

Don Brown

by Bob Mays

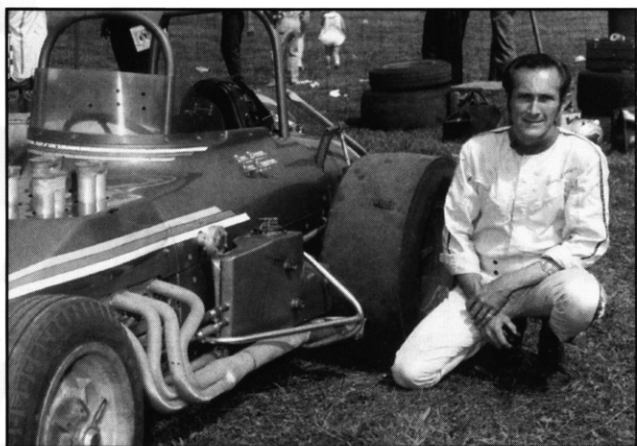
Don Brown was born in 1937 in Columbus, Ohio, and like many looking for greener pastures, the family, in 1944, moved to San Fernando, California. Brown got his first whiff of racing at Carrell Speedway in 1954 watching midgets. A couple of years later, after high school graduation, he went to work for George Shilala, a former Kurtis-Kraft employee, who was then building midgets and champ cars.

After his stint with Shilala, Brown went to work for Lujie Lesovsky and, along with chief mechanic Rocky Phillip, built the Racing Associates roadster for driver Johnny Thomson. Rewarding them, Thomson sat the car on the pole for the 1959 Indy 500. It was during this time that Brown also worked for renowned builder, Eddie Kuzma, in Gardena.

Turning to sprint cars, Don built a car for California Racing Association (CRA) competition in 1961 and promptly won the Rookie of the Year title for himself. Then in 1962, Brown decided to hit the road with the United States Auto Club (USAC). His season ended abruptly at New Bremen, Ohio, when former CRA buddy, Don Davis, borrowed Brown's car and was killed in the feature.

For 1963, Brown moved to the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) fair circuit. He finished thirteenth in the final points and then twelfth the next year. In 1965, Brown scored wins at Memphis, Missouri, and Lincoln, Nebraska, and jumped to seventh in IMCA points. Brown dropped to eighteenth in the IMCA standings in 1966, but still managed a win at Spencer, Iowa. Also racing with the Colorado-based Big Car Racing Association (BCRA), he won at Hutchinson, Kansas, and finished sixth in points.

Brown also built several supermodifieds and a few midget cars in the mid-1960's which were piloted by such luminaries as Joe Saldana, Gordon Woolley and Brown himself. In fact, Brown lived with Saldana in Lincoln, Nebraska, from June through the fall fair circuit for several years, turning out a number of cars, as well as doing repair work. It was around this time that Brown acquired the moniker, "The Prince of Darkness," because of his penchant for working late at night on racing projects, then taking a break during daylight hours.



Armin Krueger Photo

It was also during the 1966 season that the first 'Mechanical Rabbit' made its debut. Greg Weld had been talking to Brown for

some time about building a roadster-type sprint car that would work on dirt. Weld found great success in the early 1960's with a boxy roadster-style supermodified/sprint car, and in 1965 at the Nebraska State Fair, Brown took a ride in just such a car, owned by "Speedy" Bill Smith. Brown was very impressed with Smith's car, so it wasn't hard for Weld to convince him to build a roadster-sprint. Lil' Joe Saldana also wanted a car, so three were ultimately built. Weld's was completed first, and debuted with USAC in 1966. Wild ideas such as power steering, progressive torsion bars, weight-jackers and several other "secret" devices made it more worthy for dirt track racing. The result of all this was that 1966 was more of a research-and-development campaign for Weld, Brown and the first Mechanical Rabbit.

In 1967, Weld took rides with other owners and temporarily parked his Rabbit. However, Joe Saldana had his ready to go on the outlaw circuit, and go it did! Over a three-year period, 1967-69, Saldana won races and set records all over the Midwest at venues such as Knoxville, Iowa, Lincoln, Nebraska, Oskaloosa, Iowa, Fairmont, Minnesota, Eagle, Nebraska, and Belleville, Kansas. Knoxville was especially kind to Lil' Joe and his Rabbit in 1967, with Saldana setting and resetting the track record and winning features almost at will. For the Nationals that year, Saldana claimed the pole with a new track record and was running away from the field, when the left rear wheel broke, sending Saldana pitted. After replacing the offending disk, Saldana returned to salvage a 'top ten' finish. Following the 1969 season, Saldana sold the car, and it's winning ways continued several more years with such hot shoes as Roger Rager, Steve Schultz, Lonnie Jensen and Jon Backlund keeping the car up front. In fact, Backlund won the 1971 BCRA championship by sweeping both ends of a Belleville double-header.

Weld was back in his Rabbit by 1968, and had a very good season in USAC, winning at Granite City, Illinois, Ascot Park in Gardena, California, and three times at Reading, Pennsylvania, over a two-year period. One other new device on Weld's car was a four-post roll cage. Weld was the first USAC driver to go with the chrome-moly life insurance, and it paid off handsomely at Salem, Indiana. Salem was one of the trinity of high-banked tracks (Winchester, Indiana, and Dayton, Ohio, were the other two) known simply as "the Hills." Weld tangled with another car coming off turn four of the banking during a USAC feature, and slid/flipped the length of the front chute into turn one. Without Brown's sturdy cage, Weld would have surely become one of racing's honored dead. As it was, he crawled out dizzy and disheveled; one week later he dominated the feature at Reading in his rebuilt Rabbit.

By midseason of 1967, Brown had his own Mechanical Rabbit ready to go. After spending some time in IMCA sorting out the new car, Brown moved to USAC late in the year. Although he never won with the car, he obtained several Indy car rides at Milwaukee, Ontario, Pocono, Trenton, and even Argentina.

It was also during this time that USAC car owners came to realize Brown's metal-crafting talents were just as valuable, or perhaps more so, than his driving talents. By the end of the 1970's, Brown was through with driving, but not racing. One of Brown's greatest accomplishments in fabrication may well have been the Gary Balough-driven Lincoln Continental DIRT modified stock car, which was built for the Syracuse, New York, mile track. Once again, Brown collaborated with a Weld on the project; this time it was Greg's



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younger brother Kenny. Per Weld's criteria, Brown hammered out the bodywork for the car and it was stunning, to say the least. The high roof and side pods were different than anything yet seen on a short-track car. Balough immediately went out and broke the track record by three seconds, and then won the race in a laugh. Only it wasn't funny to the other competitors. The car was, technically, so far beyond anything else in modified racing that it was banned forever.

Brown's main business in the 1980s continued to be Indy car repair until the advent of carbon fiber around 1985. Since then, the Prince of Darkness has kept busy doing restorations of some of the mightiest dirt track cars of the past, including the Lee Elkins/Mike Nazaruk sprinter, the Tom Randol/Bob Slater Kurtis-Kraft 'big car' and his own car that he raced with CRA, USAC and IMCA in the 1960's. Don Brown lives today in Indianapolis.