

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

RICK FERKEL

Rick Ferkel was born in Green Springs (Ohio) on February 19, 1939. "I've been in that area of Tiffin-Bowling Green-Fostoria all my life."

As a muscular youth, all Rick wanted to do was to be a professional football player. "But when you're young and crazy, you do crazy things."

Rick quit school and joined the Marine Corps, ending his chances of a pro football career. However, he hated the Marines and when he got out he built a sprint car, although he had a self-professed lack of mechanical ability in the beginning. It was 1965 and he had a dismal first year. In fact, he earned a total of twenty-five dollars that rookie year, only because there weren't enough cars to fill the field for a 500-lap race at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway where last place paid \$25. He finished ten laps of that race. Rick accomplished zero that first year, which became his car number for most of his long career. He was and is the "Zero Hero".

"When I was young, I was wild and crazy and didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. I liked racing, but had no mechanical ability. I bought a welder for my first race car and didn't even know how to weld. It comes hard, but if you are interested enough in anything, you can learn it."

For the first dozen years of his career, when local shows in Ohio (Limaland, Millstream, Fremont) paid \$300-to-win, Rick read the ads in Chris Economaki's National *Speed Sport News* scanning for higher-paying races. Ads for shows like Bud Miller's new Wednesday night All-Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) series of 100-lap features in 1970 caught Ferkel's eyes, as it did those of Norman "Bubby" Jones, Jan Opperman, Bobby Allen, Lee Osborne, Ralph Quarterston, Lynn Paxton, Harold McGilton, Bobbie Adamson, Richard "Mitch" Smith and others. "I'd see races in *Speed Sport* that paid \$500-to-win. "500-to-win! Wow! That was tremendous money! So we started chasin' the pot at the end of the rainbow."

He was and is the "Ohio Traveler". At first he was running 75-80 races a year. But before long he was doing 125. In the mid- to late Seventies, he was consistently topping 30 wins per year, with a high of 38 in 1978. And many of those were major wins. In 1973, Rick captured the California Racing Association (CRA) "Pacific Coast Championship" at Ascot Park in Gardena (Calif.), which at the time was part of sprint car racing's "triple crown" with Manzanita's Western World and Knoxville's National

Championships. A year later, he garnered the "Western World Championships" at Keith Hall's Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix. Rick never had much luck at the Knoxville Nationals, though, with a third in 1975 (behind Eddie Leavitt and Roger Rager) and a fourth in 1973 (behind Kenny Weld, Opperman



Rick Ferkel (John Mahoney Collection)

and Allen) his best finishes. In 1976 Rick won the Nationals 'B' Main.

"Rick Ferkel broke my heart tonight. Watching him drop out of Ascot's big race while leading with only eight laps to go made me feel worse than when my own rig stopped earlier with a broken rear end. MaryLou in the grandstands said the same thing happened to her. All the racers know how hard Rick tries, and the effort he puts into his racing, and lately he's matured into a great driver. His motor blew up so badly that it even tore apart the driveline and rear end. Getting it fixed will cost Rick all the prize money he won in Arizona, and then some." That message of love, respect and admiration was from "Jan Opperman's Racing Diary", October 19, 1974.

"Let's face it, the outlaw's way is a hard way to go. He is always at a disadvantage, no matter where he travels. Each region has its top drivers and along comes the outlaw with his ever-present hope of beating them. Heck, even in Ohio, where I call home, there are plenty of guys who know the tracks more thoroughly than I. Simply because they run them more often. However, there will always be outlaw racers, as there are a few of us guys that thrive on that kind of stuff. We like the variety of tracks, the challenge of chassis and gear adjustments and, believe it or not, we enjoy trying to unseat the locals. Of course, if you are good enough there is a fairly good living in such a life and that is a definite incentive."

Even so, life on the road with a pick-up and open trailer wasn't easy costing Rick his marriage to wife Pat with whom he had a daughter Felicia. There were plenty of lonely nights, wondering why you were doing what you were doing and where your next meal (bag of butterscotch candies) was coming from. "When you're going down the road in the truck with no one to bounce ideas off of, or to talk things over with, your mind gets stale."

