

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Never Quit

Don Shepherd, called “Shep” was a sprint car owner who was a buccaneer - if he were to fly a racing flag of convenience it would be the Jolly Roger. Shep was one of the last sprinter pirates, and he and his hired-gun chauffeurs rode the dirt track circuit everywhere from Pennsylvania to California, raiding all the territories – U.S. Auto Club, International Motor Contest Association, and California Racing Association, in search of fast booty, glory, and of course easy dollars.

Shep absolutely refused to quit. If, say, his driver dropped a cylinder, he was under orders never to shut down but to continue standing on it regardless, even if the whole engine block got honeycombed. If it was going to throw the bearings, throw them, Shep wasn't going to use them again. Ruin the block, ruin anything you want to ruin, just don't bring in. Never quit! Maybe something would happen and they'd still win.

With one of the worst reputations in sprint car racing, Shep was notorious for going racing wherever he saw easy pickings: he'd run his sprinter with the CRA, then he'd hit IMCA for awhile, and then go run USAC, plus anywhere else and with any association that paid money. He and his sprinter jumped around so much, nobody ever was sure where they'd see them next.

The seasons 1963, 1964, 1965, and 1966 - the years when his driver was Bobby Unser, the first and only driver to stay with Shep for very long – were among Shep's most memorable. They began in January, in Florida, at the IMCA's winter opener, where Shep imported Bob Hogle, the marquee driver of the CRA. But Shep couldn't tolerate a token race driver, and, after Hogle raced like he had telephoned in his role, Shep – who was notorious for doing this to his non-performing drivers – fired him and replaced him with Gordon Wooley, a hired pistolero from Texas with memberships in sprinter associations all over the country.

Following Tampa, Shep and Wooley, and Shep's jet black sprinter - powered like all sprinters by a fuel-burning V8 Chevrolet - batted clear across the country to southern California's Coachella Valley; the venerable Mid-Winter Fair; and the Saturday-Sunday program of the CRA at the Imperial Valley Fairgrounds. The Saturday main event was barely three laps down and Hogle, Shep's bounced employee from Tampa, was in the lead and

checking out. But up came Gordon from the back, sweeping Shep's car past Hogle, and winning the main event by hours.

Hogle and the rest of the CRA boys went to bed that night feeling humiliated. But Sunday morning they again sensed trouble when they found Shep on the starting line grinning at them like an ax murderer. The bastard was getting ready to do it to us again!

This time it wouldn't be so easy. Not a drop of water got dropped on Imperial's top lane, so Gordon's groove of Saturday was gone. Throughout qualifying heats CRA drivers were on patrol, sweeping the track ahead of them clean and holding Gordon and Shep behind. Even when Gordon was starting from the front row, a fast Arizona car and its driver beat him into the first corner. Then another universe was heard from. Sill infuriated at Shep for his Tampa firing, Hogle, on a kamikaze mission, came from ninth to third in four laps. But vendetta clouded Hogle's judgement. Trying to go two abreast with Gordon where there wasn't room, Hogle flew out of Imperial's ball park. Landing on his wheels, Hogle was physically unhurt. His only pain was observing Gordon and Shep winning again.

Pausing only long enough to collect first-place cash, Shep packed up Gordon and wheeled eastward to Illinois and a jerkwater IMCA match where he satisfied a long-standing itch and had Gordon defeat the house sprinter of legend-in-his-own-time Hectore Honore. Then Shep and Gordon parted company and Shep headed east to Pennsylvania to join USAC, his third different sanctioning body in just three months, and do some real-steel jousting at the "Twin Fifties" on Langhorne, the deadly circular mile.

