earned his high school diploma. Finding the boy's mind far above average, Karl's teachers jumped him forward several grades. Forever afterward he scorned “book-learning.”

Automobiles overwhelmed him. He operated tune-up garages, ran used-car lots, and paint-and-body shops. He took his honeymoon in a chopped-and-channeled hot rod roadster he'd built himself.

Everywhere he went, Karl Kinser's compulsion for over-working and for winning made people nervous. Taking up the sport of drag racing, he quit in anger when others declined to race him because he won too often.

Monroe and Lawrence counties and their dramatic short tracks were a nest of ever-battling blue-collar dirt trackers who simply kicked the windows out of Ford flathead junks and manhandled them. Kinser constructed his first No. 11 and then modified it to perfection. He was a lone wolf, totally self-sufficient. Soon his overworking and brains were disturbing the flathead racers too.



Sprint car racing was embraced by southern Indiana in the early 1960s. Karl Kinser was ready. Soon he became the racing's great encyclopedia. He loved high-tech, speed tricks, and, especially, horsepower, and the great roar a mass of it made. The only thing he never could do was race No.11 himself,

Those racing drivers that he employed he never praised and always lectured about their mistakes. At the same time, he never apologized for his own. Of course this reflected the culture of sprint car racing, where the car owner was never wrong; yet even by this standard Kinser was abnormal. Staring his driver down, he dictated his philosophy about No. 11: “If you race it as hard as I work on it, everything will be fine.”

He undertook raids of other sprint car territories, returning to Bloomington with money and glory. But when he and No. 11 started carrying away too many prizes from the high-walled deathtrap of Salem Speedway they were asked not to come back.

Kinser and No. 11 traveled across Indiana to Anderson, when the community’s “Little 500” was still America’s most roughhouse race. No. 11 won it twice, and Kinser might well have gotten run of Little 500 too except by the middle 1970s he had switched his orientation to the Knoxville Nationals, just then finding its stature as sprint car racing’s classic.

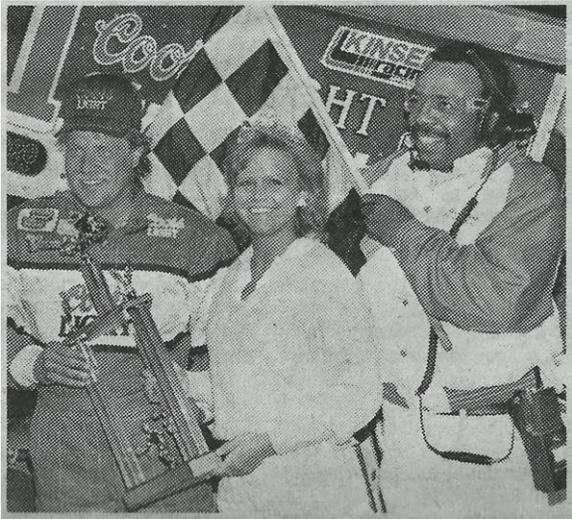
No. 11 won the 1974 Nationals, defeating Jan Opperman, the folk hero and man-of-god.



The following year, No. 11 clocked quick time on its first lap of time trials and flipped out of Knoxville on the second. Kinser gathered up the wreckage, and watched No. 11 get totaled all over again. Then, out in Illinois, Dick Gaines, Kinser’s long-time driver, somersaulted and burst blood vessels that crippled his vision. It was time for Karl to go shopping for a replacement.

He did not have far to look. Bloomington in the 1980s had 26 Kinsers in its telephone book, most of them unrelated, and seven of them were racing drivers, led by 22-year-old Steve Kinser’s father Bob, an Indiana hill country racing celebrity. Believing that Steve, just like his father, must have lots of horsepower in his blood, Karl chose Steve, who was a husky bricklayer and high school wrestling star.

The two Kinsers towed to Ohio’s Eldora Speedway and Steve’s rite of passage on a bonafide blood-and-thunder dirt track. He finished fifth. The second time he was third. “Next time we come here, we win.” Karl told him.



