

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

KENNY WELD

Kenneth Eugene Weld was born on November 4, 1945, in Kansas City (Mo.), the third son of ex-midget racer Taylor "Pappy" Weld and his wife Ella. Kenny had three brothers, Jerry, Greg and Ricky (who was adopted), and two sisters, Dee and Marilyn. Kenny grew up watching Chester White drive his dad's midgets, watching his older brothers both race cars, and doing engine work at Taylor's Auto Service.

Kenny began his racing career in 1961 in the local jalopy division. The following year he graduated into the sportsman of "B" class of super-modifieds at Riverside Stadium. Later in '62, he upgraded his motor to an "A" class super-modified for Lakeside Speedway. In '63, he was racing at such venues as Lakeside, Olympic Stadium, Riverside, Mid-America Fairgrounds in Topeka (Kansas) and the Knoxville (Iowa) Raceway, all the while driving for "Pappy". It was in '63 that brothers Greg and Jerry ran 1-2 in the third-ever Knoxville Nationals, ahead of Dick Fries and Gordon Woolley.

In 1964, Kenny ventured to even more Midwestern super-modified tracks and, at age eighteen, he won the prestigious Knoxville Nationals with Greg second and Jerry seventh. It was also during the '64 season at Knoxville that the Weld's, a.k.a. "The Kansas City Mafia", were banned for so-called "unsportsmanlike conduct". One week later, Taylor 'sold' his fast car for one dollar to fellow K.C. racer "Tiger Bob" Williams, who again proceeded to sweep the competition. Clearly, there was no slowing nor stopping the Weld's.

Early the next year, Kenny married his high school sweetheart, Mary Etta. He would continue his winning ways throughout the 1965 season, winning twice at Knoxville and finishing fourth in points behind Jerry Blundy, Norm Galpin and Bill Utz. He also bested Blundy to capture his second Nationals aboard his father's machine with a four-bar suspension and a slanted roof. Kenny also won in September at Amarillo (Tex.) against defending champion Bobby Ward, Ken Taylor and Ralph V. Funderburk in the Southwestern Super-modified Nationals.

In 1966, Kenny won the Amarillo event again and the Midwestern Super-modified Nationals at Olympic, and he was third at the Knoxville Nationals behind Jay Woodside and Lloyd Beckman.

It was during the mid-1960's that all three Weld brothers made periodic super-modified racing forays into Central Pennsylvania, and even upstate New York for the asphalt Oswego (N.Y.) Classic. At the time, the midwest tracks paid \$175 to win, while the Eastern tracks paid \$500 to win. According to promoter Jack



Kenny Weld (Unknown Photographer)

Gunn of Central Pennsylvania's Sel-Wil circuit, "In '63, for our first (Williams Grove) National, we had never seen a wing, but it was open competition and we had guys come in from the Midwest like the Weld brothers, all three of them, and we had a bunch of guys from Michigan who used to run at Oswego and that included Gordon Johncock, Nolan Johncock and Sammy Sessions. And they all came in with these wings on the roof and we laughed at 'em, thought they were really funny. But they blew us right out of the ball park..."

During the winter of 1966-67, Kenny built a roadster-style supermod, similar to brother Greg's Don Brown-built United States Auto Club (USAC) machine, and he moved to Loganville (Penn.). The radical aluminum and fiberglass car featured a quick-release steering wheel, inclined radiator and an open-tube driveline. The number 91 car was angular for better aerodynamics, with a squarish super-modified tail. And it often ran with dual wheels (on the right rear) or radial tires mounted on it. He won 23 of 65 feature starts that year, including the Friday qualifying feature at the Nationals. Kenny won twice that year at the 'Grove and finished eighth in their Modified Division points behind Bobby Adamson, Bobby Gerhart, Richard "Mitch" Smith, Gus Linder, Johnny Crawford, Ray Tilley and Ronnie Rough. He also place third in the Susquehanna Speedway season point standings behind Gerhart and Milford Wales, and third at Lincoln behind Bobby Allen and Lynn Paxton.

Engine problems plagued the team in 1968, although Weld recorded his share of wins on the Williams Grove-Lincoln-Hagerstown circuit in the roadster. He finished sixth in points at the 'Grove, but he captured his first Lincoln track championship.

For 1969, Weld built another car, except this wedge-shaped one would have a wing over the nosepiece. Kenny was living in York, with Lincoln being his home track where he finished second in points to Bobby Allen. He was seventh in points at Williams Grove, where Ray Tilley was once again champion in the "Bud" Grimm number 88 machine. Kenny also closed out the decade of the Sixties with a fifth place finish in the Knoxville Nationals, behind Kenny Gritz, Jan Opperman, "Tiger Bob" Williams and Dick Sutcliffe.