Langhorne! The problem with going there was that there was an excellent chance you were going to see something terrible happen. So no Langhorne was complete without the drivers having to listen to Irvin Gerber scaring them silly delivering his standard diatribe about the perils of his Langhorne. But on this Sunday morning of the "Twin Fifties," Gerber, Langhorne's major domo, seemed to be aiming his frightening monologue at one driver in particular: Bobby Marvin. The roughneck super-modified man-handler from Ohio had been out partying and chasing stray women all Saturday night and early Sunday morning; now he looked frazzled and exhausted. Prior to Langhorne, Marvin's career had been exploding: though he had no experience in Indy cars, his wild man reputation was potent, and Andy Granatelli and his brothers had tapped him as the third wild man to join their hell-fire Novi V8 squadron (the other two wild men were veteran Indy 500 wild man Herk Hurtubise, and rookie wild man Art Malone the digger driver who'd exceeded 180 mph in Mad Dog IV at Daytona).

But Marvin failed to heed Gerber's sermon and lost his life when his Werglund 44 hooked and tore down a section of outside railing in Mike Nazaruk territory. Once again something

terrible had happened at Langhorne, and Shep was touched by it. Shep's new driver in the "Twin Fifties" was slender and frail Bobby Marshman whom the first 50-miler had so worn out he barely could hold his helmet straight. Yet when Shep suggested to Marshman that he replace him with a fresh driver in the final 50, Bobby addressed him as though Shep was crazy: "I've got family and friends who've traveled a long way to watch me race. You can't take the car away from me now!" Shep then turned to Marshman's wife and told her whether or not Bobby raced was up to her. She gave her OK. And then Bobby, in the final 50, did a great job of keeping in sight of the leaders {Later that same season, racing Wally Meskowki's Competition Engineering Special, Bobby did another excellent job, this time rim-riding the Terre Haute Action Track.

Shep's agreement with Bobby didn't extend beyond the "Twin Fifties," so he left Langhorne looking for yet another new driver and picked Johnny Rutherford, he'd previously raced with Johnny in the IMCA. Over in USAC, its 1963 tournament continued being a bad one with another terrible crash, this time at New Bremen, and the death of yet another driver, Allen Crowe – a fast driver and a good man – in the Iddings Auto Glass Special: Henry Meyer, soft-hearted owner of the Iddings, always warned his fast drivers like Crowe to "Be careful," but Allen must not have been listening.

As for the 1963's USAC tournament champion car and driver, they were the Konstant Hot Special and Roger McCluskey. The Konstant Hot was built by Jud Phillips, and originally intended for Phillips and his favorite driver Don Branson. But the boss of Konstant Hot, Bruce Homeyer (later killed in a plane crash) had decided to fire Phillips and Branson and replace them with Roger McCluskey and mechanic Rocky Philipp and his stooge Carl Nosal. The Konstant Hot Special was so superior to other sprinters that after already winning the 1962 tournament it won 1963's as well.

Meanwhile, enviously watching Roger McCluskey and the Konstant Hot win race after race, was Bobby Unser, a fresh enlistee to the USAC tournament. Bobby had inherited the Unser family foot: as a teenager he was in the center of fierce disputes at Albuquerque hardtop shows, and adventures he experienced in the old Mexican Road Race were of the life and death variety. Plus, along with the family heavy foot, Bobby had inherited the Unser passion for the sheer wall of three-mile-high Pikes Peak, where one slip sent you tumbling into the wide blue void.

Bobby first came to the attention of two different parties: the Granatelli brothers and Shep. Needing a wild man to replace the missing Bobby Marvin, the Granatellis gave Bobby, only an Indy 500 rookie, the chair in their third Novi, which impressed Shep: maybe Bobby had something he could use? But in the 500, after Bobby creamed the concrete in only two laps, Shep changed his mind, thinking, forget that. And then, believing USAC had no drivers fast

enough for him, Shep jumped ship, plucked Sonny Helms off the outlaw modified circuit, and he and Helms spent the rest of the 1963 picking clean the IMCA. But the early and mid 1960s were a hard era: the very next year, Helms – not in Shep’s car – was killed.