STEVE KINSER of Bloomington, Ind., left, won the World of Outlaws sprint car feature race Saturday night, April 25th, at the Knoxville, Iowa, Raceway. It was Kinser's seventh Outlaws win of the season. Flagman is Doug Clark. —Jerry Mackey photo

**It was an order. Steve proceeded to win a record six Eldoras in succession, and this was the onset of the Kinser firestorm at the Nationals that nobody was going to be able to put out for the coming fifteen Knoxville's.**

**And every year during the Nationals stories circulated that Karl was lecturing Steve, telling him, "Listen Steve, you go out there and run those corners hard. Run the engine hard too. And don't come back unless you do."**

**Almost nothing ever stopped the pair of them from winning unless it was Knoxville's enforcement police, the toughest in sprint car racing, who in 1983 caught Karl breaking the rules by trying to add oil to No. 11 during a**

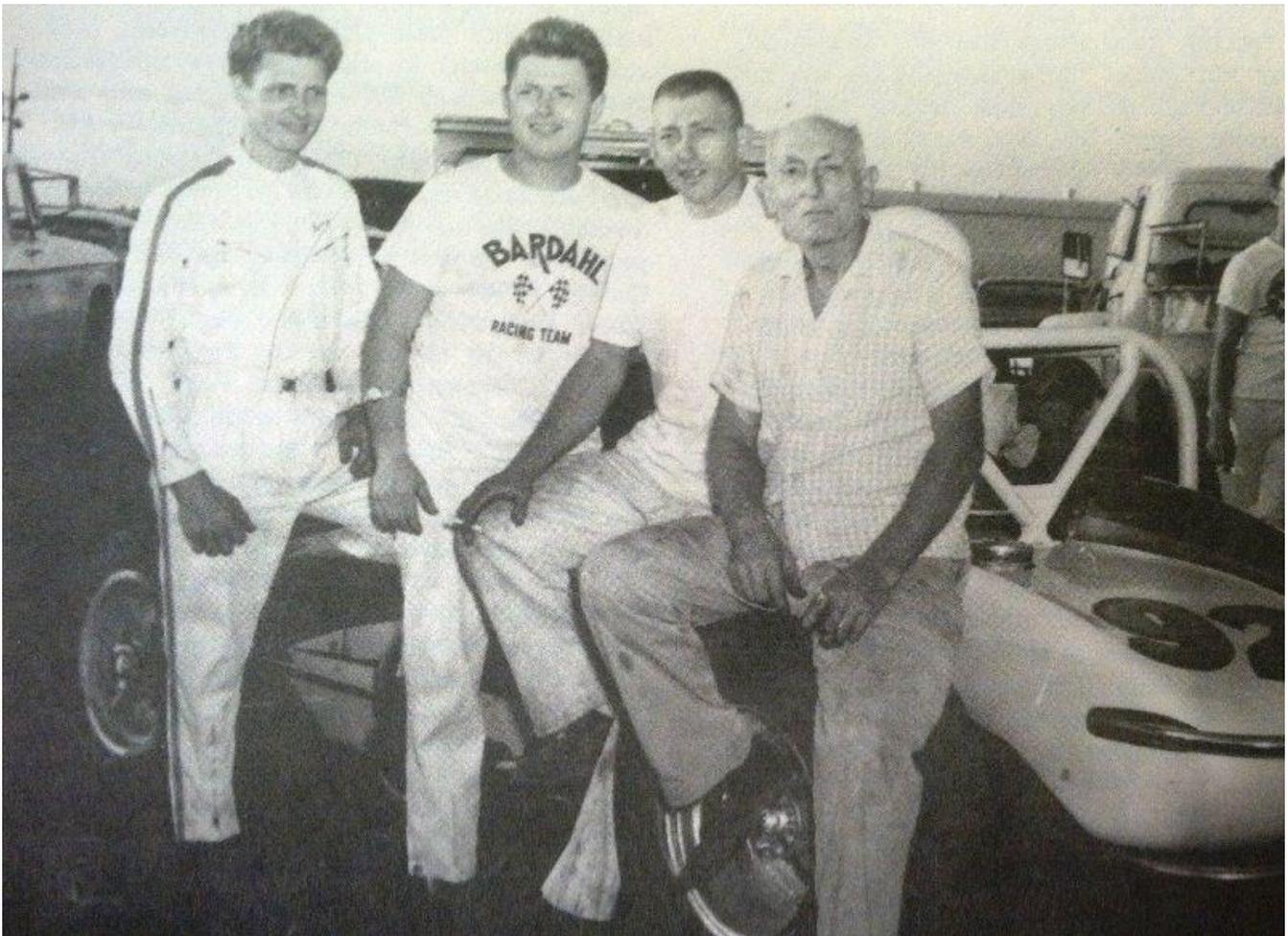
**red flag. Following the re-start, after running completely dry of lubricant, No. 11 froze up and went spinning out.**

