

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Ascot

For those lucky enough to be supporting sprint car racing in Los Angeles, the hot nights at Ascot always were the Saturdays.

First came the vibrations of anticipation. They'd begin while you were tooling south along the Harbor Freeway and passing the Imperial Boulevard off-ramp. Imperial was only a couple of exits before Ascot.

Then, at the Alondra ramp, blazing reassuringly in the twilight sky, came the trademark Ascot arc lights.

Finally Artesia Boulevard, the Ascot exit. Now all that remained was to scramble for a place in the bleachers or down in the infield pits. There were three choices. A seat high in turn four afforded a fine panorama of all the dirt corners. But sitting low in turn one put you close enough to the sprinters to hear their muscle, feel their wind and heat, and, of course, get battered by their stinging dirt.



Meanwhile, if you were lucky enough to be in the infield when the USAC boys were in L.A., you'd be rubbing shoulders with A.J., Parnelli, Johnny, Roger, Mario, Herk, and Bobby.

Ascot – sometimes called Ascot Park, a name hardly anybody ever used – stood fast through four decades (1957-1990), easily out-living L.A.'s two other dead sites, Riverside International Raceway and the white elephant of race tracks, Ontario Motor Speedway. Those last two were vast and vibrant racing cities, even capitals – OMS's opening day crowd was so large it established a California sporting attendance record. Ascot, by comparison, was a closed half-mile; even when conditions were standing-room-only for a USAC sprint car weekend, or for the annual Thanksgiving Night Midget Grand Prix - A.J., Parnelli, Johnny, Roger, Mario, Herk and Bobby - strapping on Offy buzzbombs - the announced attendance would only be around 10,000.

Ascot was down near the harbor bottom, in one of L.A.'s most seedy quarters. Yet surely there was no more pleasant a way to pass Saturday evenings than to be up in Ascot's grandstands, in the company of your neighbors, all like-minded sprint car zealots. You were



apt to discover, for example, that the guy seated next to you could lucidly discuss how come a Gambler chassis worked at Ascot and a Nance not; or why a V8 Shaver sounded more explosive than a V8 Gaerte; and he also could plot the history of dirt track rubber from the double-strep diamond, to the humper, to the digger, to the drag; agree with you that the California Racing Association was wise to keep wings off its Ascot sprinters; and then the two of you could get down to solving the real mysteries of the universe, i.e. how come Ronnie Shuman time-trialed with excellence on dry surfaces and terrible on wet ones, or why his nemesis Lealand McSpadden couldn't time trial at all without jumping the cushion...

Strange things happened. During one sprint car Saturday night, right in the middle of the main event, a transformer blew out in San Pedro and took down all Ascot's lights. But there was no gigantic wreck because all the drivers kept following each other's flaring blue alcohol flames in the dark. Yet another Saturday night race occurred during the Watts riots and you could look north in the direction of the San Gabriel mountains and see what looked like all of L.A. on fire.



Ascot was more than sprinters; on Friday nights it also pushed brakeless motorcycle racing. And although it usually edged away from carnival destruction derbies, on Sunday eves Ascot promoted Figure 8 racing, which

amounted to dilapidated junks, on an infield track shaped like an 8, criss-crossing in the intersection, and frequently collided with grinding impact. Its most remarkable drivers – they never collided – were a body of brave blacks who came out of Watts.

Newspapers neglected Ascot, but not because they disliked it. Saturday night races finished so late that they created impossible deadlines. Which was another thing about Ascot – probably the crucial thing. Its sprint car racing was nighttime racing.

This was Ascot by day: a grim stand of vacant lots, tumble-down buildings, empty bleachers. And this was the same Ascot by night: fantasyland. Nighttime racing is a dazzling spectacle. Everything speeds up, including drama, anticipation, adrenaline.

And the sense of danger? Of course. Danger at Ascot existed in equilibrium to pleasure. In fact Ascot's most momentous era also was its most notorious and dangerous. And it was all because Ascot experienced not one but two bonds with the Indy 500.

The first bonding was when Ascot used to send all its winners to the Indy 500. The second bonding - far more curious - was when the Indy 500 used to send all its winners to Ascot.



Ascot in the beginning was like any other dirt track whose sprint car champions matriculated to the Indy 500. This was wonderful. The bold but unknown Ascot rookie you had watched grappling on Saturday night would that Memorial Day become the mighty name who came blasting out of your radio as the wrecker of all Indy 500 speed records (Herk, 1960) or even the 500's winner (Parnelli, 1963). Ascot gradually gained the potent reputation of filling more Indy 500 starting lineups than any other dirt track.

All this changed when the Indy 500 decided it preferred a different sort of racing driver. But what didn't change, what went on repeating itself season after season was the never-to-be-seen-again spectacle of watching Indy 500 winners – reigning ones as well as future ones – racing sprinters at Ascot.

You'd see them every October when the USAC theater hit L.A.: A.J.. Parnelli, Johnny, Herk, and Bobby - Was it something deep in their racing ancestries – some atavism – which compelled them to continue being sprint car racing when they didn't need the money? Or did

**Ascot's night, its back-it-in-corners, and its whole nerved-up ambience make them as intoxicated as everybody else at Ascot?**

**It was astonishing racing.**

**Perhaps, in retrospect, the Indy 500 champions raced no harder than the local CRA drivers, and it only seemed like they did. But the Ascot faithful were overlooking what sprint cars on an unforgiving oval like Ascot might do to over-stimulated human beings. Safety still hadn't been coined. The open cockpits of sprint cars opened to the sky.**



**TWO DIE AFTER RACE ACCIDENT.** *Nov. 12, 1966* AP Wirephoto  
The sprint racing car of Dick Atkins of Hayward, Calif., burns furiously after he hit a car driven by Don Branson of Champaign, Ill., at Ascot Speedway at Los Angeles, Calif., Saturday night. Branson was killed instantly as he slammed into a wall, caromed back onto the track and was struck by Atkins' car. Atkins, 30, died in a hospital Sunday.

**Hubris came violently to Ascot in 1966: old master Don Branson and young disciple Dick Atkins were killed in the same pulverizing wreck, and that's when it all ended. Nobody in his right mind ever would want to participate in such racing again. And nobody with an**

**ounce of sensitivity could continue supporting or condoning such racing any more.**

**But, as it always had, Ascot went forward. Rarely with Indy 500 participants racing there any longer, and not with open-cockpit sprinters any longer either, but ones prudently equipped with steel umbrella cockpit coverings.**

**Ask anybody who ever went to Ascot what they think, and they will reply that Ascot affirmed life, not the reverse. So, R.I.P. Ascot, you old beauty!**