

Robbie Stanley

With many stories in life, it is better to focus on the early parts of the tale instead of dwelling on the ending. That is something of the case with Robert W. “Robbie” Stanley, a gone-too-soon racer who enjoyed great success as a championship sprint car driver during his brief career.

Yes, the ending was tragic; lost in a violent 1994 sprint car crash at Winchester Speedway in Indiana at the age of 26. But while his sprint car career spanned only a decade, he achieved much: three consecutive United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car titles, preceded by an All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) title.

Born November 16, 1967, Robbie’s career began at the age of six when his father helped him into a quarter-midget. He took to the little cars quickly, and began winning races. He ran the cars for ten years, winning over 200 races and the 1980 Quarter Midgets of America (QMA) Grands national championship at Waterford, Michigan.

Those were exciting days for Robbie and his family. His father, Ron, became a talented mechanic and car builder in the quarter-midget ranks, and his mother Rita was a devout backer of her son’s career. His older sister Rhonda and younger brother Ryan were heavily involved in the Brownsburg, Indiana-based family race team as well.

It began a period of his life where the Stanley family devoted themselves to helping their son reach the highest level of the sport. At age 16, Robbie made the transition directly from quarter-midgets to sprint cars, and was rookie of the year at Paragon Speedway in Indiana. Over the next three seasons he focused on racing throughout the Midwest, as well as competing in an occasional World of Outlaws (WoO) or All Star Circuit event.

Robbie was in the unique position, because racing was one of very few options in terms of making a living. His career choices were greatly limited following a 1983 surgery to repair a knee injury suffered while on the high school wrestling team. An error during the procedure destroyed his knee joint, leaving him with a permanent disability.

1989 marked a major step in his racing career. He mounted a full-time run with the All Stars, and won three features en route to the series championship, including the \$10,000-to-win Hoosier Fall Classic at the Lawrenceburg Speedway in Indiana. He was also named Rookie of the Year with the series. At age 22, he had already won a national series title. The following season he ran third in points with the All Stars.

In 1991 he and his family elected to go in a new direction. Although Robbie had very little pavement experience, and limited experience without a wing, the team put together a USAC sprint car. He made his USAC debut on April 7, 1991, in a new J&J chassis at the intimidating Winchester Speedway, and he stunned the entire sport with a spectacular upset victory over the USAC regulars.

That day would prove to be very important in his career, as it immediately established him as a title contender and a multi-talented racer. He won again at Winchester one month later, and throughout the season battled with Steve Butler and close friend Eric Gordon for the USAC title. Robbie’s third-place finish at Georgia’s Lanier

Raceway in October clinched his first USAC title.

In 1992 Robbie opened the season with legendary car owner Steve Stapp, but by June had left the team and returned to the family operation. They won the first time out at Lakeside Speedway in Kansas City, his only win of the year. He would ultimately race for Paul Hazen at selected dirt events, and continue to run his own sprinter on pavement. In a repeat of the previous year, Stanley prevailed over Butler and Gordon to win his second straight USAC national sprint car championship.

His on-the-gas, wide-open style had brought him much attention, and much scrutiny. As is often the case, his aggressive style rankled some of his critics. But over time Robbie worked through the criticism, rubbing the rough edges away with experience and maturity. By the conclusion of his second USAC season he had grown to become a solid racer who knew how to win, and how to take care of a race car. He was a friendly, upbeat presence in the pit area, and the young driver was well liked among his peers. He liked clowning around and socializing, and was known as a racer who would quickly pitch in to help the guys in the next pit stall.

In late 1992 Steve Butler left the Gus Hoffman racing team, a stalwart USAC operation that thrived on competition and aggressive racing. With the seat of the venerable number 69 now open, Robbie and the Hoffman team hooked up for the 1993 season. He responded with a win at Winchester in the season opener in April, and then he proceeded to enjoy the most productive season of his USAC career, winning five races and scoring eleven ‘top three’ finishes in 19 starts. He romped to the driver title, and the Hoffman team clinched the car owner championship as well.



Paul Arch Photo

During this period Robbie continued to explore his options in stock car racing. He ran a few NASCAR Busch Series events, and later teamed with car owner John Linville in hopes of eventually running a full Busch schedule. The plans were sidelined when Linville’s health problems led to the car being parked, and Robbie was once again on the outside looking in.

The 1994 season dawned with great expectations for Stanley and the Hoffman team. No driver had ever won four consecutive USAC sprint car titles, and after three straight, Robbie was now in a position to make history. He finished eighth in the Eldora opener in April, then won three weeks later at Winchester. On May 1, he was leading when he and Cary Faas staged a spectacular duel to the



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Robbie Stanley, Continued

checkered flag, with Stanley coming up a car length short. Two weeks later he was eighth at Indianapolis Raceway Park.

May 24, 1994, was a fateful day in sprint car history. After struggling through much of the night, USAC point leader Robbie Stanley lined up deep in the field for the 30-lap feature, held under threatening skies with lightning flickering in the distance. Robbie spun coming off turn four early in the feature and was hit broadside by another car, and he was killed instantly.

At the age of 26, the bright, cheerful light had been darkened forever. A few weeks earlier, while he was working in the shop, Ron Stanley encountered his son near tears. He asked what was wrong.

“We’ve struggled so long and hard, and it feels like we’re not getting anywhere, that we’re not going to make it,” said an emotional Robbie. “But I’ll tell you one thing, Dad, when we make it to the next level we’re never going to forget how hard it’s been. We’ll always try to reach out and help other people who are struggling as much as we did.”

That was eleven years ago and, for his closest friends and competitors, the memories and legacy of Robbie Stanley live on. He was a dedicated, devoted racer who worked for everything he got, and he ultimately achieved great success at a national level. During his time in the sun, he flew the highest. That’s what ought to be remembered, with no regrets.