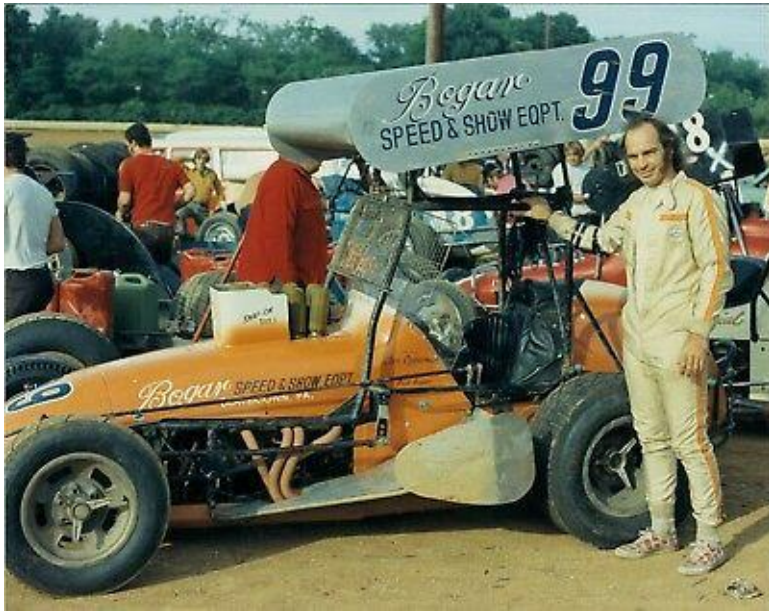


Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Loosey-Goosey

Jan Opperman and myself wrote a book about sprint car racing that nobody read. "Odyssey," was its title, but the stars of the book weren't really Jan Opperman, and of course not me, but an ugly yet extraordinary Pennsylvania sprint car, the No. 99 Bogar Speed & Showroom Equipment Special, champion of 44 features in just one season, a record never equaled. Its wizard chief mechanic was



named Ralph Heintzleman, who was backed up by some wild and crazy teenagers, led by Phil Lash, known as "Hash," and Matt Reidliner, called "Jake." This was the attack-and-go dirt track gang assembled by Jan Opperman in 1972, when he was at his charismatic hippie and racing peak, and which broke up in 1974, at last worn out from all its racing and winning.

It was a loosey-goosey mob which could load up their No. 99 Bogar and rocket to any sprint car race in the country at a moment's notice and, invariably win. Back in the 1980s, Ralph, Hash, and Jake all got together in the mid-1980s to reminisce about Jan Opperman, the No. 99 Bogar, themselves, and their over-achieving team. Ralph is a dour, slow-talking, Pennsylvania-Dutchman, while Hash and Jake talk in quick-hasps.

Hash: "The first time I saw Jan Opperman race was in 1970, when he and his mechanic John Singer came back to Pennsylvania. He liked the racing, but that winter he went back to Nebraska because he liked people there better. Then Jack Gunn, the promoter at Williams Grove and Selinsgrove, brought Opp back again and got him the ride in the Hanks Auto Parts car. I was 17 years old. I already knew Ralph and Barry Camp at Bogar's Speed Shop, and I asked 'Hey, are you guys going to watch that hippie race Harold Hanks' car Saturday night?' Opp took second at Williams Grove and won Selinsgrove. The way he worked traffic reminded me of Mitch Smith. When I got to know him I asked him how he did that and he said in his mind he was rehearsing passing people ten laps before he really did.

“He kept racing in Pennsylvania for most of the summer except for going out to Knoxville and winning the Nationals in a Roger Beck front-spring car belonging to the Cahill brothers. Toward the beginning of 1972, everybody was talking about how Opp was going to start driving for Luke Bogar and Ralph.”



Ralph: “Luke Bogar was a millionaire with an amusement park and a speed shop in Beavertown. I built and worked on his sprint cars and sold street, drag, and oval-track parts in the showroom. Luke was looking for a new driver and Opp was looking for new team. He was just getting his sprint car racing going and wanted a mechanic as serious as he was which was why, at first, he tried having Luke fire me and hire John Singer. Luke wouldn’t, and that was the start of the team.

“It didn’t matter where we raced we always had competition, but the competition we had from Kenny Weld was the toughest. Kenny was fast, and we were fast. And Kenny was a self-proclaimed figure of the Establishment – this was long before he had all his troubles with the law and went to prison – and Opp was supposed to be a hippie doing dope, which he never did.

Opp and Kenny never liked each other, and the crowd at Williams Grove felt the same way. Half of them would be wearing Weld-Weikert T-shirts and the other half orange Opperman-Bogar Speed Shop T-Shirts.

“ I don’t ever recall Kenny playing with Opp’s mind, but Opp could get to Kenny just by seeing him walking down the pit lane and calling, ‘Hey, Kenny, how ‘ya doin’? Right away you’d see Kenny getting red in the face. Then on the pace lap while they were lining up Opp might purposely bump into the back of him – anything to agitate Kenny. Because they usually ran first and second in the Williams Grove point standings they had to line up inverted, back in 17th and 18th. Everybody knew that all the other drivers were just obstacles, and that by the end Opp and Kenny would be fighting it out again. Opp would move next to Kenny and flash him the peace sign and the you’d always see Kenny’s elbows go flying out. Opp, when he was racing extra hard, was different. He seemed to disappear down into the cockpit.”

Jake: “We were hungry and wanted to win. It was ten percent glory, 90 percent working our butts off. Get our pictures taken in the winners circle tonight, but tomorrow night have to do it all over again.”