**Despotic officiating was a Nationals tradition, and any rule infraction brought harsh punishment with no hope of appeal. So, in this case, the Kinsers had joined a long cast of heroes and hacks including Doug Wolfgang, Sammy Swindell, and Bubby Jones who'd gotten thrown out of Knoxville for violating the smallest statute.**

**Probably it all started on a certain Knoxville Saturday night in 1964, the fourth running of the Nationals, the hour nearing three in the morning, and all of Marion County Fairgrounds falling into an anarchy of rioting.**

**It was an era when Kansas City – a fast four-hour pull across the prairie – was exporting to the Nationals wave-upon-wave of short-track specialists from Olympic Stadium who could jam a big super-modified two row forward on every rolling start. Swashbucklers from the big city, they rolled into Knoxville with their cars, crews, and rabid fans to sweep all before them.**

**Kansas City's most conspicuous visiting swashbucklers were the triad of young Weld brothers - unique racing brats when open-wheel competition was still an occupation for adults, not children. Jerry, 26, was the dependable eldest brother who managed the family garage and looked out for his kid brothers; Greg, 19, was the near-sighted university student and champion of the 1963 Nationals; and Kenny, a whole 17, was the baby.**



**The supportive Kansas City press had a ready name for the Welds, describing them “the Kansas City Mafia.” Newspaper men from the metropolis which had given birth to the bloody Kansas City massacre of June 17, 1933 romantically wrote up the boys as though they were Twentieth Century counterparts of Pretty Boy Floyd and his tribe of desperados who, while trying to rescue the chronic bank robber Jelly Nash at Union Station, instead gunned down Nash as well as four lawmen.**

**The Welds deplored the name. But Knoxville’s other drivers, bitterly resentful of the way their unwelcome visitors patronized them as a lot on provincial hicks considered it more than appropriate.**

**What turned the Nationals of 1964 into a giant riot was a confusing disqualification. It happened during one of the night’s heats. Earl Wagner, Knoxville’s bullying plumber – the only local driver ever to win the Nationals - had sent a pulverizing spearing into Greg Weld. And just as Jerry Weld was arriving with a set of tools to make repairs, a wrecker, dispatched by Knoxville stewards, appeared to tow away Greg’s wounded car. But the wrecker gang immediately got chased away by a formidable army of toughs out of Kansas City.**

**All this brought about Greg Weld's disqualification. And this was when matters became confusing. The legitimacy of the disqualification was disputed by the three Weld brothers who argued forcibly that the thugs were strangers to them. But when Greg's repaired car was rolled to the starting line in defiance of the stewards the same wrecker crew appeared to haul it away all over again. And by this time additional Weld supporters were jumping up and down on top of Greg's car inciting the grandstands to riot.**

**Knoxville's scared management next tried setting its horse-mounted militia on the Welds; but the posse was on the boys side and refused to attack. Violent fighting broke out in the grandstands and across the infield. A huge din of discord rumbled across the fairgrounds. In the pits, car owners and mechanics preparing for combat opened tool boxes and removed wrenches and wheel hammers.**

**Possibly the only cool head was Greg Weld's own. Overcoming the stalemate by circulating a petition, signed by every opponent driver, saying it was OK for him to race, providing he started on the back row.**

**With everybody still on edge, the Nationals was flagged away. Weld was astonishing. Raging and overtaking on the inside and outside, and exposing himself to the sliding wheels on knock-out artists, on the last lap he hurtled out of the wolf pack running second and harassing the winner.**

**And that winner happened to be Kenny Weld, making himself Knoxville's youngest Nationals' winner. Jerry Weld came in seventh.**



**But the Weds problems weren't over. Upon returning to their sanctuary Kansas City they discovered they were being charged as criminals for fomenting mob violence and banned from the Nationals for two years.**

