

mark Kinser

PHOTO CREDIT: BILL TAYLOR

by Kathy Bell

Mark Kinser was born on May 5, 1964, to parents Karl and Diane Kinser in Bedford, Indiana, which is the limestone-and-lumber region of south central Indiana. He has one sister, Karla. The son of legendary sprint car mechanic and car owner Karl Kinser, Mark felt right at home growing up around sprint cars in rural Oolitic, Indiana. In fact, one of his first jobs was selling Chris Economaki's *National Speed Sport News* at local race tracks at 10 years of age.

Karl bought Mark a 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air when he was age 16 from Sammy Swindell's car owner. "I really started learning the nuts and bolts about cars on that '55," Mark said. "As far as me working on the sprint car, that didn't happen. Dad had his brothers and other people were there that were way more qualified than I was. I didn't actually get to start working on a sprint car until we started to build one for my first car. I had watched him so much I knew what to do. They just never let me do anything other than scrape mud and wash things up."

Mark said growing up as part of the Kinser family was pretty neat. The name drew a lot of respect from the racing community at that time due to the

'Brand-X' down the front and they left it. As soon as Mark was able to afford his own gas tank he could pick his own race car number. "The number I wanted on it was a 51. I remember seeing A. J. Foyt at Daytona. He had a red car with a white 51 and I thought that was really nice. He was always my hero anyway and that was the only other number I knew other than 14, and it seemed like everybody and their brother in Bloomington

had the 14 so I went with 51. I started out in a Gambler chassis, I ran a Stanton chassis a little bit, but for most of my career I ran a Maxim," he said.

Mark's mom Diane was listed as the car owner on the number 51 sprint car. Diane was a big part of Mark's early career. "A funny thing about my mom is she went to all of the races when I first started and the way to find her was to find the biggest pile of cigarette butts because she wouldn't be far from it. She was just a nervous wreck. Finally, I just begged her to quit going because I thought she was going to have a heart attack. She was 100-percent behind me when I started and throughout my entire career. She just stopped attending the races which was easier on both of us," Mark said.

Following graduation from Bedford North High School and using used equipment from father Karl, the young former drummer in a local rock-n-roll band went racing with uncle Larry Kinser and friends "Bud" Barrett and Steve Brassine. In 1983, Mark Kinser ran eleven races at Bloomington Speedway, twelve at Lincoln Park Speedway in Putnamville, and a handful at Paragon Speedway, all in south central Indiana. Due to his own racing with Steve Kinser, Karl never saw Mark run that first full season.

Mark first began competing with the World of Outlaws (WoO) in 1984 in Karl's back-up car for distant-cousin Steve Kinser. He shared the WoO "Rookie of the Year" title that year with Greg Wooley. Mark won his first feature on Ted Johnson's tough national tour in '85. In mid-1986, at Knoxville, Iowa, Steve Kinser and mechanic Paul Elrod pulled Mark from the back-up racer in order to use it for themselves. This dispute, while Karl was back at home, led Mark to voluntarily sit out a few races and lose valuable points. For much of 1987, Mark drove for Allan Nott of Lima, Ohio.

Mark felt he really started coming into his own in his next ride, Jim Reid's number 6R out of California. "We won a race at Ascot which was huge, and a race at Manzanita's Western World which was also a big deal. I started to get more confidence and win more races in that ride. Early in my career, if I was running third, I just wouldn't settle for third and that brings on a lot of trouble. Once you get older and you get wiser with more confidence, you learn there will be nights you have to just settle for ninth or tenth. If you push it anymore, it's going to be a bad night, period. It was about that time (1988) that I started becoming a threat to win," he said.

Mark's next stepping stone to a successful sprint car racing career took him to his next ride in the Ray and Jay Williams number 8 sprint car. "Jim, Ray and Jay came into my career at a time when I needed someone to believe in me and what I could do," Mark said. "Not that I was going to go out and be a champion, but just to help me evolve into a better race car driver. They wanted to see me make a living at it so they did all they could so that at the end of the year I could pay my bills. It wasn't until I started racing with Jim Reid that I actually started making a good living at it. Before that it was a break even, living at home with my parents, type of thing. They helped take me from a young boy to a young man on the track."

