

• 2016 INDUCTEES • 2016 INDUCTEES

national sprint car hall of fame



frankie Kerr

by Bill Wright

Frankie Kerr was born on September 13, 1960, in the Cornwells Heights section of Bensalem, Pennsylvania, the son of Charlie and Mary Kerr. Frankie's siblings included Chris, Jimmy, Bobby and Nancy.

Frankie started in racing at a young age and from humble beginnings. His career started at the age of six, by happenstance. "We didn't have much money period growing up," he said. "My dad had this midget that he owned and guys would race. It was more of a fun thing for him. He just loved racing. He sold the midget to a guy and the guy didn't have all the money, but he said he had some quarter-midget stuff to trade. My dad said 'Sure.' I had three brothers and a sister. He asked which one of us wanted to race. I was the one that was always in the garage. I loved cars from an early age, so that's how I started."

He would find success, winning around 100 quarter-midget features between the ages of six and fifteen. "My grandfather was against the racing to start with," says Frankie. "We finally got him to the races. He would give me a dollar every time I won. It got to the point where he figured out he was giving me money about every week!"

Frankie Kerr, who was building engines at age eleven, got a job in a machine shop when he was fourteen years old. The only reason he did that was so he could have enough money to own a race car. The eastern big-block modifieds were where the money was at, and at the age of fifteen, Frankie hired a driver to race his home-built modified. One year later, when he became 'legal,' Frankie jumped into the seat himself, competing against the likes of Jimmy Horton, Billy Pauch and Kenny Brightbill.

A nasty crash at the U.S. 13 Speedway in Delmar, Delaware, in 1978 about ended racing for him. "When I was seventeen I was running a modified and the throttle stuck," he says. "I broke my back, my leg and my nose. My guts were knocked loose in the crash too. I was in a coma for a few days. When I finally woke up, I realized I couldn't feel anything. They told me I was paralyzed. That lasted about eleven days from the time I woke up. I was only seventeen

at the time, and I was just wondering when I could get the race car fixed again. Racing was all I thought about. I was one of the lucky ones to make it back from that."

After competing in the modifieds between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, Frankie had moved into his true love, sprint cars, in 1983. "At the time, modified racing was paying more," he says. "It got to the point where sprint cars in central Pennsylvania were paying a lot of money. My parents really thought the sport was too dangerous, and after the first year, I was on my own. I kept racing hard and I was able to get some sponsors. We won a fair amount of races for the equipment we had."

Success came quickly for him aboard a "Bud" Lawrence-backed, Melvin "Buck" Buckley-built number K54 sprint car. He won at Selinsgrove Speedway twice and Bridgeport, New Jersey, once. He won at the historic Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg, passing the legendary Lynn Paxton for the win. He also picked up a \$10,000-to-win event at the Nazareth National mile track in eastern Pennsylvania.

At the end of his 1983 rookie season in sprint cars, Frankie quit his \$35,000-a-year computerized numerical-control (CNC) machine shop job and went sprint car racing full-time. Said Frankie, "All my life I wanted to be a race car driver, so I just said to myself now I've got the chance to do it and I'm gonna do it."

In 1984, Kerr switched his Saturday night allegiance from Selinsgrove to Lincoln Speedway in New Oxford. He won quickly there, too. He was also working in the Buckley shop in Kennett Square and dabbling in United Racing Club (URC) competition. In '85, he did some United States Auto Club (USAC) dirt championship car racing for "Skeets" Gamble. He also broke his back for a second time.

1986 brought a couple more wins in open-competition and URC races. It was also the year he married Vickie Tesarck. At the time,



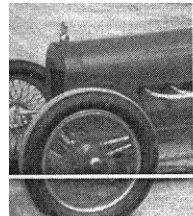
PHOTO CREDIT: MIKE SPITZER

their family consisted of two dogs. In '87, a few more wins followed, and he continued to travel more to race with different competition, with the wing and without.

Frankie started the '88 season with "Bud" Lawrence in Florida in his number 99 sprint car, but they also parted company there. It didn't take Frankie long to find a ride in the Bob Fetter Ford after its previous driver, Jerry Stone, returned to his native southwest.

