

Steve Butler

Steve Butler was one of the very best at his craft, however his contributions to sprint car racing extended well beyond the boundaries of the racetrack. As his career matured, the articulate Butler became one of the great ambassadors of the sport with the spoken word, and also in his contributions to the leading racing publications of the day. Ironically, his intellect also created opportunities in the real world, and helped pull him away from the sport while still at the top of the game.

Steve was born on September 26, 1956, in Amarillo, Texas, to parents Bruce and Sharon Butler. He had three sisters, Linda, Melanie and Laura. With their father a military pilot, the Butler family endured the constant movement that is endemic to this profession, and actually lived for a time in England. Sadly, Steve would lose his father who died in an airplane crash while serving in the Air Force, but it soon became clear that speed was in his blood as well. Butler first became enamored with motorcycles, and endured the predictable damage that comes from two-wheeled competition. Yet, as fate would have it, Kokomo, Indiana was now home, and soon he was exposed to the great open wheel tradition that was anchored by the flat, but exciting Kokomo Speedway.

Befriended by grocer Bud Whitacre, and noted engine builder Ezra Beachy, Steve traded two wheels for four, and launched his sprint car career. By 1983 the future star had found his racing legs and emerged as the Paragon Speedway track champion. Racing on a temporary permit, Steve would make six 1983 United States Auto Club (USAC) starts, and post a runner-up finish at Bloomington in September. With a taste of the big time, Steve was prepared for a full-fledged assault on USAC racing in 1984.

Butler wasted little time making his presence felt, as he bagged the second race of the year at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway in front of a national television audience. While Steve did not have the firepower to unseat Rick Hood and Sheldon Kinser, who finished first and second, respectively, in the season standings, he would score four more wins on Indiana short tracks. Hood and owner Damon Fortune waxed the field in 1985, and although Butler moved to the second position in points, he only graced victory lane once.



In a critical career move designed to improve his performance, Steve joined forces with ace mechanic Phil Poor for 1986, and the duo had immediate chemistry. It was a nip-and-tuck campaign that saw Hood, Kinser, and Butler all have a shot at the title. Steve's first trip to victory lane came on May 17 at Indiana's Lincoln Park

Speedway, but by the time fall was in the air, Hood had claimed three feature events, and was poised to become the first man to win three straight USAC sprint car titles. The pivotal round of the year unfolded at the Sante Fe Speedway in Hinsdale, Illinois, on August 29. Kenny Jacobs, the 1986 Rookie of the Year, was the fast qualifier, but he relinquished the lead to Butler late in the 40-lap main event. With this win Steve would carry the point lead into the September 28 finale at Eldora's 4-Crown Nationals. Rich Vogler would take his 25th career sprint car win, but with a third place finish Butler was the USAC king for the first time.

Before the 1986 season had ended, the United States Auto Club dispatched a stunning press release from their Speedway, Indiana, headquarters. In a break from tradition, it was deemed that select events in the 1987 sprint car schedule would be conducted with wings. Vogler began the year with back-to-back wins topless, and then Rick Ungar made history by becoming the first man to claim a winged USAC sprint car main at Eldora on April 25. Butler would find victory lane for the first time at the (Tony) Hulman Classic at the Terre Haute Action Track on May 3, and then beat Keith Kauffman to the line on a scorching afternoon at the same track twenty days later. After Kenny Jacobs won a pair of winged shows in Ohio in June, it was Vogler who held an eight-point advantage in the standings. Butler trailed Tony Elliott to the flag at Hinsdale on August 6, and then essentially sealed his second title with a winged win at Paragon Speedway on August 29. In this experimental year, Butler not only defended his title, but also was the only driver to win with, and without, a wing.

As the 1988 season dawned, Butler had the chance to make history. Adding to the intrigue of the new season, it was announced that winged races would still be included on the schedule and, in addition, the series would return to the pavement after a seven-year absence. In this banner season, Butler again was the sole driver to win with and without a wing, and he was the only man to win on dirt and pavement. It was a unique year for USAC, which ventured farther from its traditional home base, and with promoters offering the option to schedule wing races, season winners included Sammy Swindell, Brad Doty, Jac Haudenschield, Danny Lasoski, Joe Gaerte, and Mike Ward. Butler's chief rival in 1988 was Jack Hewitt, but with a series of strong runs, and by virtue of starting every main event, he won his third-straight title with relative ease.