Racing started ominously in 1964. McCluskey, double tournament champion in 1962 and 1963, crashed Wally Meskowski’s sprinter so heavily at Reading – one of his arms was badly broken – that he was out for most of the season. The reason he was racing Meskowski’s car instead of the Konstant Hot was because the Konstant Hot had been sold out from under him. Mickey Rupp, a hot dog driver and builder of Go-Karts, had decided he wanted to race sprint cars, a decision which cost him his marriage. At the very first sprint car his wife was exposed to, in May at New Bremen, there was a double wreck, leading to a braining and wrist amputation. Mrs. Rupp decided that was too much gore and mayhem. She immediately went home to file for divorce.

Meanwhile, later that month in the Indy 500, three-quarters of the starters were, as usual, off the sprint car tracks, among them Bobby, back in the Granatelli Novi, and Johnny Rutherford in the Jesse Ebb Rose Meyer-Drake Offy; and somehow the pair of them missed getting burned alive in the huge gasoline fire on the 500’s opening lap. Still another sprint car-trained driver, Johnny White, was named the 500’s Rookie of the Year. But this was not an easy time to be a sprint car driver. Back in 1963, White’s chauffeuring at Allentown had so incensed A.J. Foyt that A.J. had thrown a headlock on him. Then McCluskey, at Ascot Park, had come after White brandishing a steak knife. What goes around, comes around? One sprint car race after Indy, at the Terre Haute Action Track, White’s Weinberger Homes Special got upside-down and Johnny was lamed.

Racing continued anyway, and so did Bobby’s search for a good car. At a meet that same summer, at St. Paul, Shep, whose USAC driver still was Johnny Rutherford, was impressed by something Bobby did. Bobby was impressed too. His ride was a little white stretched midget with several things wrong with it, mostly the springing, but Bobby went fast anyway, finishing third or fourth.

Shep approached Bobby without saying much. “You going to keep driving that white car?” “No,” Bobby said, “I’m just kind of kicking around.” And after Bobby told Shep all the things the white car had wrong with it Shep didn’t say anymore and walked away. A little later, after he’d been paid off and was leaving the track, Bobby saw Shep leaning against a building.

“Bobby,” Shep called. And from the expression on his face, Bobby couldn’t tell if he was happy or angry. With Shep, nobody could. “You want to drive my car?” “Well,” Bobby said, “yeah, sure. What’s the deal, though? Johnny Rutherford’s your driver,” “No, I just fired him. You want to drive it or not?”

That was the way Shep was – just that fast and sharp on the talking. He was just that fast and sharp about hiring and firing drivers, too. He liked drivers who stood on the gas. He hadn't had Johnny for nothing. His firing Rutherford, in fact, worried Bobby. He knew Shep ran a moving and hard-tackling team but he also had heard about Shep's only hiring drivers with flame in their bellies. He'd also heard all the horror stories of Shep getting crabby and firing drivers during hot laps – before the real racing even started – because in Shep's estimation they weren't on the gas hard enough. Shep's drivers sometimes got waved into the pits and fired when the race was going on! And yet because no driver of a Shep car ever had been seriously busted up; and because he was a secret sentimentalist who didn't want something like that on his conscience; there was a Catch-22 paradox going on. Shep routinely fired drivers for racing like zombies, yet he also fired them if they scared him by over-extending themselves.

After considering all this, Bobby replied, "Sure I want to drive your sprint car." Then he asked, "But why'd you fire Rutherford?" "Scares me," Shep snapped. "He's going to get himself killed. He runs the sprint car too hard and you don't have to run the car that hard to go fast." "All right," replied Bobby. "You got yourself a driver."

"We'll run New Bremen in two weeks," Shep explained. He'd be racing at Williams Grove or Allentown with some other driver the week before, but, beginning at New Bremen, Bobby was his driver. But Albuquerque, Bobby's home, was a long way from the USAC tournament, and Bobby had his own Cessna for flying back and forth. So when he got to New Bremen and Shep wasn't around – there'd been a big wreck over east and Shep's sprinter had been in the middle of it – Bobby figured that Shep wasn't going to show. So he went searching for a ride and found one, the Steve Stapp Special: it was a nice ride; all that had to be done to accommodate Bobby for hot laps was lengthen the shoulder harnesses and seat belts.