**But the ban was rescinded and Kenny Weld captured the Nationals again in 1965, then became the first four-time winner. Greg Weld raced to the sprint car championship of the U.S. Auto Club when USAC was the potent association of Mario Andretti,**

**Bobby Unser, Roger McCluskey, Don Branson, and Jud Larson.**

**The end of the Welds was sad. Jerry Weld was struck down dead by a hit-and-run driver in Kansas City; Greg Weld, also in Kansas City, suffered an unexpected but fatal heart attack; and Kenny Weld, after quitting raced to manage a drug-trafficking ring, was caught; imprisoned; released; and vanished. Any mention of his name has been erased from wikipedia.**

**The art of racing Karl Kinser's No. 11 around Knoxville Raceway the way Steve Kinser did was to get it going so fast that it flew out of control and then snap it under control again without crashing. Back in 1982, Kinser and Doug Wolfgang – almost Kinser's only Knoxville equal - slipped repeatedly and without warning into quite possibly the fastest winged sprint car battle ever fought at the Nationals.**

**Faces deadpan, they'd appeared on the front row, traded blistering starts, the first false and the second for real, and began attacking with everything in their formidable arsenals**

**Nearly all 15 miles were fought nose-to-tail and frequently wing-to-wing, with Knoxville's rim, middle, and bottom getting exploited.**

**Wolfgang threw paralyzing broadsides at Kinser and Kinser and No. 11 matched them with paralyzing inside moves of their own.**

**The instant Kinser or Wolfgang appeared to be trapped or blocked, a sudden veer, an astonishing plunge, or an impossible plunge, set the pair of them free of straggling lapped cars and warring all over again.**

**Refusing to allow lapped traffic to trap him, Wolfgang never lifted for the first and second corners and his outside momentum carried him past Kinser. But up ahead in the third and fourth corners up were still more lapped cars, most notably Rick Ferkel's, its plastic wing flapping.**

**Wolfgang needed to figure out what Ferkel was going to do before Ferkel did. So, adjusting his attack, Wolfgang caught Ferkel high on corner four, in a dangerous spot where there was no room for error.**

**Just then Kinser and No. 11 arrived to pinch Wolfgang between Ferkel and himself. The trio of drivers, all wildly out of control, staggered free with Wolfgang and Ferkel bumping and Kinser clear.**



Wolfgang next watched Kinser and No. 11 disappearing into more lapped traffic. Somebody's engine came apart, hemorrhaging water and steam. Wolfgang prayed it was Kinser's, but it wasn't, and suddenly Kinser had so much racing in him that not Wolfgang and anybody else could hold him. Lapping up to fifth place, No.11 won another Knoxville Nationals for Karl Kinser.

Afterward, Karl carefully examined runnerup Wolfgang, who trained like an athlete and had done the

debilitating thirty miles without breaking a sweat. And Karl skeptically examined Steve, winner of the Nationals who trained on carousing and six-packs, and had perspiration all over his face, more perspiration running down his back, and steam shooting off his head ten feet in the air like a geyser.



It made Karl angry. How much faster Steve Kinser would be, Karl concluded, it only he could force him to train like Doug Wolfgang.

One of Knoxville's least successful sprint car owners was Bill Smith, who ran a Nebraska speed house, Speedway Motors, in Lincoln, and who entered non-winning teams in seventeen consecutive Nationals before Wolfgang finally turned the trick for him in 1977. Yet Opperman, Smith's shock hippie driver, came within one-and-a-half miles of winning Knoxville.

The year was 1969. It was Opperman's counterculture tastes and lifestyle which brought about Smith's ruin. Smith had imported him from a northern California long-hair commune, and Opperman, after three rousing days and nights of raising hell, sleeping on the ground, and even sometimes getting loaded, lined up for the Nationals as damaged goods, with so miserable a cold he barely could breathe.