Winning any series point battle is always satisfying, but by pulling double duty the 1988 season also brought additional glory. Driving for successful owner Kenny Jarrett, Butler had the chance to do what many had deemed to be impossible - dethrone Jack Hewitt as the USAC Silver Crown series champion. To accomplish this mission, Steve and the Jarrett team followed a tried and true blueprint to be successful. Championships are won over the long haul, and in 1988 the story for this team was consistency. Six times Butler guided his big beast to a top five finish, and when all the points were tallied he joined Rick Hood as only the second driver in USAC history to capture the sprint car and Silver Crown titles in the same year.

There was no reason to believe that Butler couldn't win another sprint car title in 1989, but he was enticed with a chance to compete in open-wheel racing's grandest stage - the Indianapolis 500. Long time racing patron Jeff Stoops was prepared to give the cerebral driver a chance at the Brickyard, but two hard knocks on the unforgiving wall produced heartache, and a broken collarbone. It was

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Steve Butler, Continued

a major disappointment for Butler. It had seemed that American short track stars were being snubbed at 16th Street and Georgetown Road, so, as Steve would admit, he felt as if the weight of the aspirations and hopes of the sprint car world were on his back. The Indianapolis diversion meant there would be no run at the title this year, but Steve did grab the brass ring two times in sprint car competition, including the season-ending 4-Crown Nationals at Eldora.

In 1992 Steve Butler won his 25th and final USAC sprint car feature. While a fourth sprint car championship would elude him, he would enjoy one more shining moment. Butler and the Kenny Jarrett Farms team began the 1992 season with a strong third-place run at the Copper World Classic at Phoenix International Raceway, and were optimistic about their chances to claim another Silver Crown series ring. A disappointing mid-pack finish followed at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, and after Jim Keeker scored his second win in three races at Indianapolis Raceway Park, a title run appeared out of reach. However, Keeker would suffer a broken wrist in a sprint car accident at Lawrenceburg, Indiana, and suddenly everything broke wide open. With new life, Butler responded by running second to Jimmy Sills at Springfield, Illinois, and backed this up with a solid sixth place finish at DuQuoin, Illinois, on September 9.

Up next was the crown jewel of Silver Crown racing, the Hoosier Hundred at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. The October 4 round would prove to be one of the most dramatic races in series history. Ron Shuman would start from the pole position, and before the day was over, he would be locked in a tremendous battle with

Butler and Jeff Swindell. Heading into the third turn on the final lap, Butler went for broke and tangled with Shuman. For a moment the entire season hung in the balance. Shuman somehow saved his car, and streaked to the win, while Swindell snuck past Butler to take the runner-up spot. Following the dramatics at Indianapolis, Swindell carried an 18-point lead into the finale at Eldora, and needed a third place finish to secure the title. Meanwhile, Butler took the pole position and knew his only chance for a second Silver Crown title was to win. Butler would do his part, and when Swindell slipped to fifth, he had claimed his fifth USAC national championship. Butler's final advantage was only seven points, the narrowest margin in series history to date. Ironically, it was the only time in the 1992 season that Butler sat atop the standings.

Butler's last full season was in 1993, and in his swan song, he was able to fulfill another dream by winning a Silver Crown race on a mile by snaring the Hulman Hundred at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in May. Yet, before the year was over he felt the pull to move into a new phase of his life. His break from the sport was clean, for unlike others who couldn't imagine life outside the cockpit, Butler had already displayed a penchant for success in other life spheres. For many years Butler had worked part-time at Delco Electronics in Kokomo, and in fact, one of his ideas earned him a \$20,000 bonus, and saved the company millions. Always the pragmatist, Butler realized that he had accomplished the majority of his goals in racing, and that it was time to make his family his first priority. Steve has been married for twenty-two years to Thomasa Rene Butler, and they have two children, Jennifer and Austin.