Suddenly the Shep outfit came belatedly rolling in, the sprinter, newly painted red, a mass of bent iron, including twisted radius rods, stove-in exhaust headers, and a messed-up front axle. Up ran Shep, a bad look on his face: "Bobby, I hear you got Stapp's car to run!" "No, I told Stapp that if you showed up I'd run you." "Mine's still beat up. Might not handle." "Well, you want to run it?" "Well, you want to drive it?" "Can you have it ready for second warm-ups?" "Yup." "Get that sumbitch ready."

Fifty-three spoken words, and they led to a bonding. To make Shep's car perform, Bobby had to jujitsu it, but only Don Branson defeated him. Afterward, asking Shep how he'd done, Shep said "Not too bad"—a huge compliment coming from Shep. And when Bobby confessed that he wasn't sure he could keep up with Branson again, Shep's reply was sharp: "I certainly hope you can. We've got to race him again next week."

Shep was USAC sprint car racing's loner. He never swapped ideas with other car owners, didn't talk to the other drivers, and didn't want Bobby to either. Nor did he want Bobby to help him work on the car. But Shep wanted Bobby to take an interest; in fact he insisted on it. At the garage in Indianapolis where Shep was headquartered, he'd show Bobby their sprinter, which he always kept sparkling clean, and explain how the weight was set, tell Bobby which tires he was going to run, and how he was going to outsmart everybody else on tires. He always had a game plan. And if Bobby didn't come in a couple of days before a race he'd receive a monstrous chewing-out.

"What's the matter?" Shep demanded, "you don't have any interest in racing". "You don't like sprint cars?" "Sure I like sprint cars," Bobby protested. "But I can't just come back here and live." "Well," Shep said, "then just come back here the day before a race."

And that's what Bobby did. Outwardly Shep didn't treat Bobby differently from the way he treated any of his drivers: always telling them all the mistakes they'd made and never telling them they'd done an exceptional job –instead Shep was noncommittal. Yet Bobby could tell. Before Bobby got with him Shep used to frown all the time like a grouchy bear; but with Bobby he went from a frown to a grin. He paid Bobby the standard 40 percent at first, but Bobby couldn't make it on that, so Shep started paying him 50 percent. Shep was almost racing for free! A lot of times he paid for Bobby's meals, even loaned him a car, and Bobby pretended not to notice, because that would have put him ahead of Shep.

Shep's sprinter was an old tube frame job, a bent springer, and it flexed a lot. It was better than a decade old, but Shep refused to try new things with it. The rear end housing was cracked when Bobby started driving for Shep and it still was cracked when he quit driving for him. Any other sprint car owner would have bought another center section. Not Shep. At the end of every season he'd take it apart and weld it back up again.

Same with the steering gear. Bobby was always telling Shep that the steering was too hard and binding and how he wished Shep would get him power steering like Don Branson's. Shep wouldn't go for it. Nothing new or trick ever went on: Shep didn't even have scales to check the weight on each wheel, but instead tested it by lifting up the tires. "How's the steering feel now?" he'd ask, "I tightened it. Feel any better?" It never did.

Shep never had trick engines, trick camshafts, trick ported cylinder heads. The only special engine he ever built Bobby was a stock-block, quarter-stroke, small-block V8 Chevy like Parnelli Jones's. Bobby always had wanted one, but when Shep got him one he didn't like it; he never could go what he thought was quick, but they kept running it regardless. Then at New

Bremen Bobby took a rock through the radiator and a leak started that even Shep couldn't stop.

Bobby sat on the starting line for the main event watching Shep reaching down with nose pliers to pinch off the leaking tube. "It's not going to run all the way, is it?" Bobby asked. Shep never lied to Bobby: "Don't think so Bobby, but there's a chance. Whatever happens, don't bring it in until its burned black."

