

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

DICK BERGGREN

by Pete Zanardi

Professor Dick Berggren saw it "as a thing of beauty. A sprint car, a Don Edmunds chassis with lots of chrome and a new paint job."

And in a very real sense, that race car had a lot to do with Berggren becoming an auto racing media giant. Over the past three decades Berggren, the executive editor of *Speedway Illustrated* and part of the Fox Winston car television team, has won countless awards in both print and electronic media. The latest of which is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame.

Berggren was teaching at Emmanuel College, a Catholic girls school in Boston. He had raced through graduate school at Tufts University, driving stock cars before acquiring the sprinter.

"I had a ramp truck," Berggren recalled. "I had run someplace on a Sunday night and had brought clean clothes with me to the college, because I knew I wouldn't have time to get home to shower and change and stuff. I just parked the truck with the race car on the back in the faculty parking lot."

It's a story Berggren likes to tell. "I was about fifteen minutes into my first class of the day when I got a page. 'Sister would like to see Dr. Berggren in her office immediately, right away.' So I went to her office and she wanted to know, 'what was that thing in the parking lot?'"

Berggren tried to explain. "But Sister was convinced," Berggren continued, "that somehow or another that 'thing' was going to pounce on one of those undergraduate coeds I was trying to teach." She, in fact, wanted Berggren to get rid of the thing. So Berggren agreed to park it behind the school's cafeteria.

"I remember, as I was parking that truck, telling myself, 'Berggren, your days in academia are over. They just don't get

it.' So I started looking for something else," he said.

In August of 1977, Berggren became editor of *Stock Car Racing*. Some five years later, a second magazine, *Open Wheel*, eventually a major force in the growth of sprint car racing in America, was born. Part of the television scene for almost two decades, Berggren's credits include providing the color commentary on

Berggren was not long for academia anyway. "Everybody else on the faculty was doing research," he says. "My research was in a garage in Framingham, Massachusetts. As soon as classes were over, I was off to the garage."

He had started racing in graduate school in 1966, stopping only the year of his doctoral dissertation. "I was a teaching assistant making about \$3,000 a year," he says. "My wife was a librarian making twice that. I just took whatever money I earned and whatever she earned and off we went racing."

The ink was hardly dry on his Ph.D. before Berggren was at it again, bouncing around the short tracks of New England. He and his racing partners, Bruce Cohen and Lew Boyd, even gave promotion a shot, becoming part of New England racing folklore with the *Spring Sizzler* at Stafford Motor Speedway in 1972.

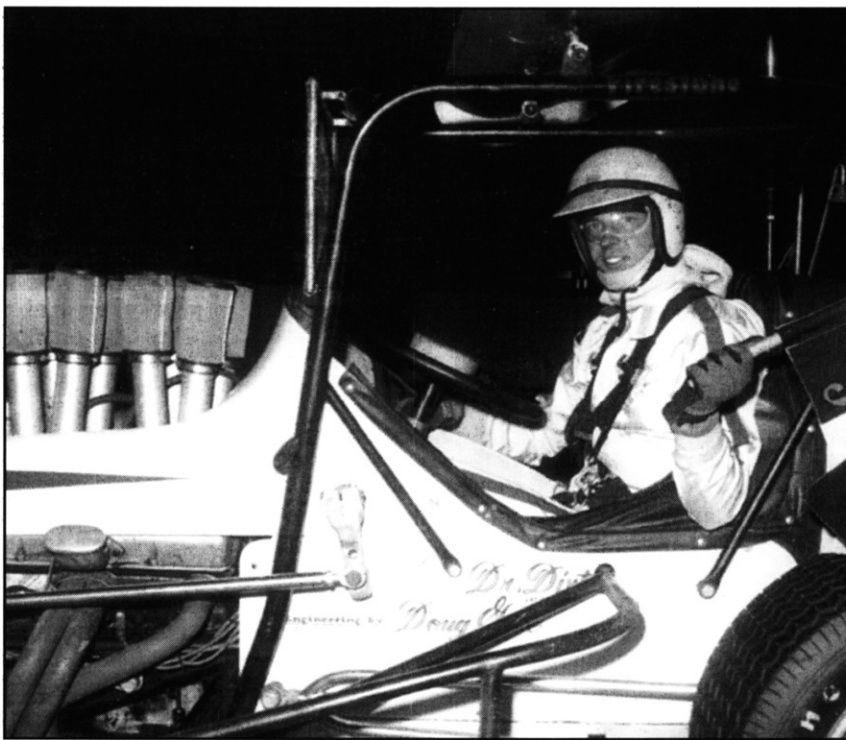
By the time the sprinter came along in '73, replacing his old "Spring Sizzler 80" super-modified, Berggren was an experienced hand.

