

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Doug

The World of Outlaws is a haphazard dirt track sanctioning body for winged sprint car racing that came out of nowhere in the 1980s and still is running strongly today, led by everyone's favorite American racing driver, Kyle Larson. When I was reporting on the WoO in the 1980s and 1990s, I was fortunate enough to watch four great drivers -- Steve Kinser, the bull; Sammy Swindell, the brat, Bobby Allen, the sorrowful flower child; and Doug Wolfgang, the underdog.



KNOXVILLE NATIONAL CHAMPIONS — Left to right, after the 1978 Knoxville, Iowa, National Champion was crowned, Ray Grimes, race manager; Bobby Allen, Hanover, Pa., B main winner; Paul Pitzer, Seven Valleys, Pa., C main winner; Steve Kinser, Indianapolis, Ind., finished second in A main; Doug Wolfgang, Lincoln, Neb., National championship winner; Eddie Leavitt, Kearney, Mo., finished third in A main; Announcer Jack Miller, and Mrs. Doug Wolfgang.

I talked to all of them: Kinser was always reaching for another can of beer; Swindell always seemed hostile; Allen always seemed out of it; only Wolfgang made a decent interview. Then on April 3, 1992, in Kansas, at Lakeside Speedway, he suffered burns over better than 30 percent of his body in a flaming crash. The WoO carried few insurance papers on its drivers; Wolfgang himself carried little; and so, to save his own life and those of his wife and two teenage daughters, he sued for damages. Nobody is supposed to sue anybody else in racing, so this earned Wolfgang -- the winner 140 WoO matches, the five time champion of the Knoxville Nationals, plus his first place finishers in hundreds of minor races -- the disgrace of being a fallen racing driver.

Exaggerating his limitations as an underdog winged sprint car driver, Wolfgang told me, “I’m losing my hair. I’ve got lines on my face. I’m worn out.” But when I asked him if he enjoyed being the underdog, he admitted, “Yes, I guess I’ve always liked playing the underdog in my racing.” This, in turn, had given him the mystique of a moody, unpredictable performer. Agreeing with this assessment Wolfgang went on, “Just put me down as a guy who learned how to race sprint cars – and learned how to race them pretty damn fast.”

The learning process began many years ago. Huset’s Speedway in South Dakota, was only four miles from his parents’ home, and Wolfgang, still a teenager, used to watch a local sprint car driver named Darrell Dawley. The two of them traveled together to Iowa’s Clay County



Fair at Spencer. During the race, Dawley sent Jan Opperman into the fence. Opperman, whose tastes were setting in motion a revolution in sprint car racing, stayed on the track throwing rocks at Dawley; when Wolfgang told Opperman to cut it out, they got into an argument. Some time later, in Nebraska, at a sprint car-building shop in Lincoln, Opperman recognized Wolfgang – “Say, aren’t you the boy from Spencer?”—and got him a job

sweeping out the floors of the shop.

Wolfgang was then 21. Nobody knew it, but on weekends he was racing economy class Modifieds back in his home South Dakota. Then, one Saturday morning at 6:30 a.m., the owner of a sprint car unexpectedly telephoned him saying, “Promise not to crash it, and you can drive my car at Knoxville tonight.” Knoxville, in Iowa, is the nighttime Indy 500 of sprint car racing, and Wolfgang, after driving the three hours to get there, finished second in the behind Ray Lee Goodwin and ahead of Eddie Leavitt and Dick Sutcliffe – all potent names. This led to a ruckus back at the Lincoln garage: “You didn’t tell us you were a race car driver!”

After this, Wolfgang traveled to Knoxville’s weekly Saturday evening matches, driving dozens of different sprinters. Some were poor, and he turned them upside-down. Every time he did, his steel spectacles cut his nose until finally he threw them away and raced with big granny glasses instead; at last he threw them away too.



He wanted to win a Knoxville main event, but when he finally did – it was 1976’s opening night – he went home thinking, “Is that all there is to winning a feature? Is that all the money I won?” But his mood brightened after winning 25 more at

Knoxville and elsewhere. He started racing and working for Bob Trostle out of Des Moines, welding together Trostle sprint cars, as well as traveling together with Trostle to some meets in Australia.

Another season they went back and forth across the U.S. on a barnstorming binge that saw them winning 45 features, which they claimed broke Opperman's old record of 44. To keep in better physical shape, Wolfgang took up running until he looked like an athlete, the only sprint car driver who ever did.

But sprint car racing was experiencing another of its lethal periods, with nine drivers getting killed in just one year, including Wolfgang's friend Dawley. "Why do something that can get me killed?" Wolfgang pondered, and the answer, he decided, was that, "I do it not because I race for fun but because I race for a living."

He won the Knoxville Nationals of 1977, 1978, 1984, and 1985 but couldn't seem to keep a team together. After failing to get along with four different WoO teams the previous year, he traveled to Pennsylvania to race for the cattle baron Bob Weikert. In 1985, he and Weikert unofficially captured 55 races, breaking the mark Wolfgang had established with Trostle. Then, late in 1987, the team broke up "As all sprint car teams do," Wolfgang sighed. He returned to the WoO where his terrible 1992 accident awaited him.

I got to watch one of Wolfgang's typical races in central California, in 1988, at Kings Speedway, a quarter-mile. Racing for yet another new team, that of Gary Stanton's, Wolfgang was starting tenth, on the fifth row outside. Looking at the dimly-lit track through his goggles and eight tear-away lenses was, to Wolfgang, like staring through a cloudy glass on water.

The pace lap speed was about 60 mph. One of Wolfgang's feet was riding the brake, and the other was holding engine revs at a steady, throbbing, 4000.

Green lights flashed. Wolfgang's brake foot lifted, his throttle foot slammed down, all 800 horsepower of his engine seemed to erupt, and his speed immediately rocketed to 100 mph.

Cutting inside, he quickly picked up one position. Ahead was traffic so dense that cars could barely maneuver Wolfgang charged at them. Striking the hard curb of outside dirt, he flew up on his right-side wheels, almost rolled over, then plummeted off the track. Wrestling back control he regained the track where yellow lights were flashing.

When the lights hit green again, it took him one tap to discover that Stanton's was the fastest sprint car on the track; Wolfgang didn't know why it was.

Dead ahead of him were pair of California cars, then a quartet of WoO heavies: Dave Blaney, Bobby Davis Jr., Jac Haudenschild, and the greatest heavyweight going, Kinser. Wolfgang made a run around several of them on the outside of the first corner. The following lap, when he took over the bottom groove, he sped into third place.

Haudenshield was leading but under terrific attack from Kinser. Cutting inside and braking to violently force his car's spinning left front wheel to muscle down on the track, Wolfgang attempted plunging moves inside of Kinser. Kinser repelled them by blocking. But Kinser couldn't get back on the throttle as quickly as Wolfgang, and Wolfgang overtook him right in turn one's middle.

Next he went for Haudenshield next, wiping him out on the fourth corner.

Thirteen of the race's 30 laps remained and Wolfgang, racing at the rate of 14 seconds per lap, lapped car after car, and won the race. Boiling oil leaking out of the driveline had burned his right foot, which blistered the next day. He also felt sick to his stomach and had sore eyes from blinking down noxious exhaust fumes.

But Kings Speedway had been far harder on Wolfgang's frequent nemesis Kinser, who was an exhausted and perspiring basket case with steam shooting out the top of his head like a geyser. Good, Wolfgang, congratulated himself. I won the race and I made the bull sweat.

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