



Earl Gaerte

by Jim Morrison

Earl Gaerte's name means power in open wheel auto racing -- the kind of power a driver finds by pushing his right foot down and propelling him to victory and series championships.

Steve and Karl Kinser, Sammy Swindell, Levi Jones, Cameron Dodson. These are just a few of the dozens that Gaerte power has carried to championships. But, it also means power in the sport of sprint car racing

itself, many seeking his counsel when formulating rules. "His advice, based on experience, is extremely valuable," said Rollie Helmling, former car owner and current United States Auto Club (USAC) president. "Earl has always cared about his customers and the sport."

Sammy Swindell, who won his first two World of Outlaws (WoO) point titles after his team switched to Gaerte Engines power, said Earl's standing amongst others reflects Gaerte's honesty and fairness. "He has a lot of respect from a lot of different people in the sprint car community," said Swindell.

Though he has helped power some of the biggest names in sprint car racing to the top of their careers, Gaerte always counsels for the average racer. "We just have always been in the game for the average racer, to try to grow the sport," said Gaerte. "Racers with money will be around for five or six years," said Gaerte. The average 'Joe' sticks around a lot longer."

Gaerte power plants have been used in almost all forms of racing, including midgets, dirt late models, sprints, Silver Crown cars, supermodifieds, tractor pullers (including the Banter Brothers), boats and even Indy cars. They have established records on the Bonneville Salt Flats and powered Automobile Racing Club of America (ARCA) and United Speed Alliance Racing (USAR) stock cars around the high-banked ovals down south. Earl was even involved in NASCAR Winston Cup racing when the first restrictor plate engine was developed, working with A.J. Foyt's team.

Gaerte Engines started in the garage behind his house in Rochester, Indiana. Gaerte worked for several years as the parts manager for the local car dealership, all the while tinkering with dragsters. In 1969, he built an engine for a competitor that lasted all season.

Gaerte quickly realized that if he wanted to make money, selling engines, he needed to build more than one per year. Earl switched to sprint cars, with Paul Hazen as his first customer for a car prepared for Jimmy Elliott, former USAC sprint car champion Tony Elliott's father.

For the next decade, Gaerte Engines grew in its accomplishments with Midwestern racers. On an autumn day in 1978, a championship battle for the inaugural title of the World of Outlaws was playing out between Steve Kinser and Rick Ferkel at the final race at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway in Rossburg, Ohio. When the engine in Karl Kinser's car gave out early, a fellow competitor offered his own engine -- built by Gaerte -- to complete the program and allow Steve and Karl to win their first championship. That winter, Earl worked out a deal with Karl Kinser to provide engines for the next season. Gaerte had five guys working in his shop at the time and Earl remembers that "they thought I was nuts."

After all, the World of Outlaws was a new concept challenging the long-established United States Auto Club. The Kinsers followed up with World of Outlaws titles the next three seasons and Steve won his first of three consecutive Knoxville Nationals crowns in 1980.

Gaerte engines quickly became the must-have power plant for sprint car racers. Sammy Swindell's LaVern Nance team soon joined the fold, as did many others. Sheldon Kinser's and Rich Vogler's teams were running them in USAC. "A lot of heroes came on," said Gaerte. "That was the turning point."

Swindell and Nance ran more than 130 races over the first two years while running Gaertes. While parts sometimes failed, Gaerte's work assembling them never did. One reason for switching to Gaerte was that Earl's engine shop was one of the biggest at the time, according to Swindell. But, more importantly, it was because of their relationship. "He treated me like a part of his family," said Swindell. "I felt like he treated me like a son. It is just the kind of person he is. He was always fair with me and I always tried to be fair with him."

With USAC and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway fostering a stock block engine formula in 1982, Earl teamed with John Butera to put Dennis Firestone in the starting field (21st) of the Indy 500. Throughout the next decade, Gaerte continued to produce winners. Steve and Karl Kinser continued their dominance on the World of Outlaws circuit. A 13-year-old Jeff Gordon turned his first laps in a sprint car powered by a Gaerte. Stan Fox and Tony Stewart, in Steve Lewis entries, also delivered many trophies and championships.

Gaerte built engines for A.J. Foyt's NASCAR effort and was involved in helping develop the first restrictor plate engines. In the mid-1990s, Gaerte Engines made a major push into dirt late model racing with some of the top teams in the division using his engines. Jack Boggs, Freddie Smith, Bob Pierce and Billy Moyer have all used and won with Gaerte power. With dirt late model racing providing the momentum, Gaerte Engines reached its peak in 1998, employing 37 people in Earl's shop and turning out 550 engines.

"Earl has a reputation for always delivering on time at a fair price," said Helmling. "Before coming to USAC, I was a Silver Crown car owner and used Gaerte Engines. I could always count on Earl for a great product and the advice I needed. Whether it was a midget, sprint car or Silver Crown engine, car owners can always depend on a Gaerte."

Today, Gaerte Engines employs 17 people and produces about 250 pieces a year. He attributes much of the decrease to the increased use of 'crate motors' by sanctioning bodies. There's also the expense of racing. The cost of fuel to travel down the road and the cost of buying pit passes for team members are also escalating.

He's also concerned about the decreasing number of new faces he sees at various short tracks. The diehards are still there, but for the first time he's not seeing people ready to replace them. "It's a tough deal," said Gaerte.

Whatever the future holds for racing, 1991 National Sprint Car Poll "Builder/Manufacturer of the Year" award recipient Earl Gaerte is going to be involved. Though his son, Joe, has taken a larger role in the company since retiring as an active sprint car driver, Earl Gaerte still puts in a full day. He begins work each day at 5:30 a.m. and leaves for home at 5:30 p.m. At nights and on weekends, he tinkers in the garage.

Gaerte just recently completed restoration of a 1966 Plymouth Fury and slipped a Viper V10 into the engine compartment. He says, with pride obvious in his voice, that it will be featured in an upcoming issue of Car Craft magazine. He also serves as county commissioner for Fulton County, just recently elected to another four-year term after serving 15 years already. He's been on the 911 Communications Board for six years and the Fulton County Economic Development Commission for six months.

Willard Earl Gaerte married Alice Faye Smith on March 14, 1964 in Akron, Indiana. She, a 26-year employee of The Rochester Sentinel newspaper, passed away on June 18, 2005. Together they had one daughter, Brenda, and one son, Joe, the 1987 and '88 All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) sprint car point titlist.