

STEVE STAPP



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Bruce Craig Photos

Steve Stapp is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999 in honor of his outstanding achievements as a car owner, mechanic and builder, including his having won the 1974 and '76 United States Auto Club (USAC) national championships.

Stephen Owen Stapp was born on August 19, 1940, in Glendale (Calif.), the son of Elbert "Babe" and Lou Stapp. As a youngster in southern California, according to Steve, "I used to fight and argue all the time. Why, I can't say. I was always trying to prove that I was smarter than everybody else."

Yet, Steve was also a creative kid, taking advantage of the racing business that he grew up around and earning money by doing odd jobs. At age nine, Steve ran the scoreboard at Carrell Speedway in Gardena (Calif.) for J.C. Agajanian. While attending Van Nuys High School (and playing catcher to pitcher Don Drysdale), Stapp earned pocket money in Don Prudhomme's father's body shop. At age thirteen, Steve was helping on Marv Edwards' Hollywood Spring & Axle Special midget.

It was also at this age when the youngster bought a Frank Kurtis-built Kurtis Kraft midget from Johnnie Parsons. After fabricating the missing pieces, he put a variety of drivers in the car, because he was too young to compete himself.

In 1957, Stapp purchased Hank Higuchi's Henry & James Special sprint car. It was also at Higuchi's service station where Stapp met driver Johnnie Pouelsen. For years, Steve peppered Pouelsen with questions regarding racing and engineering. According to Steve, "John answered me. But consider: If you were trying to work, and if somebody asked you 100 questions a day, you'd run out of energy. John would say to me, 'If you ask me one more question, I'm going to kill you.' Then I'd ask him something else, just to fire him up."

Once old enough to race, Steve started driving his own sprinter on the West Coast. In his late teens, he even ventured to the Midwest with his sprint and midget. According to Stapp, "A.J. Watson really kept me under his wing. Watson taught me more about chassis than anyone; and like I had done with Pouelsen, I probably drove him crazy with my questions. I had known A.J. since my dad took me to his Glendale shop in

1955 with Jud Phillips, Hank Higuchi, Hank Blum, Ronnie Ward and Mel Leighton there.

Hank Henry, Watson, Pouelsen, and later Bignotti were all good mechanics, and all different. My dad said once that 'Curly' Wetteroth and Myron Stevens could build anything out of anything. Likewise, Eddie Kuzma, Quinn Epperly, Lujie Lesovsky and Don Brown had the imagination to do amazing things with a sheet of aluminum. Hank Henry came to Escondido from Arizona, and showed me how to build a race car with a bench grinder, a torch, and a file. And his were

very good cars. He taught me that with my hands I could do things without expensive equipment, and that with a few tools I could be a real craftsman. Today, in fact, we have only refinements on the race cars of the Forties."

In 1961, the Sherman Oaks (Calif.) resident finished second to Billy Cantrell in a California Racing Association (CRA) event at Riverside (Calif.). In 1962, '63 and '64, Stapp was racing sprint cars against the likes of Roger McCluskey, A.J. Foyt, Don Branson, Chuck Hulse, Bobby Marshman, Jim Hurtubise, Allen Crowe, Bud Tingelstad, Johnny White and Mickey Shaw in USAC events. In fact, those were the only ten drivers to finish ahead of him in the 1963 USAC national point standings. On June 16 of that year, he turned a one-lap record of 23.42 seconds at the Action Track in Terre Haute (Ind.). Stapp finished fourth that afternoon behind McCluskey, Hulse and Foyt.

On October 23, 1963, "Stevie" (as Foyt called him) married Rosemary Peterman from Baltimore (Md.), whom he had met the previous year while in Trenton (N.J.) for an Indy car race. Son Andy was born a year later, and daughter Susannah six and one-half years after Andy. Brownsburg (Ind.) would be their home.

By 1965, Stapp quit driving sprint cars and concentrated on building, wrenching and owning them. Throughout his career, "Fat Boy" (as Pouelsen called him) had also done the same with midgets, dirt championship and Indy cars. However, it was sprint car racing where Stapp excelled. From the 1965 through '72, Stapp's own cars were piloted by some of the best shoes in the business and were consistent winners. Johnny Rutherford,

Mario Andretti, Larry Dickson (whom Steve helped win the 1968 driver's championship with four wins) and George Snider all reached USAC victory lane with car owner/mechanic Stapp.

Steve Stapp's relationship with driver Duane "Pancho" Carter, Jr., took them both to an entirely different level from 1973 through 1980, though. The "Big Bopper" (as Boston Louis Seymour called him) and Pancho scored a total of 40 USAC feature wins together and twice captured the prestigious USAC national championship in 1974 and '76. In 1974, they won seven features and beat Tom Bigelow, George Snider, Bruce Walkup and Bill Puterbaugh for the title. In '76, they won eleven mains and defeated Bigelow, Sheldon Kinser, Larry Dickson and Billy Cassella for the honors. Amazingly, in '77, they won ten races together, yet only placed third in the championship behind Kinser and Bigelow. Their championships came as a result of the successful partnering of Carter as driver, Stapp & Conger as owners, and Dobbins Chevrolet as sponsor. Among the prestigious Hoosier wins that they claimed were the "Tony Hulman Classic" at Terre Haute (1975-79) and the "Joe James-Pat O'Connor Memorial" at Salem (1974-75-76-77). In the late Seventies, Conger bowed out and McCord Auto Supply came in as the team sponsor. It was also in December of 1977 that Carter suffered severe injuries in an Indy car crash during practice at Phoenix (Ariz.), yet he came back to score more wins with Stapp in his sprint car.

In 1980, Stapp walked away from sprint car racing to grow his trucking business that hauls bulk items like fertilizer and livestock feed all over Indiana. Within five years, however, he got back involved helping son Andy and friend Jimmy White with their sprinter. But then it was back into the parts business, and eventually into producing his own sprint cars again. According to Steve, "I've never wanted to put out a mass-produced product in high volume. I know my cars will be better because of the time and effort we take to design and build them. It's a throwaway world, but my cars are just the opposite. Durability and safety are two of my biggest concerns."

Among the drivers in Stapp's cars in the 1980's and 90's have been Brad Marvel, son Andy, Joe Saldana, Bob East, Jim Mahoney, Rocky Hodges, Eric Gordon, Robbie Stanley, Russ Gamester, Mark Alderson, and Cary Faas amongst others. Steve's last USAC victory came on August 31, 1996, at Lawrenceburg (Ind.) with Mark Cassella behind the wheel. He remains active today.



Steve Stapp with "Pancho" Carter

John Mahoney Photo