"When Doug got it all fixed, it was incredibly fast and reliable," he said. "Every race driver, at least once, should have a racer like that one."

While Berggren is more than aware it is his media successes that bring him to the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, he can't deny the satisfaction of being in the same shrine with the sport's greatest competitors. "It is absolutely special, a unique thrill," he said.

The sprint car success, 24 feature wins at Beech Ridge, was just part of the experience Berggren took to *Stock Car Racing*. He brought a brighter image to the magazine; he instituted new ventures, including *Open Wheel*.

Back then, in 1980, national distributors would advance publisher's money for one shot specials. He admits *Open Wheel* began "as a way for the publisher (Adrian Lopez Publications' Bart Diehl) to borrow money at no interest."



Dick Berggren

Dick Berggren Collection

a mid-90's winter sprint car series on TNN from Arizona. "It was the first look anybody got at live sprint car racing," says Berggren, who believes it "was the real cause of *World of Outlaws* showing up on television."

Berggren still has the sprinter and for good reason. With mechanic Doug Gore (a technical writer with *Stock Car Racing*, *Open Wheel* and *Speedway Illustrated*), Berggren was quite successful in the open wheel machine, especially at Beech Ridge Motor Speedway in Maine. "We actually bought it in pieces," Berggren said. "I started putting it together and made a little progress. Doug came along, and he made a little progress. Piece by piece, we finally got it right. The thrill of victory [better than a dozen] was actually magnified by 'the wheels coming off at Thompson, the oil filter breaking at Fonda, the fuel tank splitting at 'the Ridge.'"

Sprinter in the parking lot or not,

DICK BERGGREN, cont.

"It was launched just before the Knoxville Nationals," he continued, "and we began to hear stories of people going to the newsstands and buying up all the copies at over cover price and selling them at the Nationals for twice the value. Then people started calling and buying just about everything we had around the office. It was then we figured out this wasn't just a one shot special. This was something really good."

Gradually it became a quarterly, a bi-monthly and then, finally, a monthly all the while being a vital part of racing in America. Berggren lost control when the two magazines were sold. He admits his present publishing group actually tried to buy *Open Wheel* back without success. "We could have fixed it," he insists. "It was profitable when we had it and should have stayed profitable."

According to Berggren "they [the final ownership] didn't understand what it was about; they mishandled the business end of it and the editorial end of it. What they did, to my mind, was criminal."

Berggren, the inaugural recipient of the National Sprint Car Poll's "Media Member of the Year" award in 1985, was a natural for color man duties when Pat Patterson launched a mid-winter sprint series from Arizona for TNN. He joined Mike Joy, Brad Doty and Ralph Sheheen and the series lasted two years. "Nobody else was running so we had everybody," Berggren said. "It was a regular series. You could tune in on Sunday night and see live sprint car racing for the first time."

When *Stock Car Racing* was taken from him, Berggren battled back by putting together *Speedway Illustrated*, which is pretty much geared to the stock car folks.

The comeback is clearly a crowning achievement; the magazine has won awards from its inception.

Berggren still has his sprinter, and he has not lost the passion. The man who through the years has given so generously of his time and money for such charitable causes as the Jan Opperman Fund (with Cary Agajanian) and the non-profit National Sprint Car Museum Foundation really loves "the sprint cars and the super-modifieds and the midgets and Indianapolis cars as well."

"You can't watch those things and not fall in love. They're pretty special."

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