Everybody took off racing, with Jud Larson in the lead, Bobby running second, and the pair of them had the rest of the drivers so outclassed it wasn't funny. Larson, in the 1950s had been the class of dirt track racing, but in the 1960s was as old as Branson and had deteriorated into a beer hound. The way to defeat Jud, Bobby, knew was to push and punish him until the suds ran off, then pass him.

After that, Bobby was long gone. Shep signaled him he had a straightway lead, and in a USAC sprint car race that truly was being long gone. Brrr,brrr,berrr, Bobby suddenly heard the engine going, especially coming off the turns. But he kept the lead. Larson was getting even more tired, and was falling further behind, but everybody else was slowing down too.

Each brrr brrr began lasting a little longer. Then the engine started stinking – it was totally without water, and had been for laps. Bobby felt it vibrating. He'd run 40 laps, with only ten to go, but now it was a steady brrrrrrrrr lasting from when he got off the throttle to when he got back on.

In the meantime, Jud was back there somewhere, and every lap Bobby looked back over his shoulder for him, which was something you never did in sprint car racing, but he still had his lead of a straightaway.

The brrrr became a death smell. The car had had no water for a long time. And as Bobby went out of number four turn, he knew it was time to pull it out of gear, and just as he did – heep! – the water-less motor froze up solid.

And here came Shep another bad frown on his face, but never saying a word, just gritting his teeth like he always did. He cracked open the hood, looked in, smelled the engine a couple of times, and slammed the hood down again. "You burned her all right," he said. "Did I ruin it?" Bobby asked. "I hope so, Shep replied. "You never liked the worthless sumbitch anyway.". What Shep liked best was that Bobby hadn't given up and quit.

Later in that same season, in the south of Indiana, for the annual 100-lapper on the paved high walls of deathtrap Salem, Shep could not believe his eyes. Bobby, who'd earlier run out of brakes, was having a long, difficult day; and Shep, watching, was figuratively riding along with

Bobby sharing every swerve and dart. But then the Gapco Special, driven by a USAC sprint car rookie, leading the race and lapping the field, abruptly appeared to catch Bobby straddling the groove and rendered him into the fence.

The Gapco Special ended up in the winner's circle and so did Shep. Not one to take the roughing up of Bobby lightly, Shep weighed in with an ass-chewing of the Gapco's little driver – who interrupted Shep to tell him that Marquess of Queensbury niceties didn't apply and that Shep should either install better brakes or tell Bobby to keep out on the way of faster drivers. Tough monkey. His name was Mario Andretti.

Here's a five-ingredient recipe for anybody grooming himself to be Race Driver of the Century: 1) be born during wartime on a forlorn chunk of real estate that Yugoslavia, Austria and Italy had been squabbling over for decades; 2) grow up in abject poverty in a displaced persons camp in Italy after the forlorn chunk of real estate gets ceded to Yugoslavia at the end of World War II; 3) participate strictly on the quiet with your younger twin brother Aldo in a race-driver training program subsidized by the Italian government; 4) get uprooted all over again when your mother's uncle in Pennsylvania, in Nazareth, right in the blue-collar steel belt, sponsors you to America as immigrants and; 5) witness your very U.S. race at Langhorne – Langhorne! – which inspires both yourself and your twin to become American racing drivers.

Aldo fell by the wayside. But Mario clawed his way up through modified stocks, indoor buzzbomb TQ Minimidgets, and at last the full-size midgets of the ARDC. Hungry to make ink, on the Labor Day weekend of 1963, Mario sped across PA and Jersey to win three midget main events on two different tracks in one day, something only Shorty Templeman had done before, and the exploit had almost broken the dwarf Shorty.

