



by Dennis Mattish

Johnny Anderson

Johnny Anderson was born near Pensacola in Bagdad, Florida, on June 15, 1945, to Naval officers Wendell and Betty Anderson. At age two, Johnny and his parents moved to Sacramento, California, where his father had moved in the early forties after growing up in Sac City, Iowa. Johnny soon had four siblings: Billy, Bob, Linda and Wendell, Jr.

Johnny's grandfather and father had three used car lots on Broadway in Sacramento, and it's there where Wendell picked up the nickname "Broadway Andy." Soon after he bought a quarter-midget at a local auto auction, the Anderson boys were racing.

As he grew, Johnny migrated from quarter-midget cars to half-midgets to micro-midgets. By the time he was fifteen years old, he was Rookie of the Year (1960) in micros.

Then in 1961, with hardtops being the premier division at most tracks, Johnny jumped to the hardtops and again achieved Rookie of the Year status with CSRA. Still a teenager, he traded in his "Jimmy Six" hardtop for a sleek 1932 coupe with a V-8. It was during this period of time that Johnny qualified for his first Gold Cup Race of Champions, a 200-lap race. Like all the other iron-men drivers of the time, Johnny raced in a t-shirt and open-faced helmet with a leather mask.

In 1964, the last year of Johnny's teen years, the hardtops evolved into the supermodifieds, which ruled the short-track world on both pavement and dirt for the next decade. Johnny was the first on the west coast to bring out the big "humper" drag tires with 20 inches of stagger. Johnny was also the first to use side wings and power steering at the Sacramento race tracks.

In 1966, Johnny purchased an Offy-powered Hiram Hillegass-built sprint car, which he first raced at Champion Speedway in San Francisco. He won the main. The next day, at West Capital Speedway's half-mile dirt track, he also won. At the time, the legal age to run with the Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC) was 21. Johnny was not yet age 21. So, after his West Capital win, Johnny had to tow to Los Angeles and run Ascot Park. The legal age to run with the California Racing Association (CRA) at Ascot was 18. Because NARC wanted to keep their rising star, they lowered their legal age from 21 to 18.

In 1968 Johnny purchased the Granvel "Hank" Henry-built ex-Parnelli Jones Fike Plumbing Special, in which Sherman Cleveland was killed in 1966. Brother Billy often piloted this car, too.

Johnny was running and winning with his sprint car on the pavement and the dirt in northern California, Oregon, Washington and Nevada. He even finished third to winner Jerry Blundy and runner-up Bob Hogle in the 1968 J.C. Agajanian-promoted Sacramento 100-mile open-competition supermodified/sprint car race. He also piloted United States Auto Club (USAC) championship cars for owners Ernie Ruiz (eighth in '69 and twelfth in '70 at Sacramento) and J.C. Agajanian/Leonard Faas (twentieth in '70 at Phoenix).

In March of 1971, two years after brother Billy won the '69 New South Wales Super Modified Championship there, Johnny was invited by Liverpool Speedway promoter Frank Oliver and general manager Mike Raymond to go to Australia. There, the racers went right, not left, as they did in America. Johnny adapted quickly. During his three months in Australia and New Zealand, he raced midgets cars, stock cars and sprint cars before returning to the United States. He had even won at fabled Rowley Park in Adelaide, South Australia.

In June of 1971, Anderson ran a NASCAR Grand National race at Riverside, California, for owner Don Nuzum. In '72, he ran Ontario, Texas World and Riverside (twice). He ran Riverside twice more each in '73 and '74. His best finish in those nine starts was seventeenth at Ontario.

Johnny would race in Australia again in 1972. In December of '71, he shipped the Henry-built sprint car to Australia. It was the first sprint car ever to go to Australia, and it was waiting for Johnny when he arrived. The day following Johnny's arrival, promoters organized a private practice session for him at Liverpool in New South Wales. However, word leaked out that the American driver was testing his sprint car. Every top pilot in Sydney showed up to watch Johnny put the sprinter through its paces.

During his three weeks in Australia and New Zealand, Johnny rewrote the record books at every major speedway and was tagged "The Fastest Man on Wheels." In all, he raced 25 times and took home numerous trophies. He sold the now-fabled "Anderson Sprinter" to Australian national champion Garry Rush, Sr.

In 1974, Johnny Anderson won his first Gold Cup Race of Champions over the same Garry Rush. It was the last time a super won the event as the torch was passed to the sprint cars, but this presented no problem for the '74 West Capital supermodified track champion.

During this time in the early seventies, Johnny was also dominant in midget cars, so much so that promoters often paid him extra if he started in the back and won—so he did. Johnny finished ninth in the Bay Cities Racing Association (BCRA) midget car point standings in 1971, behind Hank Butcher, Chuck Gurney, Duane Bonini, Tommy Astone, Jr., Floyd Alvis, Bob DeJong, Bobby Morrow and Karl Raggio.