In 1970, Weld took over the "Bud" Grimm mount, basically as 'driver only', and won 27 main events. And he proceeded to win his first Williams Grove point championship over Bobby Adamson, "Mitch" Smith, Paxton, Johnny Grum, Jim Sheaffer, Bobby Allen, Billy Cassella, Lee Osborne and Gene Kohr. He also finished third in the 150-lap 'Grove National Open behind Grum and Allen. Kenny was second in points at Lincoln to Allen and eighth in points at Hagerstown. 1970 was also the year that Jan Opperman was imported by Jack Gunn and a natural rivalry developed between the two drivers, fueled by the promoters and the media. Ironically, it was during that same season that Kenny had to personally visit Jan to let him know that younger brother Jay Opperman had been killed in a sprint car at Knoxville. And tragedy struck the Weld family when brother Jerry was killed while crossing a street in K.C.

Kenny was back in his own number 91 the following season, yet he again claimed the Lincoln and Williams Grove point championships and, after teaming up with car owner Bob Weikert, he finally won the 150-lap National Open at the 'Grove. Kenny was also third in the Hagerstown points behind Larry "Smokey" Snellbaker and Elmer Ruby.

In 1972, Weld remained teamed with Weikert and his famous Floyd Trevis-built number 29 "Beefmobile". Shortly thereafter, Opperman partnered with owner Dick Bogar and the number 99 sprinter and the Weld-Opperman rivalry really took off. Between the two teams, they won over seventy features on the tough central Pennsy circuit (Opp - 44, Weld - 29). And the promoter-driven, media-hyped rivalry between the 'clean-cut, conservative, Middle American redneck' and the 'grass-smoking, New Age hippie' was real. According

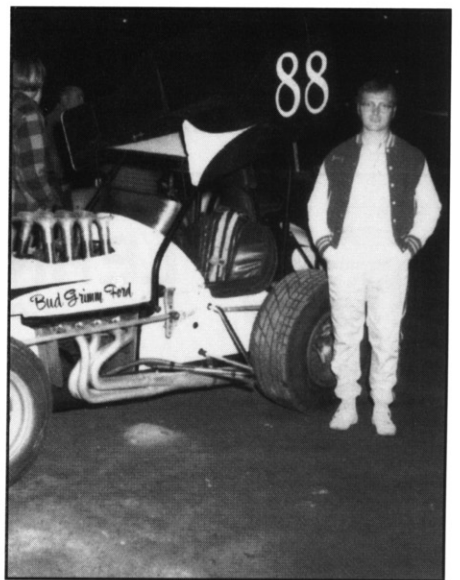
to Kenny, years later, "There certainly was a rivalry. We were clashing personalities. Jan Opperman was one of the best drivers ever, and we'll probably not see the likes of our rivalry again. The timing was just right."

That year, Kenny drove the "Weikert Livestock Special" to the big \$3,000-to-win Knoxville Nationals win. He also won his third track titles at both Lincoln and Williams Grove, and his second consecutive National Open triumph. Opperman beat Weld late in the year at Manzanita Speedway's Western World Championship in Phoenix (Arix.).

Weld had another ultra-successful season with Weikert in 1973, winning 43 times in "Old Blue". Their greatest achievement that year was winning the Knoxville Nationals title, making Kenny the first four-time winner of the most prestigious sprint car race in the world. In it, he led start-to-finish and defeated his arch-rival Opperman and good friend Bobby Allen. Kenny also won the Winternationals title at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa, Port Royal's "Tuscarora 50", the 150-lap "Pennsylvania State Championship" at Lincoln and his third-in-a-row 'Grove National Open. In addition, he was the track champion at both the Williams Grove and Penn National speedways.

According to Weikert, "We won at Knoxville with the wing on and with the wing off. It didn't matter, 'cause Kenny could drive anything. He could do anything, and I mean anything. He could build a complete car, and then build a complete motor to put into it. Then he'd drive it under the checkered flag. If he crashed it, he fixed it. He was an innovator, not a copier."

In '74, Weld won another 39 features, including 74-lappers at Lincoln and Selingsgrove, the 150-lap "Pennsylvania State Championship" again, and a record fifth-in-a-row Williams Grove track championship. However, by the end of that year, the Weld era in Eastern sprint car racing was nearing its conclusion as teammate Paul Pitzer, himself a 19-race winner in '74, eventually replaced Kenny in "Old Blue". Weld is credited with having won 189 feature races and 8 track championships between 1967 and 1975, mostly behind the wheel of the Weikert Livestock Special. He competed with the All Star Circuit of Champions, United Racing Club and the United States Auto Club, and he recorded wins at Bedford, Everett, Jennerstown, Mercer, Penn National, Port Royal, Susquehanna, Lincoln, Williams Grove, Reading and Selingsgrove in Pennsylvania and at Dorsey and Hagerstown in Maryland. Said rival Opperman in 1974, "None of the USAC drivers I've come across are as tough as Kenny Weld, Bobby Allen and the other Pennsylvania guys."