In 1989, the year of the World of Outlaws (WoO)/United Sprint Association (USA) split, Mark Kinser finished third in USA points behind champion Steve Kinser and runner-up Sammy Swindell.

In 1990, Mark continued to pick-and-choose his races. Mid-season, Chuck Merrill came on board. Mark was running well with the Williams brothers' sprint car. They won a handful of races and were running more consistently towards the front. That's when Chuck approached Mark with the opportunity of running the Maxim house car. He told Mark that he was opening a speed shop, that Karl was going to help him out with the frame, and that he wanted Mark to run the house number 5M.

Mark attributed his continued success to Chuck Merrill and sponsor Stu Murray of Wirtgen American. "I raced with Chuck for I don't remember how many years," Mark said. "To run a factory-backed house car with the house number on it for that many years is a rarity in this sport. People don't get together and stay together anymore. Chuck didn't just sponsor my car. He didn't just slap a sticker on the side of it and pat me on the back and say 'go get 'em' and hand me some money," Mark said.

"We were a partnership. We wanted to make each other better. Any way I could help him in research and development work or anything to make his product better, we would do it. We experimented quite a bit with Chuck. I consider Chuck part of my family. As soon as I found out I was being inducted, I called Chuck and I was happy to hear he was being inducted, too. That's how much he still means to me to this day. He's been a big part of my racing career and I don't think I'd be where I am today without him because I don't think I could have afforded it. Chuck gave me the best equipment. Anything he could get his hands on, it came to me first. I got the best, newest, and fastest stuff. In racing, that's a huge advantage. I definitely can't thank him enough," he said.

"When Stu (Murray) and I got together it was back when the (World of) Outlaws had more television. Stu and I had a lot of success together. Through backing my race team, people found out what a Wirtgen milling machine was and the Wirtgen name and product became pretty well-known thanks to our WoO media coverage," Mark said.

continued on page 23.

"I was just a dot on the radar. I would win four, five, maybe six races in a year, running my own program with other mechanics, but my first year running with dad, I think we won 20-some races..."

success of the following Kinser: Bob, Steve, Sheldon and Karl. Karl and his two brothers, Mickey and Larry, formed the Kinser Brothers racing team. They ran under the Kinser Brothers' name for a lot of years. Then Mickey started a sawmill and Larry started teaching auto mechanics at a local high school, which left Karl to fend for himself in the racing business.

Mark's first car, was the number 11X because there was an old tail tank of Steve's laying around that still had the number 11 on it so they just added an 'X' and raced with it. Mark said someone painted



• 2014 INDUCTEES • 2014 INDUCTEES

national sprint car hall of fame



MARK KINSER

continued from page 20.

Early in his career, Mark didn't have any patience. He'd run the top no matter what. Several people told him he needed to run the bottom, too, but he said he wouldn't listen to them. Finally, after marrying wife Cindy, she literally begged him one night to just try the bottom for a lap or two after three or four guys passed him. "Once I stopped just winging it around the top, I started running a lot better. It took me a long time – years – to figure out that I had to slow down to go faster. Once I did, I already knew how to run wide-open around the top, so I could blend the two together, be really aggressive but stay in control," he said.

Mark Kinser finished second behind champion Steve Kinser for the 1991 WoO point title. He was third the following season. In 1993 and '94, he went back to picking and choosing and only running selected WoO shows.

Once Karl and Steve split company, when Steve left to try his luck in the NASCAR Cup ranks after the 1994 season, Mark teamed up with his dad and Chuck Merrill. At that point in his career, Mark had already won 22 WoO main events. "It could be tough working that close with your family. You're in close quarters of each other all of the time. One of the best things that helped me deal with it was that I did have a motor home. A lot of times, when things weren't going well, I'd find a lake and just go fishing. Me and Donny Schatz fished a lot. Just getting away from it all seemed to help. Dad doesn't really hold a grudge. He's really hard to put up with after the race, if you made a huge mistake, and somewhat the next day. But, after 48 hours, he moves on. He doesn't dwell on it and bring up something that happened a month ago. But he sure lets you know about it in the first 48 hours," Mark said.

