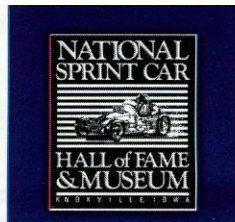


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# national sprint car hall of fame



## doug Clark

by Rob Ristesund

**D**oug Clark has flagged sprint car races for nearly 40 years and has become one of the most well-known and respected flagmen in the sport. He's been the flagman at Knoxville Raceway in Iowa since 1984 and has flagged at Huset's Speedway, now known as Badlands Motor Speedway near Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for 29 years.

He's also spent full seasons in the flag stand at tracks in Hartford and Huron, South Dakota; Rock Rapids, Iowa; and Fairmont, Montevideo and Sauk Center, Minnesota. Including the many special events he's worked around the country, he's flagged races in 19 different states.

Doug Clark was born in 1952 in Sioux Falls, where he has lived his entire life. He was raised in a blue-collar neighborhood just east of the downtown area and was drawn to racing as a child through his older brother, Jim, who worked at a local welding shop. The shop was a hub of local racing activity, where a number of the cars that competed nearby at Huset's were built and repaired.

With a yearning to watch the cars that he saw in the work place compete on the track, the 11-year-old swept the shop's floor in exchange for a ride to the track with the owner, Pete Peterson, who was also the welder at Huset's. After arriving at the track, Clark would then head to the bleachers and often search out and sit with his buddy, Doug Wolfgang, among the thousands in attendance.

When Bill Hill moved to Sioux Falls from California primarily to race, he was in need of some help with his car and a 15-year-old Clark was glad to oblige. A couple of years later Clark helped Wolfgang when he began his driving career and eventually assisted Darryl Dawley, whose transmission repair shop was near Clark's home.

With the popularity of sprint car racing growing in the local area, a group joined

together to build a sprint car track, Hartford Speedway, just to the west of Sioux Falls. When the track opened in 1976, Clark continued to assist Dawley at the new oval for a couple of years until the track was in need of a flagman. He volunteered his services and joined several others as they alternated flagging chores for a few weeks until he was awarded the full-time duties.

"I took it very seriously, probably more than the others," said Clark. "They liked the job I did. I enjoyed it and wanted to continue doing it."

During his tenure at Hartford, Clark flagged his first race at the Knoxville Nationals in 1981. At that time, the Nationals ran a "Mystery Feature" on Friday nights and Clark made a suggestion to Knoxville director of racing, Ralph "Cappy" Capitani.

"I told Cappy that since they have a 'Mystery Feature,' they should have a 'Mystery Flagman' to flag it. And that would be me," he said. "Cappy said that sounded like a good idea."

After Hartford closed its gates on its half-mile oval for the final time in 1983, Clark applied for the flagging position on Saturday nights at Jackson Speedway in Minnesota for the following season. His big break in racing came soon after that, when he received a call from Capitani asking him to be the full-time flagman at Knoxville. When Clark couldn't reach an agreement with the Jackson officials, he accepted the position at Knoxville.

"I knew he was interested and I felt we needed him," said Capitani, who directed the racing at Knoxville for 36 years. "I think he's one of the best flagmen in the United States. He has a great deal of respect from racers, officials and fans. We were glad to have him. Good flagmen are hard to come by. They don't grow on trees."

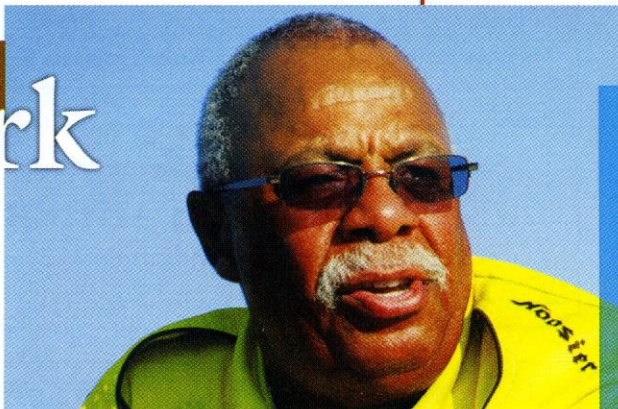


PHOTO CREDIT: PAUL ARCH

Clark also faced a challenge experienced by few. He was a black official in a white man's sport. He was usually the only person of his color in the infield at a race. Many times, that included the grandstands, as well.

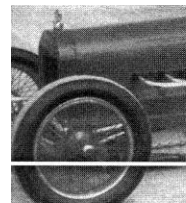
"It's just something you deal with throughout your life," he said. "The first years at Knoxville were probably the worst with the racial slurs and stuff. But it got better, probably because they got to know me and saw how I handled the job."

"There may have been some concerns at first when we hired him," said Capitani. "But we weren't too worried."

Working at Knoxville brought Clark some national exposure, primarily with the track hosting the largest-attended sprint car race of the year, the Knoxville Nationals. It was there that he caught the eye of one of the most powerful figures in sprint car racing. Ted Johnson knew the importance of having a capable flagman and hired Clark to flag many of his World of Outlaws (WoO) races, not only in the Midwest, but around the country.

Clark came close to leaving dirt-track racing for NASCAR in the mid-1990's. When the flagman for their truck series announced that he was retiring from his position, Clark applied for the job. But, after Clark was told by a NASCAR official that he was close to being chosen as the replacement, the flagman rescinded his retirement decision. Clark chose not to pursue any future employment opportunities with the series.





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## DOUG CLARK

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The dangers of flagging a race are always apparent with cars racing – and sometimes becoming airborne – just a few feet away at speeds in excess of 140 mph. But despite numerous brushes with cars crashing near and into the flag stand, Clark has escaped injury for the most part. A cut on his hand from an errant pipe that required stitches has been his most serious injury. His son, Justin, who has assisted him at Knoxville for 12 years, hasn't been as fortunate, having suffered a broken jaw and unconsciousness after being struck by a wing panel.

Former Knoxville flagman Gary Johnson was seriously and permanently injured in 1979 when a sprint car driven by Dick Stoneking flipped into the flag stand, claiming Stoneking's life. At the time of the crash, the flag stand extended several feet out and over the racing surface. It was later moved behind the fence.

"I don't feel like I'm in danger there," said Clark. "I feel safer at Knoxville the way it's constructed now than I do at any other track."

It's been almost 60 years since Clark and Wolfgang first became friends. Each has taken a different path to reach the pinnacle of their respective racing professions.

"There's no doubt that Doug is a good flagman," said Wolfgang. "But I guess what's really amazing to me is how long he's been doing it. You don't flag races for that long unless you enjoy it and have a passion for racing, which I know he does."

"I don't think it's a control thing," said Clark. "I just love racing and being a part of it. I promised my mom and dad that I wouldn't drive a race car, so this is my way of being involved."

"I try to be as fair as possible and I respect all of the drivers, regardless of who they are or what they say. It doesn't matter to me if they're running first or twenty-first," said Clark.

Doug Clark, the veteran flagman with only one eye (he lost the other one digging rose bushes in the early 1960's), continues to live today in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He was inducted into the Huset's Speedway Hall of Fame in 2012.

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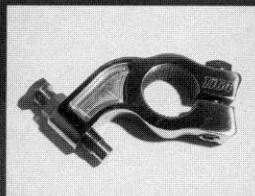
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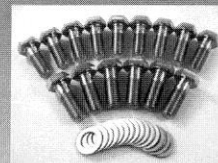
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