

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Gathering of the Outlaw Clans

Thursday night, October 14, 1972

Outside Manzanita Speedway, the unbroken line of pickup trucks, rail trailers and monster unlimited V8 sprint cars stretched across the gravel parking lot, spilled out onto 35th Avenue, then swung north toward downtown Phoenix. Moving among the monster unlimited V8 sprinters, studying the lettering on the flanks, I read all the powerful names - Bob Trostle Racing, Des Moines, Iowa, Driver: Dick Sutcliffe - Weikert Livestock, York, Pennsylvania, Driver: Kenny Weld - C and H Racing, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Driver, Larry Demaree - Stauffer Tire, Allied Concrete. Wamsley Engines, Phoenix, Arizona, Driver, Billy Shuman - Solomon Electric Supply, Solomon, Kansas, Driver: Roger Larson - Bogar Speed & Showroom Equipment, Beavertown, Pennsylvania, Driver: Jan Opperman - R & H Farms, Topeka, Kansas, Driver: Thad Doshier - Wiseman Racing, Grand Island, Nebraska, Driver: Lloyd Beckman - Woodland Chevrolet, Oildale, California, Driver: Frank Secrist - Clayton Chevrolet, Kansas City, Missouri, Driver: Ray Lee Goodwin - Van Collins Chevrolet, Rapid City, South Dakota, Driver: Jack Comer - Banas Chevrolet, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Driver: Bobby Adamson.



A great gathering of the outlaw sprint car clans! Manzanita Speedway, out in the middle of the Arizona desert, had a jagged range of gray mountains to the south; a wrecking yard full of junkers and metal foundry to the east; the desolate outskirts of Phoenix to the north, and a pasture full of stray range cattle to the west. And it also had, every November, the classic race of outlaw sport. "Western States Sprint Car Championship."

The Western States was the richest, fullest, and fastest simply because it was the only time all season when the fastest outlaw drivers from all across America came together to square off in their unlimited sprinters. They raced on this half-mile's worth of rumbled but high-speed dirt for three furious nights: a top - heavy pack of better than 100 drivers finally getting pruned to the fastest 26 who came to the line on Saturday for the 50-lap main event. No holds barred.

At the Western State and nowhere else were you able to compare all the different racing styles plus study the clash of cultures. The drawls of the Texans chimed in with the down-east twang of the Pennsylvanians, and with the flat prairie slang of the Kansans and Nebraskans. And if you were from California you wondered through the overcrowded infield pits wondering how come everybody was talking so funny.

Tension during the three nights was palpable because a great deal was at stake: it took a massive ego for a driver to bring himself halfway across the country and expect to win in such company. On the other hand, no outlaw driver worth the name came to the Western States to run second.



“This is a dangerous damn race track,” said the giant Kansan Sutcliffe (six-foot-six, 240-pounds) out of Kansas City. “Don’t you think so, Jan?”

“Manzanita is one of the most dangerous places I have to run all year,” agreed Jan Opperman, defending champion of the Western States.

Opperman raced everywhere. Which was why I had traveled from Los Angeles to the Western States, the opportunity to watch the very best when he is the very best is rare, and plainly Jan Opperman, the only religious holy-roller in outlaw racing, was at his very best: winner of 43 outlaw main events out of 90 starts in 11 months. But too many days and nights

on the roads had extracted a toll on Opperman who looked as worn-out as his famous ride Bogar Speed & Showroom Equipment.

All his fatigue seemingly showed during Opperman's Wednesday night heat race. An erratic Manzy driver named Darrel Dockery shot ahead of him at the start and promptly began defending his position by making lots of mistakes and swerving all over the track. Because Manzanita, had few areas wide enough for passing, Dockery still was ahead at the finish.

I saw Kenny Weld watching and, knowing that he and Opperman were non-speaking rivals of long-standing, I asked how Manzy's other locals might have reacted had Opperman bumped into Dockery to get past him. "They'd be some double-mad sumbitches," Weld replied. Opperman was disappointed. "For not being aggressive enough I'll be starting tenth on Saturday night. Tenth. Which is a long ways back Give me something to do, though."