And there were nights when seven or eight people slept in the van in the race track's pits or parking lot. "It was the only way we could survive. To be honest, I started racing at the end of an era where you could run United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint cars and go on to Indy. Of course, every young sprint car driver had that goal. It was mine, too. I was on the way to Indy. Or so I thought. USAC at that time was like the World of Outlaws (WoO) now. They were the premier group. They had a lot of rules, and I couldn't conform to them. I ran what they called 'outlaws', which of course was not World of Outlaws. It was just open competition sprint cars. I just pulled in and raced. If you won, you get paid and if you didn't, you didn't do as well."

He was and is the "Original Outlaw." With the help and friendship of mechanic Jimmy Darley, an El Paso (Tex.) native who later became a tech official for Bert Emick's All-Star Circuit, Ferkel became quite knowledgeable about the technical mechanics of a sprint car. He was among the first racers in the country to prove the worth of drag tires, although he admits he didn't realize the changes that the drag tires would bring about in the motors that were needed to pull them. Rick also designed a sprint car chassis for a West Coast maker (Tognotti) way before other manufacturers took up the assembly-line production that is so common today.

Perfecting sprint car technology and beating the local competition wasn't what Rick was all about, though. Winning friendships and establishing strong personal ties with people like Don Martin of Lernerville Speedway, owners Al Daugherty, Bob Hampshire, George Nicholson, Paul Morgan, and drivers Johnny Beaber and Norman "Bubby" Jones were as important as victories on the track. Shirley Kear, widow of Ferkel's long-time sponsor (since '73), said Rick's personal support and his willingness to share racing knowledge were crucial to keeping the well-known Kear's Speed Shop open following the death of her husband Chuck. And when fourteen-year number Zero sprint car mechanic Darley came back to racing

(Rick Ferkel Bio Continued Below)

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(and Rick) after a self-imposed absence... "About the time people said I was getting too old for sprint cars was about the time Jimmy left. Having him back is equivalent to a guy losing his right arm and then getting it back."

According to Opperman, "Anybody can be a nice guy when he is a winner. But Rick Ferkel has stayed the same nice guy; win, lose or crash."

He was and is a true "Ambassador for the Sport of Sprint Car Racing". Rick's loyalty to WoO founder/president Ted Johnson of Wichita Falls (Tex.) was a major reason for the huge fan support that nourished the World of Outlaws through its infancy. "Ted and I got together before the World of Outlaws started. Ted was a race fan, and he still is. He made some contact with me, and asked me to come to places like West Memphis (Ark.), Mesquite (Tex.), Phenix City (Ala.) and Shreveport (La.). The races were all flops at the box office, but Ted was such a big fan, I really think he did it just so he could see all the top guys racin' with each other. He got a little group together ("The Racers"). He'd go to a promoter and say, 'I'll have these guys coming in, and they'd need a little bit of tow money,' and so forth. He did the whole thing. Some of our (Bobby Allen, Dub May) suggestions may have been beneficial, but Ted put it all together. That's how it all evolved into what the World of Outlaws is today. Ted has done more for sprint car racing than anybody in the whole world. Jack Gunn laid the groundwork with what he did in Pennsylvania and Ted took it from there. Ted Johnson is the reason we're running for the purses we are today."

In 1978, during the inaugural 41-race WoO season, Rick won four of nine WoO races at Eldora, including the initial running of the Eldora Sprint Nationals, the predecessor to today's "Historical Big One". Rick led the points up until September 3, when Karl Kinser's driver took over the top spot. The first-ever WoO point championship was decided at that ninth and final race at Eldora. A flying wheel from Fred Linder's car struck the Kinser Brothers number 11 and sent it into the wall, putting it out of the race. However, as luck would have it, Ferkel's Daugherty number 0 would soon lose its motor and be sidelined. When Shane Carson's car drove under the checkered flag that day, Rick had lost the WoO title by just 54 points to a 23-year-old Steve Kinser. They were fol-

lowed in the point standings by Bobby "Scruffy" Allen, Doug Wolfgang, Jack Hewitt, Charlie Swartz, Lee Osborne, Danny Smith, Sammy Swindell, Gary Patterson, Lealand McSpadden, Jimmy Boyd, Dub May, Fred Linder, Johnny Beaber, Shane Carson, Johnny Anderson, Kenny Jacobs, Jimmy Sills and Rick Nichols.