In 1989, they were no stranger to victory lane again, and Frankie's travel increased. The Fetter Commercial Music team ran shows with the fledgling United Sprint Association (USA) series, as well as with Bert Emick's All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) and Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws (WoO). They also made their first trip to the Knoxville Nationals in Iowa, where they would finish eleventh, missing the Rookie of the Year honors to a third-finishing Stevie Smith. In their two years, the team won 33 races, which is no minor accomplishment in central Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, the jukebox-selling Fetter had a few personal issues that threatened the team moving forward, but a chance encounter that season would be the biggest moment in Frankie's racing life. "We were racing in Moberly, Missouri, with the USA series," he says. "It's the first time I met Stan Shoff. I was out in the parking lot early, changing a motor. He introduced himself to my wife and me. I got a call from him a week or so later. Jeff Gordon had been driving his car. They had crashed a lot and weren't going very good. I think we went to West Memphis (Arkansas) and maybe the Devil's Bowl (in Mesquite, Texas) late that year. He offered me the ride for the next year (1990). Bob was willing to still help us with the motors. It turned out to be a great deal for all three of us that first year."



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FRANKIE KERR

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The Billy Anderson-wrenched McBride & Shoff (subcontractor for Caterpillar) number 23s team was lethal wherever they unloaded. "I was fortunate to have an opportunity to win in a lot of different series," says Frankie. "We won in every national series there was at the time, either with the wing or without. I was lucky enough to do that and I'm not sure anyone else has ever won in the series that we did. We would just get out the calendar and fill the races in."

In his years running with the All Star Circuit of Champions, Kerr racked up 53 wins (sixth all-time), four championships (1991, '93 tied with on-track-rival/off-track-friend Kevin 'Pup' Huntley, '94, '97), four Ohio Speedweek titles, three Eldora Speedway championships, and an incredible 501 top-five finishes in 591 starts with the series. The 1997 ASCoC title paid him \$50,000 and a Chevrolet Silverado turbo diesel truck.

In addition to the All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC), Kerr won with the World of Outlaws (WoO), United States Auto Club (USAC), California Racing Association (CRA), Sprint Car Racing Association (SCRA), National Championship Racing Association (NCRA), Interstate Racing Association (IRA), United Racing Club (URC) and American Winged OutLaws (AWOL) amongst others. His WoO wins both took place at Fremont, Ohio, once in 1991, and again in '92. He is credited by historian Kevin Eckert with 118 wins in 18 seasons.

He had gotten a taste of non-winged racing in his own car in 1987 when he ran at the Tampa Fairgrounds in Florida. It wasn't until 1991 that he would race without the wing again. The team won several of the SCRA/USAC challenge events they contested in the Midwest. The biggest would be the \$17,000-to-win 1999 Non-Wing Nationals at the Terre Haute Action Track in Indiana. "Of all the races I've won over the years, the only trophy I have out in my home is the one from the Non-Wing Nationals," says Frankie. "It was kind of cool. Everyone was there."

With car owners and drivers splitting on a whim in sprint car racing, the relationship between Stan Shoff of Metamora, Illinois, and Frankie Kerr was truly amazing. "I moved to (Fremont) Ohio and kept the cars at my

place," says Frankie. "I accounted for every single penny that went into and out of the race team. I think Stan respected that and I respected him, not only as an owner, but as a person. We used to just hang out with Barb and him. They were just great people."

Fellow drivers, on both the dirt and the asphalt, breathed a little easier when Frankie moved on to work as a mechanic and crew chief in NASCAR in October of 2000. "It was a great relationship," he says of the Shoff team. "We raced together for twelve years. Stan was the nicest and most polite human you'd meet in your entire life. Anyone who met him knows that. You couldn't ask for anyone nicer than Stan. Driving for Stan was the best time of my life, to be honest."

Kerr not only won in modified stock cars and sprint cars, but the veteran, who has broken his back three times while racing, has also 'parked it' in victory lane with All-American Midget Series (AAMS) midget cars. He also wrenched teammate Donnie Beechler to a 1995 Tulsa, Okla., Chili Bowl Midget Nationals win for car owner Gary Zarounian.

According to Frankie, "I won on a Tuesday night at Fremont Speedway (in Fremont, Ohio) and I retired the next day (June 28) in the middle of (Ohio) Speedweek," he said. "Don't ask me why, but it just happened to turn out that way. I don't regret it because I've made a really good living for my family, but I still have that passion for dirt racing."

Samantha Kerr of Boone, North Carolina, and Frank Michael Kerr, Jr., presently living in Newcastle, England, are the children of Frankie and Vickie Kerr of Statesville, North Carolina. His son goes by the name 'Frankie,' while Dad went from 'Frankie' to 'Frank' during his transition to NASCAR. No disrespect, but to sprint car fans everywhere, there will always be just one Frankie Kerr.



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