

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Ted and the Outlaws

The nerve-wracked, chain-smoking, Ted Johnson seemed to sustain and stimulate himself on a steady diet of nicotine and Doctor Pepper. Yet for the hyperactive president and founder of the World of Outlaws sprint car-racing gang, the 1988 season must have seemed like a trial, a sentence, a punishment for Johnson-wasn't-sure-what.



Hostilities erupted early, then rapidly grew worse. They actually began in Florida in February where World of Outlaw drivers ushered in the new season by flipping each other out of on Tampa's State Fair Speedway; and they continued their violence in Arizona where a pair of teams experienced an explosive uprooting of personnel.

But during the following week, at the WoO awards banquet in southern California, at Long Beach, where the 1987 cash awards were distributed, the owner one of Ted Johnson's teams, Marks-Keppler, out of northern California, unexpectedly broke down in the of middle of his thank-you speech and started spilling tears, real tears. The audience erupted with waves of applause, and briefly the World of Outlaws became one big happy family again. Very briefly - Shortly after his expression of sentimentality, the same weeping car owner turned pugnacious and, following a one-punch disagreement with a member of the tough tribe of Kinsers out of southern Indiana, showed up for the weekend Ascot Park races bearing a knot on his forehead.



And the strife seemed contagious. The dance band for the WoO fete had problems of its own: Its lead female singer experienced sudden kidney pains while performing and her hastily-recruited replacement, the band's pregnant back-up

singer, subsequently went into false labor during her own performance

Departing California without further pain, Johnson and his outlaws arrived in Texas, home of the WoO, for the next round of races. Something else happened. Johnson did not yet know it, but a cabal of his WoO teams were talking revolt. Following a hysteric mass meeting in a crowded Dallas motel room, conducted in an atmosphere “reminiscent of a lynch mob,” according to one of the revolutionaries, who suddenly were up with a decade’s worth of Ted Johnson’s erratic leadership, voted to boycott all future WoO races.

But the boycott never materialized, largely because Johnson, in a flattering, conciliatory, gesture got the would-be lynchers to call off their coup by hastily naming six of them to something called the Car Owners Advisory Board.

Suddenly, sapped by all fighting, and by now suspicious of each other, everybody summoned up what the remaining seven-months-worth-of-nighttime WoO dirt track races meant to them. But no sooner had the dreary season ended in October when fresh horror arose to confront Ted Johnson. A brand new sprint car sanctioning body, the United Sprint Association (USA), administrated by Johnson’s own old former directors of competition, marketing and PR, along with the WoO’s three great names, Kinser, Swindell and Wolfgang, appeared to blandly announce it was going to pirate away all of Johnson’s and the WoO’s drivers, car owners, sponsors and race dates.

A chain smoker all his life, Johnson, aged 72, died on October 21, 2006

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