**And with three laps to go he was in the lead when his goggles so filled up with mucus he hardly could see. So, in a huge upset, he was beaten by a future martyr of the grim sprint car culture named Kenny Gritz.**



**He was a steady driver, no big gun but typical of the handful of men who could really exercise a sprinter when the spirit moved them. His car owner was Lee Snider, a fiberglass tycoon whose mechanic, Gary Shoenrock, was slowly losing a desperate battle with diseased blood and diabetes.**

**Gritz was unlucky. An acetylene torch he was using lit off fuel tank fumes and caught his face on fire. He was in agony, and after Snider and Shoenrock had medics from Knoxville examine him, Gritz was advised to skip the Nationals. He immediately replied that nothing could make him do that even though his Edmunds four-bar – ridiculed as the “Twist-a-Flex Special” – was unsuited for a speed track like Knoxville.**

**Early in the Nationals Gritz fell to sixth. Then he found himself and so did the big four-bar. They catapulted around Opperman to the checkered.**

**Gritz had his blistered face scrubbed down all over again. As champion of the Knoxville Nationals he entered the State Fair at Lincoln where the rules obliged mechanic Shoenrock to remove the Knoxville roll cage; Gritz. In other words, was racing open-cockpit and without protection.**

**Lincoln was a horror of dust and ruts. Things turned ugly: Gritz hooked a hidden rut; somebody else’s exposed wheel got him upside-down and open-cockpit first; and that was the end of Kenny Gritz.**

**Lee Snyder never again carried a sprint car back to the Nationals and soon was gone from racing. Accounts say that Gary Shoenrock later took his own life, either on account of Gritz or his own wasting diseases.**

**Sprint cars weren’t the only things that used to sun wide-open during the Knoxville Nationals.**

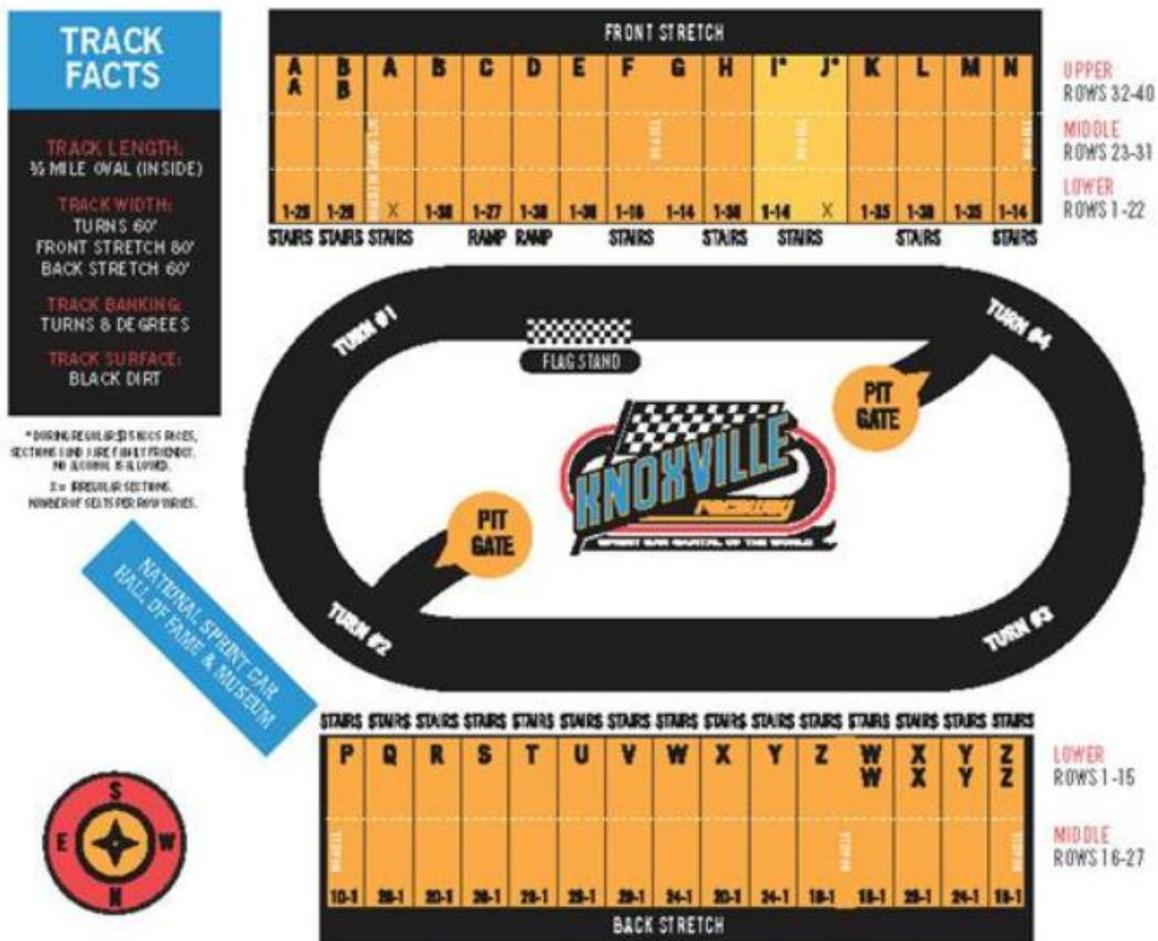
**Gamblers were made welcome and from dawn to dusk inside the adjoining livestock barns everything was one big and rip-roaring booze party with every imaginable sort of conviviality. One year, legend suggests, a card cheat crashed the party; got caught; and a mob flourishing a**