So now at Salem, Mario had acquainted himself with Bobby and Shep. And throughout 1965 and beyond the two friends – incredible as it sounds Mario and Bobby became friends, though Mario and Shep never quite did – and they kept smacking themselves around in everything from Indy cars to sprinters at Ascot Park. It wasn't deliberate; they just couldn't keep out of each other's way and it was epic sprint car racing.

But what turned out to be the 1965 tournament's big moment occurred not on dirt but the pavement of Indy Raceway Park. Shep's old, axed, employee Johnny Rutherford, who'd been racing the Steve Stapp Special, had a falling out with Steve, and, helmet in hand, had gone to Wally Meskowski, whose previous driver, Bobby Marshman, had been killed in an Indy car at Phoenix International Raceway. Wally then gave Johnny the chair of his own, vacant, bent-springer No. 9, crafted by the great Eddie Kuzma.

Their first race together was a week or so later on a wet surface at Eldora where Wally had everything truly hooked up on the bottom and Johnny cut the nighttime competition to pieces. Shep and Bobby next won three straight and then Greg Weld also went on a tear. But Wally and Johnny went back to winning. Out at Ascot in the season finale Bobby and A.J. Foyt -- making a rare celebrity start -- tangled and knocked each another out. And then Wally and Johnny -- despite throwing two wheels in the same awkward race -- were knighted 1965 national sprint car champions.

Nineteen sixty-six was the most anticipated season yet. Its cast was unbelievable: Johnny, Bobby, Mario, Jud, Don, Roger McCluskey (back in his favorite sprint car, the old Konstant Hot, now the H&H Machine Tool) Larry Dickson, Greg Weld, Red Reigel, Ron Lux,, Dick Atkins, Arnie Knepper - But by the end of the year, five of them would be dead.

Outsiders wondered why Mario, now an international star, continued racing sprint cars. But insiders knew: it wasn't for the money. With an all-star cast of drivers like 1966's, USAC dirt track sprinters had turned into the fiercest circuit going -- if you were a real racer, it was the only place to be. Which was why Mario had flown all night from the Sebring 12 Hours just to race Wally Meskowski's second sprinter at Reading's season-opener.

Established as the two-car squad to chase, Wally's team floundered at Reading. The new No. 1 Wally had built for Johnny wasn't right and Mario in Johnny's old No. 9 lost to Jud in his new ride, the Dunseth Special.

Come the next gray Sunday at Eldora, Johnny again was struggling: speeding past the pits he sought tutelage and Wally responded with the "Move Higher" signal. Johnny moved. To his great annoyance, all he discovered were broken ruts; meanwhile additional cars were shooting past on the inside.

Now steering with one hand, he vigorously waved the middle of the other at Wally, after which he raised his face shield in an attempt for better eyesight. What Johnny received instead was a dirt clod the size of a baseball thrown up by Mario's No. 9 which caught him full in the kisser. Upon awakening some time later, Johnny found himself in a shallow creek bed with No. 1 on top of him. Both arms were so pulverized from the effects of three wailing endos that Johnny never was able to race sprint cars again.

Racing continued; so did its costs. Back at Reading in June, Jud, well past his prime, was pressing. Flat busted again, it was time for him to start earning some loot. In his great years Jud had been famous for throwing outrageous broad-slides, so, after qualifying the Dunseth on the front row, and after Paul Leffler, his mechanic, asked what he was going to do, Jud replied, "Go down to the first corner. Turn everything backward. And be gone."

This was the night Jud threw his final broad-slide. The Dunseth got hung

up on the cushion just as Red Riegel, in Johnny White's old Weinberger Homes, came roaring in all committed. Their tangled-up sprinters rolled off the track, came back on, stopped upside-down, and both of them were lost.

Racing still went on. The tourney carried everyone from Pennsylvania to Indiana and back again, and some of the winners were Bobby and Mario and occasionally Don, Larry Dickson and Arnie Knepper. But Roger in the H&H Tool was beginning to have a dominating year like those of 1962 and 1963.

