

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Scold ‘ and Shame ‘Em

The uncompromising Longhorn Racing Team, variously made up of a fleet of astounding sprint cars, two front-engine dirt track champ cars, several one-of-a-kind Indy cars, and a powerful corps of attacking racing drivers and diehard mechanics, roared and swarmed and cut a swath through open-wheel racing from 1975 through 1982 until abruptly disbanding.

A wild posse of cowboys fueled by Texas money and Texas pride, Longhorn Racing’s ambition was the abject humiliation of the opposition. Donnie Ray Everett, who was furiously outgoing, had broad shoulders, a beard like a broom, making him look like one of the old ZZ Top rockers. As Longhorn’s chief mechanic and Wild West philosopher, Donnie Ray constantly was exhorting Longhorn with his gut-bucket Rio Grande Valley drawl: “You never want to win a race by inches! You want to beat the other teams by laps - I mean you want to scold ‘em, to shame ‘em. That’s the only way to race.”

But racing with such a relentless commitment finally proved to be dangerous, and toppled Donnie Ray with a massive heart attack. It even threatened the financial life of Bobby Hillin, Longhorn’s owner and inspiration. While it lasted however, Longhorn Racing’s passion was a thing to behold.



“Racing,” Hillin once declared in rueful retrospect, “can be a terrible disease. You can’t stop.” He grew up in central Texas, in the oil-glutted community of Midland, passing his youth observing his flamboyant oilman neighbors Jim Hall, Hap Sharp, and Ronnie Hissom mopping up amateur sports car racing with their exotic Maserati Birdcages, Monaco Coopers, and, finally, Chaparrals, Inspired, Hillin was ready to do some scoldin’ and shamin’ of his own.

He met Donnie Ray and C.J. Hanna, a pair of Rio Grande racers with a sprint car, and he sponsored them to some meets in Florida. Thus, Longhorn racing was born. And the atmosphere, even then, was win-or-else.

The late Steve Schulz was Longhorn Racing’s first driver and the first to get fired: he couldn’t grasp Donnie Ray’s concept off scoldin’ and shamin.’ Longhorn’s second driver was the outlaw Thad Doshier, quickly put out to pasture by Donnie Ray in favor of the California Racing Association graduate Bruce Walkup. Then at his prime, Walkup trucked one of Longhorn’s great dirt champ cars to New York and did a spellbinding job at Syracuse.

Walkup then got moved aside for Jan Opperman, who quickly made Longhorn Racing erupt. It was 1976. That summer was to mark the close of Opperman’s spectacular and difficult career although nobody realized it. But Opperman’s raw energy captivated everybody, especially Hillin’s 11-year-old son, who ritually cleaned and taped his goggles; and Hillin himself, who put Opperman in one of his Indy cars and watched him run a strong race

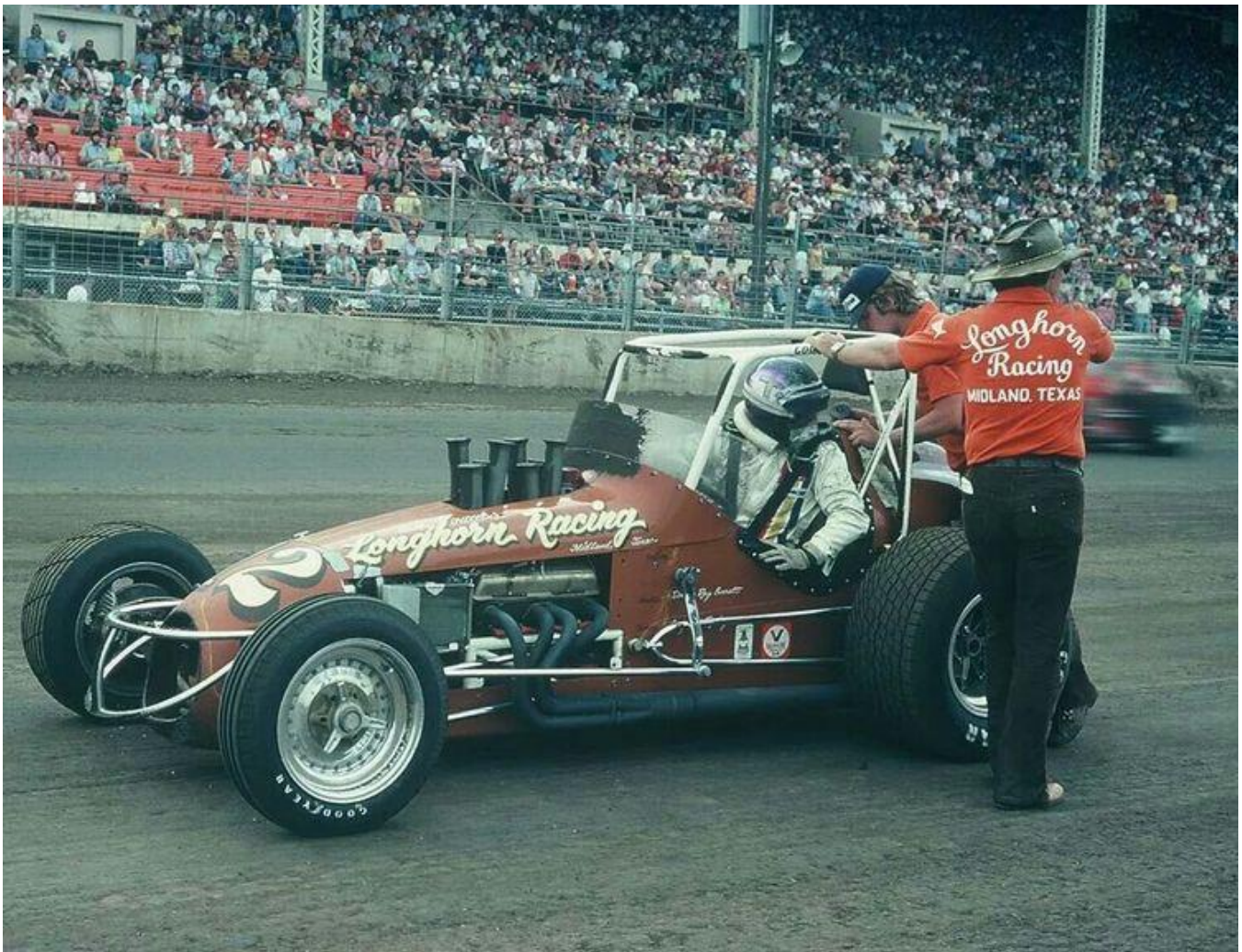
in the Ontario Motor Speedway 500; but especially Donnie Ray, who was twisting the wrenches on the tumultuous afternoon when Opperman took a Longhorn sprint car to the unfriendly paved bankings of Dayton and won by beating Dayton's king, Pancho Carter, who after many previous losing duels with him, hated Opperman. This was scold 'em shame 'em racing at its most pure.

