



Emmett Hahn

by Galen Kurth

Emmett Hahn conceived of, founded and fostered the American Sprint Car Series -- the ASCS. That is quite an accomplishment. However, it's only a small part of what Emmett Hahn has done in racing.

If things had been different in Oklahoma in the 1960s and '70s, he might be inducted as a driver. But when Hahn

was tearing up the dirt tracks of the Great Plains, the top class wasn't sprint cars, but instead supermodifieds. These 100-inch wheelbase racers developed during his time behind the wheel from coupe- and sedan-based designs to winged dirt cars and attracted the best talent the Southwest had to offer at tracks in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Lawton, Wichita and Dallas.

He began driving a hobby stock at Tulsa Speedway in 1962 and moved into the supers by 1966. His big break came when he moved into the Jack Zink-owned cars when Jackie Howerton left for the United States Auto Club (USAC). "My first night in the car, at Oklahoma City, the crew kept waving at me to slow down; I was so far in front, but I was having too much fun. I'd never driven a car that fast in my life."

At that time, the National Championship Racing Association (NCRA) was an umbrella group of promoters who ran their own tracks but would support one 'national' show at each track in the club. The biggest race of the year was the Hutchinson Nationals in Kansas, which would draw well over 100 cars -- all trying to make a 24-car main. Hahn won it three times. He also knocked off 25 more NCRA national events, including five of the eight held in 1971. That same year he started a run of five straight championships at the Tulsa Fairgrounds Speedway, a nearly circular 5/8ths-mile dirt track with a nasty habit of ending drivers' careers. In 1975, with fully inverted main events, he won sixteen times in 22 starts at Tulsa, including seven straight.

In the early '80s, Hahn took a few rides in USAC dirt championship cars, but an old eye injury was beginning to bother him just enough that, as he put it, "I couldn't pick up the track anymore. My big advantage used to be an ability to find the fast way around before anyone else, and I'd be gone before they figured it out." He climbed out of the cockpit for the last time in 1982.

Despite being heavily involved with a successful business, Emmett couldn't move away from racing completely. He began promoting races at Port City Raceway, a small track on the east side of Tulsa. As he described it, "for the first time, I did something people told me wouldn't work." He scheduled the races on Thursday nights, and the fans and the racers turned out in huge numbers.

His next move was to build a quarter-mile dirt track just west of town in Sapulpa. Operating as 66 Speedway, he offered modifieds and factory stocks. It was here that he honed his skills as both a promoter and a track preparer, developing a reputation for a consistently racy track even under the worst conditions.

Sprint cars had replaced the supers in Oklahoma by this time, and watching racers struggle to keep operating a car against the spiraling costs set Hahn thinking and researching. What he

determined was that the best and easiest way to control costs was by limiting the money spent on cylinder heads. A spec cylinder head, offered at a reasonable price and rendered untamperable, would cut costs and help even out the playing field for the haves and the have-nots. This was the heart of the American Sprint Car Series 360-cubic-inch formula.

That series, running spec heads supplied by J.V. Brotherton and his Brodix cylinder head company, crowned its first champion in 1992. Over the next twelve years, Hahn developed new ideas for the format of races and worked on limiting exotic materials in sprint cars. His ideas have been accepted from coast to coast. The ASCS has grown to 13 regional series and a national tour, the American Sprint Cars On Tour (ASCoT), and there are more than 1,500 ASCS-legal engines in use throughout the country. The North American Sprint Car Poll has selected him as Promoter of the Year five times.

In 2004, Hahn took his ASCS ideas to the highest levels of sprint car racing. He introduced the 410-cubic-inch Sprint Bandit series, with spec cylinder heads, limits on exotic materials and tires, and a unique fan-friendly format that offered competitors several chances to qualify for the main events. A single bad lap or small incident in a heat race wouldn't ruin a driver's night. An equalizing formula using injector sleeves allows "open" 410 c.i. motors to compete with the Sprint Bandits on an even basis.

Emmett's ideas have almost always worked out, whether anyone else thought they would or not. One idea, however, needed some radical work before it became perhaps his most famous creation.

Tulsa, Oklahoma, is home to the largest open-span building in the country, the Expo Center. The exhibition floor, originally designed to display oil-drilling rigs, caught Hahn's eye. The racers from Port City Speedway, running quads and Odysseys, had wanted a winter race. Emmett thought the Expo Center was just the place. A one-day extravaganza of bikes, carts, quads, and mini sprints called the STP Shootout was born. What Hahn really wanted to stage, however, was a mammoth indoor sprint car race.

Lanny Edwards, long-time promoter at the Devil's Bowl Speedway in Mesquite, Texas, looked at the building, considered the possibilities, and came up with a modified plan. Sprint car drivers would appear, but they'd be in midget cars, competing against the best midget drivers in the country. Thus was born the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals in 1987, which has become the largest and most successful indoor race ever; indeed, one of the biggest races, indoor or outdoor, of the dirt track racing season. It was originally named after its sponsor, Bob Berryhill's Chili Bowl food company.

In 2002, Emmett Hahn received the North American Sprint Car Poll's Outstanding Contribution to the Sport Award. Two years later he received the Bobby Isaac Award for contributions to short track racing. Presenter H.A. "Humpy" Wheeler said of Hahn, "He saw sprint car racing was in trouble and was willing to go out on a limb to save this very popular form of racing."

Two years later, Hahn and Edwards were inducted into the National Midget Hall of Fame in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. In 2007, the ASCS will race some 240 nights at over 100 different tracks in the United States and Canada.

Emmett Hahn was born in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, on October 10, 1940, to parents Elmer and Geneva Hahn. He grew up with two sisters, Linda and Beverly. He is married to "Fuzzy", and they have three children: Donna, Tommy and Steve. Today, if Emmett Hahn isn't with his family or with Tommie Estes, Jr., on the American Sprint Car Series tour, he is probably out golfing.