

# Glen Niebel

by Dave Argabright

Life came full-circle for Glen Niebel, and along the way he was one of the most successful and influential builders and mechanics in modern sprint car racing.

Niebel was born at home near tiny Mt. Auburn, Indiana, on July 4, 1939, a third-generation American of German heritage. In 1962, young Glen opened the doors of Niebel Engines, building a variety of industrial engines and a number of successful drag racing engines. In 1965, Niebel was hired as a mechanic by sprint car owner Paul Mead of

Edinburgh, Indiana. And, along with Indiana driver Bobby Black, they towed to St. Paul, Minnesota, for their inaugural run. In the years following, Niebel dabbled with sprint cars, either working on his own or serving other car owners as chief mechanic.

In 1973, Niebel teamed with Shelbyville, Indiana, Oldsmobile dealer Don Siebert. For the next three seasons, they raced with the United States Auto Club (USAC) and despite a late start in 1973, finished fourth in car owner standings with driver Bruce Walkup. They were third in 1974, and in 1975 hired a young Chuck Gurney as their driver.

Following the '75 season, Niebel left the Siebert team, allowing Glen to focus on his growing engine business. He continued to assist a variety of cars in terms of engine services or as a chief mechanic.

By 1981, Niebel was again fielding his own car and teamed with Ron Peterson. Niebel hired Bob Frey for pavement races, and together they won the sprint car portion of the Copper World Classic at Phoenix International Raceway. They also campaigned the number 20 sprinter at selected USAC races on dirt with drivers Larry Gates and Larry Martin.

By this time, Niebel had developed a preference for pavement racing. However, he -- along with a segment of longtime open wheel racers -- was left out in the cold when USAC eliminated all pavement racing for the 1982 season. It would not be until 1988 that USAC returned to the pavement.

Niebel turned his attention to the Copper World Classic and the Little 500 at Anderson Speedway. Each February saw Niebel and Frey make the long tow west, where they ultimately won three more Copper Classics for a career total of four, before the sprint car portion was replaced by supermodifieds in 1989.

In 1983, Niebel was intrigued with a new idea. What if he put a V6 engine in his sprint car? Many laughed and scoffed at his idea. That was enough to tip the scales for the supremely competitive Niebel, and he began serious dialogue with Billy Howell of Chevrolet on the project.

Although Chevrolet did not underwrite the project -- Niebel was very much on his own -- they agreed to provide some components. Niebel began work on the engine and in 1984 bolted a 265-cubic-inch V6 in his number 20. They towed to Winchester Speedway, where a series known as International Championship Auto Racing (ICAR) was formed to keep pavement racing alive since USAC's departure. ICAR allowed both sprint cars and supermodifieds in the same field.

On paper it looked hopeless. Niebel and Frey and their little V6, going up against monster V8-powered supers. They lined up for the first heat, with Frey on the front row alongside supermodified veteran Doug Saunier.

"They threw the green flag and the super got under Bob in one and two," Niebel later recalled, his face locked in a broad smile. "They went down into three and four, and (Saunier) couldn't even get back under him. After that, Bob just drove off. There was no catching him from that point.

"The crowd, all at the same time, just rose and cheered. I've never felt anything like that in my life. That little ol' V6 was like Jack the giant killer."

Had the story finished there, it would have been a Hollywood ending. But it did not. Despite their initial success, it was clear the 265-cubic-inch engine lacked the horsepower to consistently run with the V8s. That reality forced Niebel, and Chevrolet, back to the drawing board, where they eventually crafted a 285-cubic-inch V6 with an aluminum block, and along with a 200-pound weight break from USAC, could consistently hold their own in any competition.

During this development period, Niebel realized he had to find another way to win. So he and Frey focused intensely on the handling of their car, and their progress with corner speed, paired with the horsepower that eventually came, made them a force.

It was at the Little 500 where Niebel and Frey really soared. Niebel approached the race with a special focus. He knew his car had to be bullet-proof; he and Frey had to communicate perfectly, both during the race and before; and they needed smooth, perfectly-timed pit stops to stay in contention. This careful strategy, paired with the stingy fuel mileage of the V6, worked perfectly.

They finished second in 1985, their first Little 500 with the V6. The following year they finished second again, despite heavy suspension damage from an early-race collision. In 1987 they hit their stride, winning four straight events, including the 1989 race in which Frey battled back from a seven-lap deficit.

Frey curbed his racing activity following the 1990 race, and Niebel hired eastern superstar Bentley Warren. Warren's aggressive style was very different than Frey's, but he and Niebel clicked. Warren finished second in 1991 and 1992, and Frey returned to finish second in 1993 in Niebel's two-car effort.

In 1994, Warren dropped out after 154 laps. That ended an extraordinary ten-year period in which Niebel's famed number 20 went over 4,600 laps without a mechanical failure, scoring five wins and four runner-up finishes.

The next year, Warren finally cracked the win column in what remains the fastest Little 500 in history, and returned to victory lane in 1997. In 1998, Warren finished second in Niebel's final Little 500 effort.

Throughout this era Niebel was involved in several prominent owner/mechanic/sponsor partnerships, including stints with Gene Nolan, Team 6R Racing and Pendleton, Indiana, car dealer Willie Boles.

In addition to his Little 500 runs, Niebel continued to run selected USAC events. In 1994, Mike Bliss won seven USAC features, often dominating. The V6 had grown to 315-cubic-inches, and at the conclusion of the 1994 season USAC announced there would be no weight break for the V6 cars.

At the same time, Niebel and Bliss parted ways. Niebel hired a brash young racer named Tony Stewart and announced they would run for the USAC title. Again, people laughed; with no weight break, the V6 would be competing with traditional V8 cars, even on the dirt. Niebel was determined, however, that they could compete.

In what could only be described as a storybook season, Niebel and Stewart swept the USAC Silver Crown and sprint car titles, while Stewart won the midget title with Steve Lewis. The unprecedented "Triple Crown" performance vaulted Stewart to stardom, and cemented a powerful friendship between Niebel and him.

The 1995 season marked the high-water mark for Niebel's racing career, and not long after he began expressing a desire to cut back his activity and slow down. After more than 30 years of running an engine business and working on race cars, he felt it was time to relax a bit and 'smell the roses'. His efforts had earned him a berth in the Hoosier Auto Race Fans (HARF) Hall of Fame, as well as the Little 500 Hall of Fame.

However, a bout with cancer came his way, and after an initial period of remission the cancer returned. With loyal friends and family right with him, Niebel struggled through the difficult period with grace and courage, and on December 11, 1999, died quietly at home, the same home in which he was born 60 years earlier. Life indeed had come full-circle.

Glen is survived by his wife of 41 years, Carolyn Niebel; daughters Jan Meyer and Jean Ann Linville; brother Gene Niebel; and eight grandchildren. He was preceded in death by a son, Greg, who died in a hunting accident in 1978 at the age of 16.

In an era of publicity machines and self-promotion, Niebel's work and ideas spoke for themselves. His accomplishments are remarkable, including an unprecedented six Little 500 victories and two USAC championships. His development work with Hoosier Tire in the 1980s helped bring that company's product to lasting prominence.

But perhaps Glen Niebel's greatest legacy is the influence he had on so many people in various segments of the sport. Drivers such as Tony Stewart, Bob Frey, Mike Bliss, Bentley Warren, Jim Keeker, Larry Rice, Norman "Bubby" Jones, Chuck Gurney, Bruce Walkup, to name just a few; fellow engine builders and car owners; tire personnel such as "Irish" Saunders of Hoosier Tire; and even those of us in the media who covered his many exploits.