Disaster struck again in Kansas City. Working the guardrail at Olympic Stadium, and coming on at outside flyer from 11th to fourth, Ron Lux, a protégé of Herk Hurtubise, got in the way of himself, and tried something that didn't work on Knepper. Arnie escaped but Ron took a fatal flip.

Everybody tried forgetting it as best they could as the tour swung into Oklahoma and Muskogee's Thunderbird Speedway, which gave drivers and cars a slimy, wet, battleground of red clay. Everybody was guessing about tires – diamond treads or Lightning Drags? – but Muskogee was marked by a Shep/Bobby meltdown.

So far they'd had a good swing. Bobby had set a track record qualifying at Olympic Stadium; been second in the feature; set another fast time at Tulsa; and taken fifth. But then something had happened between Bobby and Mario. Shep had had Bobby practicing on Lightning Drags, and they seemed the hot tip. But when Mario stopped by to ask how they were working, Bobby replied, "Aw, Mario, not worth a damn."

Mario left and Shep asked Bobby, "What'd you lie to him for?" And Bobby answered, "Aw, Shep, it'll be OK"

"It's going to be a long night," Shep retorted.

Never fond of Mario after the earlier set-to at Salem, Shep still objected to Bobby's giving him false information. Shep's soft conscience always made him afraid of somebody getting hurt. What if Mario listened and put on the wrong tires and, busted his but? How'd they feel?

The whole thing backfired anyway. Lightning Drags turned out to be the wrong call – but Muskogee's impossible surface came in perfect for diamonds. For punishment Shep deliberately made Bobby unsuccessfully continue running Lightning Drags through the first, second, and third qualifying heats. Finally they had hostile words about it – the only hostile words they ever exchanged – and Shep told Bobby he was fired and actually loaded the car on its trailer. But Roger McCluskey and the USAC steward Russ Clendenin worked the détente that re-united them. The dispute ended as quickly as it began: Shep apologizing for losing his temper, then hammering on some diamonds; jacking in some right-rear weight, and assuring Bobby, "You'll win this one." Sure enough, Bobby won the final qualifying heat and copped fourth in the feature.

There were additional late season stops at Reading, New Bremen, and the Terre Haute Action Track. With Jud gone, Don Branson at 46 was by far the old man on the USAC tour, but he took a buzzbomb midget to the Hut Hundred at the Terre Haute Action Track and

won. And at Sacramento's 100-miler for dirt track Indy cars Don turned a blazing qualifying lap but lost the race to Dick Atkins.

In Los Angeles for Ascot Park's nighttime double-header, Roger McCluskey already had clinched USAC's seasonal title but neck-and-neck battles raged all over Ascot with Don hunting down stragglers from the back until ramming the fourth corner fence; sending planks flying; coming to a stop on the track; and having Dick Atkins in the Meskowski No. 9 arrive at full screaming throttle with no place to go except into Don, killing them both.

The cause of Don's wreck never was known, but it ended this era of sprint car racing. No drivers ever again would aspire to be as vulnerable and doomed. And car owners and mechanics like Jud Phillips and Wally Meskowski got out of the racing because, in Phillips case, he lost Don Branson, and in Meskowski's because he'd never replace Johnny or Mario.

One sprint car soldier who continued racing, and it was no surprise, was Shep, even though racing never felt the same for him after Bobby. One of Shep's last starts was back at the Terre Haute Action Track, one of the few half-mile tracks where his car never had won. This time his slow driver was named Scratch Daniels. And this is how it played out: Shep flagging Scratch into the pits; Scratch demanding to know why; Shep telling him it was because he was fired; and Scratch coming out of the car swinging but missing.

Then the Terre Haute Action Track's cop that everybody hated came running up, tripped over somebody's jack, and broke his leg. Russ Clendenin, still USAC's sprint car steward, took Shep aside, telling him he was going to fine him \$500 for firing Scratch during a race. Shep's answer was classic Shep

“Well when was I supposed to fire him? At dinner?”

That was Shep!