

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Steve Kinser

by: Rob McCuen

The word ‘superstar’ might as well have been created to describe Steve Kinser. Don’t look for the big time prima donna attitude that we’ve come to associate with super stardom though, because you won’t find a trace of it. He’s far more concerned, obsessed even, with what’s left to do than with what he’s already done. He’s been called a legend, an icon, and ‘the best who ever lived’, yet he still relentlessly forges ahead. Even his fellow racers call Kinser ‘the King,’ and that alone speaks volumes.

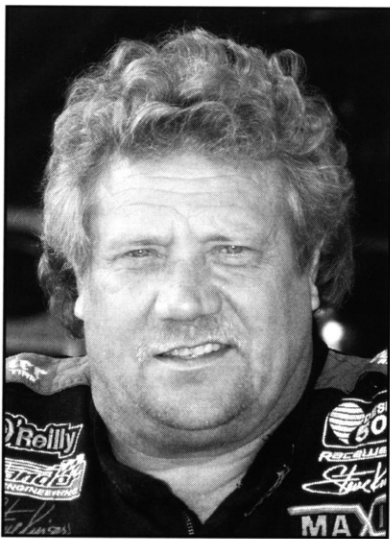
His storybook career has reached the stage where he pulverizes another record, most often his own, nearly every time he suits up. The racing industry is rapidly running out of awards to bestow upon him and Kinser long ago depleted the adjective inventory of any and all journalists who have struggled to find colorful new ways to describe his talent. Kinser’s appointment to the hallowed hall was a lock if ever there was one. Indeed, were it not for a mandate that requires all active inductees to be at least fifty years of age (he was born June 3, 1954, to parents Bob and Zelbert Kinser), Steve would have been a unanimous choice back in 1990 when the original twenty were enshrined.

More than a few eyebrows were raised when wise old owl Karl Kinser drafted his distant cousin to replace the seriously injured Dick Gaines in his famously fast number 11 in 1978. The hiring of a basically unproven 22-year-old upstart with just two years of minimal traveling experience seemed wildly out of character for the grizzled master craftsman. Karl tended to prefer time-tested veterans at the wheel of his cutting-edge pride-and-joys and there was no shortage of hard core old pros with bulging resumes and trophy-filled mantelpieces burning up Karl’s phone lines for a shot at the coveted seat.

But, Karl’s widely regarded genius went far beyond his ability to design and build four-wheeled greased lightning. He was also an uncanny judge of driver talent, and there was something in the demeanor of his broad shouldered blonde cousin with the smoldering glare that got Karl’s attention. When you’d been around as long as Karl Kinser, you learned to go with your gut instinct. Limited experience be damned, Steve was his new driver. It would prove to be a decision that would forever change the history of the sport.

If Steve felt the pressure of his new employer’s ‘gas it or get out’ mindset, he sure never showed it. His headlong leap into the national spotlight was sudden and dramatic, and by midseason of ‘78, Steve Kinser was sprint car racing’s fastest rising star. He was wild and hyper-aggressive at times, but he possessed both the reflexes of a panther and the stamina of a Brahma bull. If the car didn’t handle, he could seemingly bully it into submission.

The timing could hardly have been more perfect. In spite of the trails that had been blazed by men like Jan Opperman, Norman “Bubby” Jones, Bobby Allen and, of course, Rick Ferkel, outlaw racers were still grappling with a seemingly incurable image problem. The cars were too ugly and their drivers too coarse and unpolished.



Dave Hill Photo

They raced for chump change at worn-out, backwater venues and they were often dismissed as a bunch of second bananas who were not good enough to cut the mustard in the spit-and-polish world of the United States Auto Club (USAC). Well into the 1970’s, while the USAC racers nabbed the headlines, the outlaws continued to toil in the trenches of relative obscurity.

Then, in the spring of 1978, in perfect synchronicity with the emergence of Steve Kinser, along came a Texas-bred hustler named Ted Johnson who had a crazy notion that he could organize these random race chasers and give them an identity. They would be called the World of Outlaws (WoO) and he spoke of organizing a coast-to-coast travel itinerary of \$2,000-to-win paydays. They would race with, and without, wings and they would crown a champion, point fund and all, at the conclusion of the season.