In 1979, Ferkel finished third in the WoO season-long point standings behind Kinser and Swindell. In 1980, he placed seventh, while placing fifth in friend Bert Emick's revitalized All-Star Circuit points (behind Allen, Hewitt, Al Hager and Beaber). In 1981 and '82, Ferkel returned to the 'top five' in the WoO national standings (behind Sammy, Wolfgang, Kinser and Jeff Swindell in '81; and behind Sammy, Steve, Carson and Brad Doty in '82). He also placed eighth in ASCoC points both of those years. In '83, showing the effects of running coast-to-coast and back again on a shoe-string budget year-after-year, Ferkel slipped to 20th in points in WoO points, but moved up to seventh in All-Star points.

It was during those truly 'outlaw' days of the mid-to late Seventies that Rick met his wife Cathy and they started a family together. Sons Tony and Ricky were born in 1976 and 1981, respectively. However, towards the end of that period, after the 1983 Knoxville Nationals, Rick seriously considered retirement as a driver for the first time. "It was a hard thing to do. When I closed the door on the trailer for the last time, I didn't know what I would do. But I felt the Lord would look after us."

Less than two weeks later, Rick was back on the road. He was and is a "Racer". He again finished seventh in All-Star points in 1984, and even improved to sixth in '85. It was that same year, though, that Rick experienced the worst injury of his career. He broke his back at Webster City (Iowa). However, through it all, he kept his positive and up-beat spirit that has come to be a trademark (along with the ever-present grin and welcome handshake) of Rick Ferkel. "I feel pretty fortunate, and I thank the Lord for it. "I'm pretty healthy for all the things I've been through. Racing isn't a picnic. It's a physical job and much harder than people believe. When you're fast, it's easier. Those are the fun times."

In 1988, "The Buckeye Traveler" partnered with Ted Johnson again, only this time as an official with Ted's

new venture, the WoO American Late Model Association. Following the demise of that stock car effort, Rick made a farewell WoO tour in early 1989, then became the WoO sprint car 'Director of Competition' in 1990. What did that entail? "Working with promoters, working with racers, putting up banners."

Early in 1994, Rick departed the Outlaws with his characteristic personal diplomacy. "My theory is that you should never burn your bridges, because you never know. Ted and I have a good relationship."

For the 1994 season, Rick signed on as chief mechanic for 31-year-old Doug Kalitta of Ypsilanti, Mich., a four year veteran of USAC sprint car racing and an accomplished pavement driver. Under Rick's guidance, Kalitta won his first-ever USAC main event on May 26 at Winchester (Ind.). Unfortunately, that day will forever be remembered as the day that three-time USAC sprint car champion Robbie Stanley lost his life on the high banks. The Kalitta and Ferkel team also captured the 1994 USAC Sprint Car Championship title, a feat which required quite a bit of versatility on both dirt and asphalt surfaces.

Like he has had ever since he first thought of retirement in 1983, the winner of hundreds of career sprint car main events still has a number Zero sprint car back home in northwestern Ohio (Tiffin). "I still maintain my race car, and at every opportunity, I will race it. I still feel quite competitive. If I have equal equipment I can win. But it isn't any fun running in the back."

In June of 1993 and 1994, Rick Ferkel twice won the \$2,500-to-win 360-cubic-inch sprint car event at the Knoxville Raceway known as the "Hall of Fame Classic for Legends of Sprint Car Racing" (drivers age fifty and over). According to historian Kevin Eckert, Knoxville was career win site number 78 for Ferkel. He is again entered in tonight's third annual "Pennzoil Masters Classic". "I have no regrets. I have peace of mind and I enjoy life. There's no thrill like winning and you always feel like tonight's the night."

Rick was inducted into the Findlay/Hancock Sports Hall of Fame.