Mark and Karl didn't bring racing home. When they were home, they were home. "That's his shop," Mark said. "If I've got a suggestion, I had to give it to somebody else, then they'd give it to him because it's his way or the highway. On more than one occasion he let me know where the door was," he said.

When Mark was running other cars earlier in his career without Karl's input as crew chief, Karl would give suggestions like how they could gain some speed and tell them what they were doing wrong with gear set up or stagger. But Karl was there to win with Steve, first and foremost.

"I was just a dot on the radar. I would win four, five, maybe six races in a year, running my own program with other mechanics, but my first year running with dad, I think we won 20-some races. I won more in one year with him than I had in the last four years with someone else. It just amazed me how good we really were when he could give me his full attention," he said.

It was in mid-1995, at Eldora Speedway, that Mark and Karl Kinser had a dispute. But it ended with father and son having a clearer understanding of one another, and a renewed commitment to make their team work. The rest, as they say, is history.

Mark won the 1996 and '99 World of Outlaws (WoO) point championship titles, the latter one with Gary Stanton's Mopar power-plant. He was also runner-up in the series in 1991, '98 and 2001. He won the prestigious Knoxville Nationals three times (1996, '99, and 2000). He has nine 'top five' finishes and thirteen 'top ten' finishes in the sport's national championship race. And he still holds third-place on the all-time WoO 'A' feature winners' list, with 153 wins, just behind cousin Steve Kinser and Sammy Swindell, respectively.

Mark Kinser has 13 wins with Bert Emick's All Star Circuit of Champions

(ASCoC), three wins with the United Sprint Association (USA) in 1988-89, and one with the National Championship Racing Association (NCRA) to go with his open-competition feature wins.

He has won many major events in sprint car racing, besides the Knoxville Nationals, including the 1996 Historical Big One winner and 2001 King's Royal winner, both held at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway. He won the Williams Grove National Open in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1995 and '99, and the Gold Cup Race of Champions in Chico, California, in 2001.

He has won the Don Martin Memorial Silver Cup at the Lernerville Speedway in Sarver, Pennsylvania, five times (1996, '97, '98, '99 and 2001) and the Western World Championship at the Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1988 and '97. He has won the Eagle Nationals in Nebraska five times (1986, '96, '97, 2000 and '01).

Mark Kinser also made a short-lived attempt at NASCAR Truck Series racing in 1997.

Mark made the surprising decision to retire from sprint car racing while he was still at the top of his game. His last race was in Pevely, Missouri, in 2005. He has stayed away from the race track since making that huge decision, so as not to second-guess himself and his decision by being enticed with the sights and smells at the track.

Said Mark Kinser back in the day, "I don't want to lose touch with sprint car racing. I'd like to run sprint cars as a career, for the rest of my life, but it's just too darned tough. You can't have a normal lifestyle and race sprint cars. It's just not attainable."

"If you don't have that driving desire you're never going to be a champion. Those things (sprint cars) are dangerous and it just seemed like the right time for a change. My kids were in school and we were separated from them. I'd pretty well had a great career at it. It just seemed like the right time to make a change and I've never once regretted it," he said. "To this day sometimes I still miss the competition end of it. I miss the drop of the green really bad. You know there's something about that, feelings I'll never have again. I miss that thrill of competition and the challenge of making my way up front and winning races, every day."

Mark received the National Sprint Car Poll "Driver of the Year" award in both 1996 and '99. In 1992, Mark, Lee Brewer, Jr., and Steve Beidler pulled an unconscious Doug Wolfgang from his burning car in Kansas City, Kansas, and they received the poll's "Outstanding Contribution to the Sport Award" for their heroic efforts.

Today, Mark and his wife Cindy Moore Kinser, whom he met in 1987 at a dirt-track near her Fair Oaks, California, home and whom he married in '88, live in Oolitic, Indiana. Son Cole is a junior in high school and daughter Lois is in sixth grade.