Friday night, October 15th,

The following evening the crowd was brought to attention by the menacing presence of the outlaw giant Sutcliffe, who hadn't raced the night before. Sutcliffe was famous for murdering his cars. They chewed up their rear-end gears, burst their engines, and Sutcliffe was even known to yank steering wheels loose from their moorings. He also was infamous for his out-of-the-ballpark trip in 1968, during the Western States inaugural. Running an impatient second, he had badly overshot the first corner and his careening vehicle was traveling 15 mph too fast when it broke away and bounded for the low concrete crashwall. Before Sutcliffe could catch it his right rear clobbered the wall and he was launched into a deadly series of tumbling flips.

Along the top of the wall were hammered narrow wrought-iron posts supporting thin sheet metal. Advertisements for local merchants had been spray-painted on the sheet metal. The barreling car ripped out great hunks of the stuff while Sutcliffe, unconscious now, flopped about in the open cockpit. The flipping car cleared the wall at last, then disappeared out into the night, still flipping. Across the street from Manzanita was a 24-hour cut-rate market. Sutcliffe's mangled, smoking car and its seemingly lifeless driver bounced into the street and almost finished up inside the market. There was no fire. Men had dragged Sutcliffe's inert body from the wreck and later he was pronounced fit except for a badly misshapen arm.

Crowd disappointment, then, was towering when Sutcliffe finished only a badly-beaten third in his qualifying heat. Now he, just like Jan Opperman, would be starting at the back of the Western States.

Anticipation, picked up, however, at the sight of Kenny Weld's blue-and-cream-colored sprinter rolling onto the front straightaway accompanied by three crack mechanics all neatly attired in pressed white trousers, black stomping boots, and red-and-white T-shirts lettered on the back:

**WELD/WEIKERT RACING
WHEN THE GREEN FLAG DROPS,
THE BULLSHIT STOPS**

“Weld,” of course, meant Kenny Weld, and “Weikert,” meant Bob Weikert. Kenny's powerful millionaire cattle baron sponsor. Weld, in the same Weikert sprinter he'd be racing in the Western States, had already won Iowa's Summer Nationals.



No one – Weld least of all, who was calm and sure of himself, as ever – seemed startled when he won the qualifying heat. Others had to sweat. Numerous grinding collisions resulted. Two cars rolled over. One driver nearly vaulted the deadly first corner wall – the Sutcliffe wall – and finally tore down 20 feet of sheet metal. A Pennsylvania driver misjudged the same first corner then bounced off the wall directly into the path of a Nebraskan. There was a messy

pileup. Fists flailing, the Nebraskan sprang from his car. Someone restrained him. But later, when his crew went out to bring back their broken car, they exchanged words with a body of Texans and another brawl began.

Saturday morning and evening, October 16. Twelve hours before the Western States. Weather: 90 degrees and clear.

Starting on the front row as he was, Kenny Weld now was strongly favored to win the Western States and among the heat waves radiating up from the parking lot in the Caravan Inn in Phoenix he was assisting his mechanics in the preparation of the Weld/Weikert.

Meanwhile, across Phoenix at Dick Sutcliffe's motel Sutcliffe's statuesque blond wife was sunning herself out by the swimming pool, and praying that the Western States would be interrupted by a big crackup and red flag. Otherwise, her husband, starting 15th had no chance of winning.

Across town from Weld's and Sutcliffe's motels, Jan Opperman and his wife Mary were in their room viewing a delayed tape of a U.S. Auto Club sprint race from Terre Haute. First Gary Bettenhausen flipped. Later Dick Tobias nudged Jimmy McElreath and spun him around. Then Sammy Sessions boldly moved inside of Tobias, whose car somersaulted wildly. "Boy, those USAC boys are pulling some no-no's" observed Jan. "That's a rough race," agreed Mary. "Hope it won't be that way tonight," added Jan, troubled by the crash-punctuated TV race.