Ralph: “We weren’t geniuses. It was all teamwork. Luke Bogar furnished the money, Opp took care of the driving, I did the mechanical part, and kids like Hash and Jake did the physical work, except when they’d say, ‘Oh, the hell with it, we’ll let old Ralph do it.’ Opp and I worked well together, even when he got impatient and made mistakes. There were races when he was half a second faster than everybody else and he’d romp into the first corner without lifting, pop a tire, and flip into the fence. ‘Why didn’t you lift?,’ I’d ask. ‘Oh, she felt too good,’ he’d answer.



“All of us worked damn hard. But it wasn’t necessarily brainwork; we just knew what to do, and it was strictly a money proposition. Win a race at Williams Grove or Selinsgrove – Opp’s “bank” he liked to call it and although nobody runs the place any more like Opp, it’s still the fastest way around – and we automatically knew it paid about \$300 plus \$30 for a heat race. But at a USAC show we could figure around \$1,500 hundred on a weekend, and if we set quick time, a little more. Sometimes Opp would set a track record,

which was worth another couple of hundred. Winning the trophy dash at a USAC race was automatic with us, except the time I screwed up, but that got rectified the next night.

“Opp was on a percentage with Luke Bogar – normally he kept 50 percent of the prize money, but if we won \$1,500 he got 55 percent. So, chasing that extra five percent we went racing all over the country. We raced on tracks we’d never even heard of. One of them was in New York, clear up by Buffalo, at Hamburg, a pair of Friday night 25-lappers on the Erie County Fairgrounds. What got our attention was that they paid \$1,500.



“We left Bogar’s at midnight and after another hard drive found Hamburg was an old hump-backed horse track. All the regulars came over and told us that it got dry and slick, so we put on diamond treads for warm-ups and the heat race. Afterward everybody was telling us how fast we were. I looked at Opp, and he looked at me and we shook our heads. He knew we weren’t fast and I knew it too. So we took off the wheels and

changed tires, changed gears, and went back to square one. OK, it was feature time. Turn one was like a crowned road, banked the wrong way. Opp took it in there, banged his right rear against the

outside fence while everybody else was hitting each other diving for the bottom, took the lead, and was gone.

“From Hamburg we drove back to Beavertown in the fog, getting to Selinsgrove in time to win in Saturday night, And on Sunday we went to Maryland and won at Hagerstown and won on Sunday. So, counting the pair of 25-lappers at Hagerstown, we felt pretty good for having won four features in three days on four different states.”

Hash: “In 1974 Opp left Bogar and Pennsylvania to go race in the Indy 500 and all the other big Indy car meets. Being with him was, for me, a once-in-a-lifetime deal, and maybe nobody gets a deal like that even once in a lifetime. I was a dumb kid who loved sprint cars, and I was working almost 24 hours a day for the greatest sprint car racer of them all. Many times I can remember working until falling asleep on the workbench at Bogar’s while Jake would be lying under No. 99 not moving. And the reason he wasn’t was because he’d fallen asleep too.

“Jake: Opp liked us, I think, because we were young and just a little crazy. I remember one really cold Saturday, loading up No. 99 to go to a USAC show at Reading. Ralph, Opp, Hash and myself drove off in a snowstorm. Opp was sleeping in the back because he’d been up all night, and as we were tooling down the highway kind of hard, pulling this giant trailer on the back loaded to the gills we had a blowout – ka-boom ! This was a real blowout, no tire left, right down to the rim. And we were going round and round down the road, barely keeping from losing it. Finally we got slowed down enough for me and Hash to jump out, tear the wheel off the trailer and change tires. When we got back



in Opp was awake and watching us ‘You’re some really nice kids,’ he told us. ‘You keep me laughing and feeling loose.’ Then he added, ‘And this whole team is so loosey-goosey I can’t believe it.’ Afterward he went back to sleep.”

Fully restored and returned to its old state of fighting fitness, the No. 99 Bogar Speed & Showroom Equipment Special now hides inside some unknown private collection. That it exists at all, considering how hard Opp raced it, is a tribute to the talent and perseverance of two dedicated

people, the restoration couple Ralph Pruitt and his wife Cyndi, who live In Pennsylvania, at Glen Rock, not far from Beavertown and the old Bogar speed shop.



It was an unusual undertaking, as Ralph Pruitt not long ago explained: “My family is in the car restoration business so I’m used to doing beautiful old Packards and Cadillacs. Usually, when I start restoring a car I want it to be as nice and beautiful as possible. But that was the opposite of the No. 99 Bogar, where the danger was to make it too nice and beautiful, because it wasn’t. Ralph Heintzelman designed, built, and maintained it by himself, and pretty looks didn’t matter – he’d have sawed it in half with a hacksaw to make it faster. And I’ll never forget watching Opp racing it at Williams Grove and just

creaming those pretty USAC cars. Central Pennsylvania, back then, was the cutting edge of sprint car technology, and nobody thought about cosmetics, only winning. Eight out of ten Pennsylvania teams built their own cars. Ralph, during the time he was with Opp, built three No. 99 cars, and this one was his best. But after Opp finally wore it out, and it was sold, I don’t believe it won a race. It got wrecked at Port Royal, and for years sat rotting in Charlie Sweitzer’s backyard in Lewistown.

“Charlie gave me the chassis, three aluminum body panels, the brake rotors, the master cylinder and brake pedal, the original bumpers, the torque plate, front wheels, and a couple of suspension birdcages. For everything else I was on my own. One thing I didn’t need to worry about finding was a power-steering unit, because Opp didn’t like power-steering and seldom used one. The fiberglass body is a Don Edmunds-style made by Lloyd Enterprises. The engine is a little 307 V8 Chevrolet, a USAC-size motor. In 1972 Opp won 44 features, and Kenny Weld, his only close competition won just 25, so I can safely say that No. 99 was the top-winning sprint car in the country.”