noose nearly strung him up. Legend further suggests that Karl Kinser himself may have been one of the mob members.

The Knoxville Nationals was a dangerous meet. Sprint cars got out of the fairgrounds and struck grain bins and silos, even sprayed wreckage into the grandstands. Drivers died, including Jay Opperman, brother of Jan, and two others who had the life smashed out of them just getting lined up for a heat.

For propriety's sake, changes were made. Civilizing the sprint cars and keeping them inside Knoxville and negotiating Knoxville at full screaming throttle was achieved with the addition of hideous overhead wings.

For the benefit of the drivers, and to accommodate the new demands of TV, Knoxville's feeble lighting system was given a substantial voltage boost. Wooden walls that used to pulverize faces got replaced with steel. Spectators were given a new set of grandstands.



Monster controversies over the rolling starts – at one Nationals a flagman got so frustrated trying to flag a heat away that he quit in the middle of the program – were dealt with when stewards forbade drivers from standing on the gas until crossing a line of chalk across the

**fourth corner. This happened to be one of the least successful changes, causing a minimum of one fracas at every Nationals.**

**Knoxville's old dens of gambling were rooted out so that spectators were unable to spend their money not on games of chance but on the concession midway and at the new Hall of Fame museum.**

**Paying hundreds of thousands of dollars and attracting what seem to be well-behaved spectators, the prosperous, wholesome Knoxville Nationals seemed to bear little resemblance to the wilder and harder Knoxville Nationals of yesteryear. But this was called progress and nothing could be done about it.**

**Out in Los Angeles. Ron Shaver, the horsepower maniac, went on creating and selling many of the fastest aluminum-block V8s that went bombing around Knoxville during the Nationals. "Knoxville eats a motor up," Shaver believed. And his creations ate up Knoxville. They were 15-to-1 compression warheads of around 800-horsepower which blasted and reached revs of nearly 8,000.**