Country 'n' Western music blared from the public address; hawkers sold beer in iced buckets to a grandstand of 8,000; push trucks moved into place behind the crowded pack. Nervous drivers got saddled up. "Good luck, boss," cried Weld's trio of confident mechanics. Weld from Pennsylvania nodded curtly. Sutcliffe from Kansas City looked grim. Opperman from everywhere seemed to be mumbling a last-instant prayer.



Down the backstraight the pack picked up speed with Weld on the pole. War was about to erupt. Off the fourth corner the engine roar rose, then swelled. Weld, master of the exploding, and tire-peeling start, broke to the front, easily blowing off Dockery next to him.

Two of the fastest drivers didn't hesitate. Sutcliffe plunged forward to separate two drivers ahead of him. And Opperman bolted far to the outside, right along the wall of sheet metal, Fastest of all came Buddy Taylor, a New Mexican grandfather and at 46 the oldest driver in the Western States. Up from fourth position, suddenly he was pressing Weld for first.

Nobody had been expecting this, certainly not Weld. And then, out on the rim of the fourth corner, Taylor discovered perfect traction, put on a terrific burst of speed, and unexpectedly sent his purple car rocketing past Weld and into first.

But Taylor led for barely three laps. A high-speed wreck developing right behind him on the backstraight red-flagged the Western States and wrecked 14 cars – nearly half the starting field. Nobody was hurt but one of the teams able to make it back to the re-start was Opperman's Bogar Speed & Showroom Equipment. And Opperman, who was stuck far in the back, could be heard raising tremendous hell with Ralph Heinzelmann, his chief mechanic, and with Jake and Hash, Ralph's two teenaged gofers, because the Bogar desperately needed a bigger wheel and drag tire on its right rear.

Fulfilling Opperman's demands, Hash took off for the infield pits, running as if his life depended on it. It was a near-thing. By the time the new wheel and tire were added everybody was lining up for the re-start. And away they raced.

"Not bad for an old man!" Weld had yelled at grandpa Taylor by way of congratulations. But Taylor wasn't finished mauling him – he went right back to pulling away. Meanwhile Opperman, who had guessed right about what his Bogar needed, was streaking – all the way up to third in 15 laps, with only Weld and then Taylor left in his sights. Opperman overtook Weld in the 35th lap and six laps later caught Weld for first. The Western States was in effect over

By then all that was left to do was study Opperman, wheels chattering, using his arms setting up tricky side-to-side slides, deliberately forcing the worst ruts. And on the last lap he hit the first corner without lifting at all, riding in at an honest-to-god 110 mph, then permitting the ruts to bounce the Bogar completely off the ground. Watching him with my heart pounding, I was sure nobody could race a sprint car faster or better than this.

Later that night, long after Manzanita had emptied, the streets of Phoenix were crowded with pickups towing their monster sprint cars on rail trailers. The outlaw clans were departing for another year. But back in Jan Opperman's motel, a mad and beer-swilling victory celebration was just getting started. Opperman himself hung around until nearly two A.M. Mary was already asleep. But Jan discovered he still was too keyed up to sleep and joined Ralph, Jake, and Hash with their beer. Dick Sutcliffe also dropped by to visit – he'd gotten the red flag his wife was praying for, but hadn't been able to take advantage of it. The most surprising visitors wishing their congratulations were Kenny Weld's three mechanics. Yet Kenny himself was nowhere to be seen. A long-running and stupid feud between himself and Opperman prevented the two of them from ever becoming friends.

AFTERMATH

Jan Opperman had his outlaw sprint car racing carry him into two Indy 500s, but a string of truly tragic wrecks debilitated him and he died in 1997. Buddy Taylor, winner of better than 200 southwestern sprint car main events, but never the Western States, was killed at Manzanita in 1978.. Kenny Weld left sprint car racing to turn into a high-rolling drug dealer, went to prison, and also died in 1997. Dick Sutcliffe became a cross-country freight hauler of 18-wheelers and his son turned into one of major league baseball's all-stars. Darrel Dockery went to work for Mickey Thompson, helping preen Mickey's notorious Indy cars. Ralph Heinzelmann, the last time I visited with him, was training his son to be a sprint car driver and I don't know, whatever happened to Ralph's two great gofers, Jake and Hash.

