

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Rickey Hood

by Pat Sullivan

There must have been moments early in his career when Rickey Hood felt he was growing up under the microscope. After all, his father, Clarence "Hooker" Hood, was well on his way to a storied career, and his exploits on and off the track were the stuff of legend. Indeed, the younger Hood faced a challenge that many second-generation drivers must confront - how to live up to the expectations of others while testing the water long enough to see if the right racing genes had been acquired. This task is hard enough in any environment, but when you grew up in Memphis during the wide-open late 1960s and early '70s, it was necessary to earn your spurs quickly.

Indeed, to survive in this supercharged racing atmosphere it was essential to learn how to handle yourself on and off the track - and you knew if you ventured across the river to the fabled gumbo oval in West Memphis, Arkansas, you had better be prepared to don some battle armor. At that decidedly trial-by-fire playground, you were forced to go wheel-to-wheel with some of the toughest short-track hands in the land, and to be sure, none of them felt any hesitation about feeding you a wheel if needed.

Hooker Hood wasted little time deciding if his young son had what it took to make it in the rough-and-tumble sport. Rickey practiced at Milan, Tennessee, at the age of 14, an unheard of proposition in those days, and two years later he climbed in his dad's supermodified for the first time. Making a statement early, he demonstrated that he was right where he belonged by becoming the evening's fast qualifier. Even the most hard-boiled veterans of the Memphis-area racing scene were soon forced to admit that Hooker's boy had those special qualities that earmarks one for greatness.

Part of the mystique of Hooker Hood was that he had raced at places as diverse as the most remote backwoods bullring to the famed Daytona International Speedway. Soon, like his father before him, Rickey became a true outlaw, traveling the country racing anywhere, anytime. As a result it was a tad surprising to some when Rickey Hood began competing with the button-down United States Auto Club (USAC).

In the early days he would compete on a temporary permit, and he would score his first USAC win while piloting the King/Powers sprint car at Paragon, Indiana, in 1981. Nonetheless, the taste of success with the Indiana-based organization did not engender an immediate desire to settle down with one series. USAC, World of Outlaws (WoO), All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC), local shows, it didn't matter where he landed. One thing was for certain; people always knew he was there. In 1984, Hood grabbed the brass ring six times in USAC competition, taking the prestigious Tony Hulman Classic at the Terre Haute Action Track, and claiming a 50-lap main at Granite City, Illinois, over Schrader and Tom Bigelow. Many feel that to be one of the most captivating tussles in USAC history. As always, however, it is consistency that wins titles, and by finishing in the 'top three' in fifteen events, Hood was able to take the season championship over future National Sprint Car Hall of Fame inductees Sheldon Kinser and Steve Butler, respectively.

Unfortunately, the '84 season also ended on a sour note. While competing at Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix in October, Hood was struck by an errant sprint car while standing in the pit area and was left with two severely broken legs. The injuries required several operations, and a long convalescence. Suddenly, all of Rickey's attention was focused on walking again, and there were concerns that the career of a budding superstar hung in the balance.

The 1985 USAC season began with a three-race west coast swing that ironically opened at Manzanita. To the disbelief and yet delight of all, Rickey Hood was there, strapped in the George Toney/Kenny Jarrett Farms sprinter. Hood not only beat the odds by racing again, but in true fairytale fashion, he won the main event. To the dismay of his peers, when the USAC tour returned to the Midwest to begin the season in earnest, Rickey was back in Damon Fortune's car. With a resolve honed by sheer time and

rehabilitation, Hood would sally forth to nine series wins in 25 starts, and added 18 top-three finishes for good measure. When the final points were tallied, no one was in his area code. Hood's participation in USAC also extended to the club's premier division - the Silver Crown series, also known as the dirt championship car division. His debut

performance in the traditional earth-pounders could not have been more spectacular. Securing a ride with Bill King for the 1982 Hulman Hundred held at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in May, Hood would start on the outside of the second row in the sixty-lap affair and passed Ken Schrader on the 38th circuit to take victory in his first feature start. While he was locked out of victory lane in 1983, he rode six top-ten finishes to 'Rookie of the Year' honors, and in 1984 his association with Damon Fortune resulted in a dominating win on an oppressively hot evening in Oklahoma City on July 22.

Unable to compete in the 1985 season opener at Tampa due to his injuries, he was forced to watch veteran George Snider take his mount to victory lane. Nonetheless, when he returned to action, he did so with the same fire he had already displayed on the sprint car trail. Shocking some, he showed his versatility by scoring a win on the pavement at Indianapolis Raceway Park on July 13. For good measure, he kept the streak going at Oklahoma City, eight days later and at the next round at West Virginia Motor Speedway. Chuck Gurney was able

to derail the Hood express train at Springfield, Illinois, but when Rickey added a win at the DuQuoin, Illinois, mile on September 2, it was clear that the title would be his. To add to the luster of a spectacular 1985 campaign that saw him win two USAC championships, Rickey was also honored with the Jimmy Caruthers Award for his courageous comeback from injury.

With wanderlust a part of the family heritage, Hood always felt free to explore his racing options. A frequent haunt for much of his career was the always-tough All Star Circuit of Champions. Rickey made his first appearance in the top-ten in All Star points in 1981, but it was after his championship years with USAC that he really made his mark on the Bert Emick-led club. He would ultimately finish in the top-ten in All Star points six times, and ran second in the championship chase to Frankie Kerr in 1991, a year highlighted by Hood's win at the famed Hoosier Fall Classic in Lawrenceburg, Indiana.

No one would blame Hood if he chose to rest on his laurels, but when racing has been a central part of your life since your teenage years there is no reason to slow down. Relocating to Phoenix, Arizona, Hood found steady work with the Sprint Car Owners of Arizona (SCOA) series. It is safe to say that many open-wheel drivers who hail from the great Southwest wish Hood would have stayed in the Queen City. Far from simply remaining competitive, Rickey soon proved to be one of the toughest gunslingers in the desert. He grabbed his first SCOA title in 1997, then allowed everyone to catch his wind for a moment while he reloaded. After watching Marty Wilcox go to the head of the class in 1998 and '99, Hood would reassert himself by taking championship honors the next four seasons in succession (2000, '01, '02, '03). To this day, Hood continues to remind anyone who doubts him that there is still plenty of fight left in this racing dog.

In spite of their personal differences in style, Hooker and Rickey Hood share several traits, among them is amazing longevity in the sport. Hooker claims to have won in six different decades, and as the 2006 season dawns this feat may well be duplicated by his son who is now competing, and winning, in his fifth decade of competition. Statistics indicate that Rickey Hood has racked up 34 All Star Circuit wins, 22 in USAC competition, and found time to hit pay dirt with Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws on three occasions. Yet, in the true Hood family spirit, no one knows for sure how many other victories have fallen into the second-generation driver's win column. For the Hood family - it has been a remarkable journey from a racetrack known locally as "The Ditch" to the grandest stage in the sport - the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame.



John Mahoney Photo