Hillin decided to enlarge the team. Impressed with Opperman's statement that the dirt track driver he most feared was Bubby Jones, he gave Jones a sprint car and dirt champ car and added him to the Longhorn's team.



Opperman's big, debilitating accident at that summer's Hoosier Hundred devastated both Longhorn Racing and Billy Ray in general, and Bubby Jones in particular. Jones had been riding a close fourth while Opperman –worrying the leader –was a close second just as the leader lost it right in front of him. Trying and failing to miss him, Opperman got upside-down. And next the third place car piled into Opperman's open cockpit, with one of its wheels hitting his helmet.

An eyewitness to all this, Jones was horrified. Not only had he and Opperman become close friends but Opperman had injected Jones with his own strong religious beliefs. The accident had occurred on the Hoosier Hundred's back straightaway, stopping the race. Bubby didn't hesitate. Abandoning his own Longhorn car, he sprinted across the infield and into the main grandstand, where he took possession of the public address, imploring those in the bleachers to "Pray for Jan!"



Due to Opperman's forced absence Jones became Longhorn Racing's first-string dirt and sprint car driver. Just like Opperman, he was not supposed to be a pavement or high-bank merchant; but one sweet afternoon he and Donnie Ray took Opperman's old sprinter to Winchester and won a double-header. And, as a foot note, this may have been the race where Donnie Ray became so over-excited he suffered his big cardiac arrest.

With its next move Longhorn Racing stepped into outer space. Bobby Hillin abandoned sprint and dirt champ car racing and plunged full-time into the bigger, glitzier, riskier, game, of Indy cars.

Now the teams that Donnie Ray and the rest of Longhorn would have to scold and shame were those belonging to titans Penske Patrick, Haas, and Hillin's first inspiration Jim Hall. Hillin tried his best. He emulated Penske by constructing his own Indy cars, naturally calling them Longhorn. He hired the greatest of 500-mile drivers, Al Unser, then matched him with his favorite engineer, Hughie Absalom of England. When this combination didn't jell, Hillin hired the mechanic Wayne Leary and the engineer John Ward, expecting them to re-create the magic they'd made at All-American Racers, This, too, failed to happen.



By then, the bottom was dropping out of Hillin's oil and natural gas drilling business. And Longhorn Racing was forced to bite the bullet and disappear. "For some reason," Hillin said recently, "we couldn't win. But why not?"

His son grew up to win the Daytona 500 for stocks, and Donnie Ray Everett, who ultimately got fired by Hillin in a traumatic moment for both cowboys, quit racing to open an engine-building shop in drowsy Brownsburg, just outside Indy. Reflecting on the lost Longhorn era, Donnie Ray drawled, "Scold 'em and shame 'em is still the only way to go racing." And then he added, needlessly, "But it's damn hard to do."