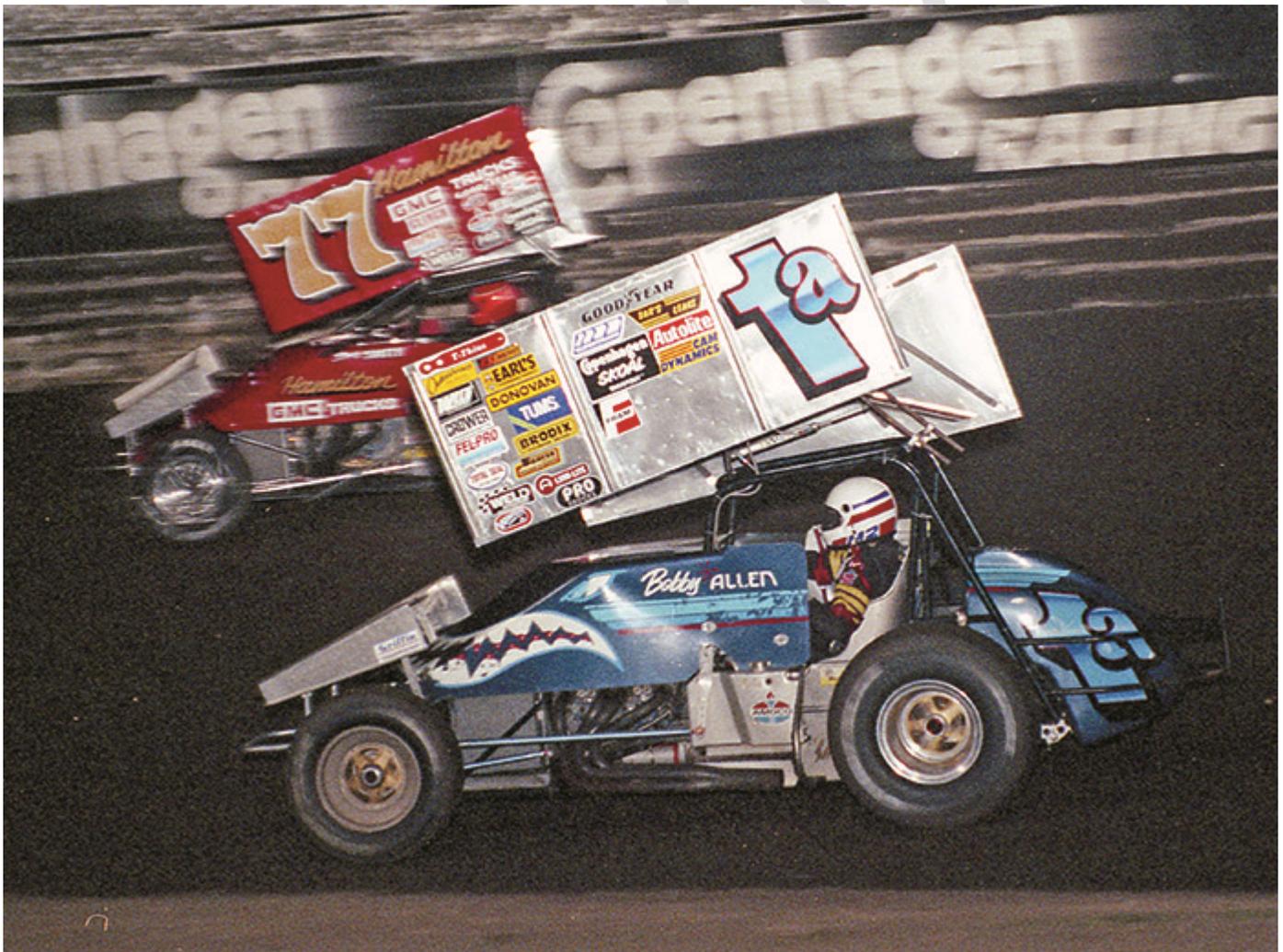


Merely completing Knoxville's 15 miles without over-stressing themselves and becoming sick remained a chore for such fickle howitzers. and their destruction achieved a climax in 1990 during the 30<sup>th</sup> Nationals.

With only six of the 30 laps to go, many of the hottest sprinters like Karl's and Steve Kinser's No. 11, had gone to the morgue with illnesses ranging from sparkless magnetos to mangled connecting rods.

Holding second and third positions were Sammy Swindell and rookie Steve Smith. Young Smith was struggling along on seven cylinders that were about to go to six. Swindell's dire predicament was worse. Burnt oil seeping from his own badly wounded engine was occasionally setting his car afire and the remainder was spraying onto his goggles and rendering him almost blind.

And leading the Nationals, plugging away on his unfashionable bottom lane with his usual underpowered junkyard engine was everybody's sentimental, destitute. Knoxville hero, the former go-kart champion Bobby Allen.



**A leftover warrior and unreformed hippie from the era of Opperman, Allen was the only Knoxville personality who carried almost as much myth. Broke as usual, but ever-optimistic, Allen had traveled to the Nationals hoping to earn enough to pay for the wedding of his youngest daughter.**

**Bizarre indeed had been those last eight laps: they'd had Allen and his worn-out and smoking junk camped out on the bottom, stubbornly holding off the others; they'd had Swindell careening blind as a bat around the rim of Knoxville, using white flashes of wall to tell him when it was time to turn; and they had poor, powerless, seven-cylinders Smith struggling in vain.**

**Allen won; the matrimonial ceremony of his youngest daughter could go forward. Doris Allen, Bobby's faithful blond wife, told me, "At races all these years I've been watching Bob's car smoking and not the others. Wonderful!"**

**(This was my last Knoxville Nationals because afterward I went to live in the Netherlands.)**

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