In 1972, Johnny finished in position 72 in BCRA points. In '73, he was up to thirteenth in points, and in '74, he was back to eighth in the season-long BCRA points. In '75, he finished sixth in BCRA points behind champion Bobby Morrow, Danny O'Neill, Harry Stryker, Jr., Hank Butcher and Floyd Alvis, respectively.

On September 28, 1975, Johnny Anderson won twin 100-lap mains on the same day in NARC sprint car and BCRA midget car competition, respectively, at the San Jose Speedway.

In 1975, Johnny also raced (Don) Snow's Speed Shop USAC dirt championship car, finishing 24, 24 and 23 at Springfield, St. Paul and Indianapolis, respectively.

In 1976, Johnny earned NARC wins at Calistoga and Eureka, and an open-competition win at West Sacramento. He was the top point-getter at the Calistoga Speedway that year, as well as being the 1976 NARC point champion for owner/mechanic Kenny Woodruff. In NARC points, he topped Jimmy Boyd, LeRoy Van Conett, Gary Patterson, Rich Govan, Phil Pedlar, Mike McCreary, Don Melvin, Ron Horton and Jimmy Sills, respectively. He also placed nineteenth in BCRA midget points.

In '77, he won at Phoenix, West Sacramento and Calistoga in sanctioned (NARC) and unsanctioned supermodified and sprint car competition. On May 30, Johnny Anderson crashed with Jimmy Boyd on lap 31 of a 50-lap open for supermodifieds at West Capital, and he came back (sans top wing) to win!

In 1978, Johnny raced and won in winged and non-winged sprint cars on paved and dirt tracks under open-competition, NARC and World of Outlaws (WoO) banners. With '78 wins under his belt at West Sacramento, Altamont, Calistoga, Dixon and Petaluma, he raced with Ted Johnson's new World of Outlaws (WoO) and was crowned point champion of the six-race, late-season WoO Western Tour aboard the Woodruff Brothers/McCray Plastering sprint car. He finished the year seventeenth in overall WoO points with one win at Calistoga.

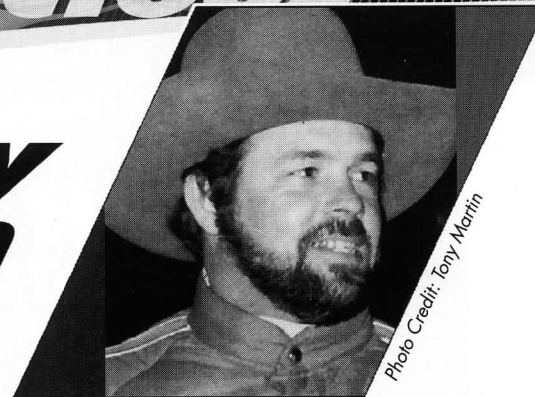


Photo Credit: Tony Martin

In April of 1979, Johnny Anderson won a WoO finale at Champaign, Illinois. He also won preliminary WoO mains at East Bay in Florida and at Tulsa in Oklahoma. He finished tenth in WoO points behind champion Steve Kinser, Sammy Swindell, Rick Ferkel, Lee James, Doug Wolfgang, Dub May, Bobby Allen, Ron Shuman and Jack Hewitt, respectively.

In 1980, Johnny was assigned to be the driver for Sacramento's DuWayne Starr in the Tognotti's Auto World sprint car. Johnny won eight features, including his biggest win yet against the World of Outlaws at the Gold Cup at the Silver Dollar Speedway in Chico. Johnny has absolutely no memory of this race due to an accident endured November 3, 1980, at the Corona Speedway. He was caught up in a terrible pile-up in which about a half-dozen cars bounced off his flipping sprint car. The carnage was so bad that the rest of the show was canceled. It was announced at the race track that Johnny had died. The next day, the San Francisco newspapers also ran a story that Johnny had died. But, miraculously, Johnny lived, although he was in a coma for twelve days and the hospital for three months.

Johnny returned to race midget cars and sprint cars again in the eighties (eleventh in BCRA points in '84), but he had lost his natural competitive edge. After his retirement from racing, Johnny remained active in the racing world. In 1998, he was instrumental in forming the West Capital Raceway Alumni Association. A few years later he began the All-American Vintage Classic. He has done charity appearances for the Shriners Hospital for Children, bringing his restored Hillegass-built sprint car and giving the kids a thrill by letting them sit in it and having their photos taken with the winner of the 1974 and '80 Gold Cup Race of Champions.

Johnny Anderson has been inducted into the West Capital Raceway Hall of Fame (2000), the Bay Cities Racing Association Hall of Fame (2004), and the Motor Sports Press Association Hall of Fame (2007). The man that has raced and won with and without a roll cage, on dirt and pavement, with and without a wing, in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, lives today with wife Brenda in Carmichael, California.

The outlaw known for wearing a cowboy hat also enjoys spending time with his grown son, John Anderson, Jr. (a.k.a. "J.J.").

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