

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

RICH VOGLER

by Emily Vogler White

Rich Vogler learned carpentry and race car expertise from his father, Don, a craftsman who built houses and race cars from the ground up in the Chicago area. Don was also an accomplished race driver, winning the UARA Midget Championship in 1975 and 1976. Rich and his sister, Dale, raced Quarter Midgets; Rich started at nine years old in 1959 and won local track championships. Rich started his professional racing career at age 19 in his father's midget, and started to find rides in other midgets, so Don could reclaim his seat on occasion. Rich won the NAMAR Midget title in 1973, and in 1975 he moved on to United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint cars. All this time, Rich worked as a carpenter during the week, logging many miles to races on weekends and to the Indianapolis Speedrome or Indianapolis Raceway Park for mid-week races, returning home in time to go to work.

In 1978, driving for Doug Caruthers, Rich dominated USAC midget racing, winning a record 5 features in a row and the 1978 USAC National Championship. Rich also hit his stride in USAC sprint cars, winning five features in 1978. This success and pavement expertise earned him a ride in a "Mini-Indy" car (USAC's Super Vee series) and he was able to hang up his nailbag and become a full-time

racer. On his way home from racing midgets in New Zealand the winter of 1979-80, Rich bought a newspaper during a layover in the L.A. airport and read that Norman "Bubby" Jones had quit Don Siebert's team. Rich called Siebert about driving his car and the resulting team won the 1980 USAC sprint car title. Rich won the USAC midget title also; the only time anyone has won both titles in



Rich Vogler
Bruce Craig Collection

the same year. Rich ran well in the Dirt Champ car division that year, winning one race and finishing third in points. He also passed his rookie test for the Indianapolis 500.

1981 was a very bad year. It started with Don Siebert dying unexpectedly just before the season opener at Eldora, then Rich's father dying in a midget crash at the Indy Speedrome

and finished up with Rich sustaining a serious concussion at the Hut 100 in September. In between he won Dirt Champ car races, sprint car and midget races, and made another try at Indy in an obsolete car. Rich concentrated on another USAC midget title in 1983, winning it in the Streicher family car. He took time out to win a couple of USAC sprint races and he picked up his first All-Star Circuit win. In 1984 the Streichers decided to go All-Star sprint car racing with Rich, winning several races. Rich filled in with Speedrome midget races, winning 9 of the 11 he went to, attracting the attention of Jonathan Byrd, sponsor of a Speedrome stock car, who was looking for a driver to take to the Indy 500.

The Indianapolis 500 was Rich's goal, and for midget and sprint car drivers in the '80's, it was a goal not easily attained. But with Byrd's backing, Rich finally got into a good car and easily qualified for the race. Rich qualified again in 1986, driving Johnny Rutherford's back-up car, and was running a solid seventh halfway through the race when disaster struck; the left rear wheel fell off after a pit stop. Rich won another USAC midget title in 1986, his fourth, and three of the ten USAC sprint car races that year. In 1987 Rich qualified for his third Indy 500, but broke the engine early in the race. He was just barely beat out of the sprint car title by Steve

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Butler and finished second in the USAC midget points also. But in 1988 Rich won his fifth USAC midget title and moved into second on the USAC all-time win list behind A.J. Foyt, Jr.

Qualifying for the 1988 Indy 500 was a cliffhanger. Gordon Johcock bumped Rich out of the field minutes before the end of qualifying. Rich jumped into his back-up car and bumped his way back in, bumping Johncock out. The team, Machinists Union, was impressed enough to hire him to substitute for a broken-armed Kevin Cogan for some Indy car races later that year. In 1989, qualifying was even more dramatic. Rich's car was ill-handling and too slow. When his car was bumped shortly before the

end of qualifying, he got into Cogan's back-up car, took one practice lap, went out to qualify and put it in the race, for his best Indy car finish ever: eighth. For the 1989 USAC sprint car season, Rich drove for the Hoffman family of Cincinnati, Ohio. They won on pavement and dirt, earning the title. Rich won a bunch of midget races driving for the Wilke Racers, including the Copper World Classic on the Phoenix mile.

In 1990, after years of struggling in Indy cars, Rich turned his sights on NASCAR, a place where they still hire drivers. He got a ride and went to Michigan to make his Winston Cup debut. It rained out qualifying, and NASCAR's system of determining the starting field left him out. So they went

to Pocono, where Rich qualified, and they jumped into his plane for a sprint car race in Salem, Indiana, that night, where he had his fatal crash.

Rich Vogler left behind a formidable record. Two USAC sprint titles (1980 & 1989), five USAC midget titles (1978, 1980, 1983, 1986 & 1988), three times on the American Auto Racing Writers & Broadcasters Association (AARWBA) All-America Team (1980, 1988 & 1989), holder of the most track records in USAC competition, second on the USAC all-time national win list, and five Indianapolis 500 starts. He is survived by his wife Emily, his mother Eleanor, his grandmother Bea, his sister Dale, and his three sons, D.J., Eric and Nicholas.