Kenny Weld (Lloyd King Photo)

(Kenny Weld Bio Continued Below)

Kenny Weld Cont.

Kenny left sprint cars in 1975 to race modifieds, following in the footsteps of Bobby Gerhart and Dick "Toby" Tobias. He built and raced big-block modifieds, or "heavies" as they were known in sprint car circles. He won sixteen times in a Weikert-owned modified at the Reading Fairgrounds, racing twice a week on Fridays and Sundays. In 1976 and '77, upstate New Yorker Alan Johnson and others won many races on the Drivers Independent Race Tracks (DIRT) circuit in Weld-built modifieds.

In 1977, Weld drove modifieds and even attempted a comeback in sprints, but he soon retired as it was apparent that Kenny was disappointed and frustrated that he didn't make it to Indianapolis, the so-called 'major league of auto racing'. Just before Kenny moved back to his native Kansas City area, he was quoted as saying, "If it ever becomes worth it for me to race again, then I'll do it. Right now, it's not worth it."

Kenny returned to the East in 1980 when he built the infamous "Batmobile" modified, with fabricator Don Brown for driver Gary Balough, who had previously driven a Weld-built modified. The supposed Lincoln Continental Mark V-bodied car was two seconds faster than any other of the 150 DIRT modifieds at the division's premier event at the New York State Fairgrounds in Syracuse. Following Balough's record-breaking Syracuse week and win, the rulebook was re-written and the car was effectively banned from further competition. According to Kenny, "They used to come to Syracuse to have fun. I made them get serious about it."

Still disappointed that teams in NASCAR or Indy Car racing apparently didn't want his talents, Kenny Weld was despondent in the early Eighties and he turned to drugs. He was arrested in 1983, received a conviction for possession with intent to distribute cocaine and he was fined \$50,000. It was also the same year that his father and mentor, Taylor "Pappy" Weld, passed away. Kenny served 52 months of the 25-year prison sen-

tence and was released in 1987.

According to Kenny, "For 35 years of my life, I was a decent contributor to society. Then I made a wrong turn. I became a drug addict. I forgot where I came from. I just got lost. My competitiveness, greediness and ambition propelled me into being a big drug dealer."

Weld was smart enough to use his time in prison productively, first as a mechanic, then as a welder and a machinist. He returned to the cockpit of a radically-designed and home-built sprint car in 1988 at Knoxville, but he broke his arm in a crash soon afterward at the Buckeye Speedway in Orrville (Ohio). He then retired as a driver from the sport, auto racing, in which he is credited with more than 225 career feature wins.

According to Lynn Paxton. "You've got to give the guy his due. He was a good driver, a damn good builder and a great engineer. There may have been better pure drivers like Opperman, but when you consider the whole package, nobody was better than Kenny."

In 1989, Kenny founded Weld Tech with brother Greg and daughter Debra, who is married to racer George Austin III. Kenny basically took the process of porting cylinder heads from an art to a science and solved the problem of human inconsistency in shaping the ports and cutting the combustion chambers by programming computer numerically-controlled (CNC) machine equipment to perform the task. His self-taught approach meant sixteen hours days, seven days a week, yet it allowed him almost single-handedly to make Weld Tech a world-class leader in the performance racing industry in the 1990's. In Kenny's own words, "There's two ways you can acquire knowledge. One is you learn and one is you're taught. I'm not very teachable, but I learn well."

During the summer of 1995, Kenny was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (large-cell, multiple-

site). The 1979 charter inductee into the Knoxville Raceway Hall of Fame started treatment and went into remission, however, his health took a turn for the worse the following year after moving his growing business to Brownsburg (Ind.).

In January of 1997, Kenny Weld was named the first recipient of the "Smokey" Yunick Legion of Merit award at the Performance Racing Industry Show for technological developments in the construction of racing engine cylinder heads for all forms of motorsports, including NASCAR Winston Cup stock car racing. Kenny passed away on March 20, 1997, after contracting pneumonia in Houston (Tex.), where he was undergoing alternative treatment for his cancer. In lieu of flowers, Mary Etta requested contributions to the continuing education of their daughter Tara (c/o Weld Tech, 1789 Green Street, Brownsburg, IN 46112).



Kenny Weld (Bruce Craig Photos)