This sounded just fine to Steve and Karl. Playing their desperado ‘run whatcha brung’ image to the hilt, Johnson’s loosely knit group of hard-core road dogs quickly captured the imaginations of both the fans and the motorsports press. Armed with a small but stellar battalion of name drivers, Ted booked his roving speed carnival into established venues like Eldora and Devil’s Bowl, where they played to huge crowds. Just like that outlaw racing had hit the big time and Steve Kinser said goodbye forever to laying bricks.

Whether he liked it or not, he was quickly becoming the new face of the sport. If his newfound fame distracted him, you sure couldn’t tell by watching him. The wins came in bunches – 39 total by season’s end, and befittingly, he became the first World of Outlaws point champion. Ultimately, it was his supernatural feats under the club’s banner that were destined to define him. Then and now, Steve Kinser IS the World of Outlaws.

Steve and Karl’s relationship was never coated in sugar but their legendary squabbles rarely stood in the way of their mutual zest for checkered flags. They remained together through 1994 and won fourteen WoO titles, ten Knoxville Nationals crowns, and 384 final night WoO features. For reasons nobody seems to understand, preliminary wins aren’t counted as official. When one factors in this quirk in the record books, plus wins with the United Sprint Association (USA), United States Auto Club (USAC), California Racing Association (CRA), All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) and in open-competition, their victory total was closer to 450. The formidable duo also won a staggering nine Gold Cup Race of Champions (Chico, Calif.), three King’s Royals (Rossburg, Ohio) and three Western World Championships (Phoenix, Ariz.). In 1987, their season-long romp was one of domination taken to a new realm. Steve cashed 46 of the 69 WoO A-main checks issued, including 24 of the last 26. When the curtain closed on the ultimate dream season, they had knocked off 56 features, a sprint car record that still stands.

By the end of 1994, Steve had run out of frontiers to conquer in his beloved sprint cars. Having already won an International Race Of Champions (IROC) event at Talladega, Alabama, NASCAR was calling his name. He signed on with Kenny

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Steve Kinser, Continued

Bernstein’s Quaker State team for the 1995 season and sprint car fanatics the world over mourned the passing of an era. The experiment lasted only seven events and NASCAR’s loss was sprint car racing’s gain. While reports that Bernstein’s operation was in shambles filtered back through the industry grapevine, Kinser’s critics had a field day lambasting his perceived ‘failure.’

Ever the class act, Kinser refused to make excuses and quietly returned to Bloomington to assemble his own team. He enlisted the services of trusted friend and Karl Kinser protégé Scott Gerkin as crew chief and within weeks Steve was back with a vengeance. Karl wasn’t shy about voicing his displeasure over Steve ‘stealing’ Gerkin away from him and a bitter rift developed between the two that lingers to this day. Perhaps fueled in part by the naysayers who insisted that he couldn’t win without Karl’s mechanical wizardry, Steve soon proved otherwise.

Despite missing the first eleven WoO races on the calendar, the start-up team won eighteen features, the inaugural Historical Big One at Earl Baltes’ Eldora Speedway and, for added emphasis, the Knoxville Nationals. So much for the critics. The King was back, this time for good.

Kinser finally got a crack at the Indianapolis 500 in 1997, the realization of a lifelong dream for the Hoosier hero. He spent the month of May sandwiching practice in between his WoO commitments. Despite the limited seat time, he rose to the challenge in classic Kinser fashion and methodically worked his way up to

speed. On race day, he ran as high as ninth until a crash sidelined him with just twelve laps remaining. His fourteenth place finish failed to dampen his spirits, and his lone Indy 500 appearance remains a treasured memory.

Kinser continues to defy all logic. His impact on racing history is simply immeasurable, yet he continues to add to his amazing legacy every time he straps in. His 19 World of Outlaws titles, well over 800 career feature wins, 12 Knoxville Nationals titles and 11 Gold Cups barely scratch the surface. If Steve has run it, he’s won it. He’s been voted into the American Auto Racing Writers and Broadcasters Association (AARWBA) All-America team a record 19 times, 14 of those on the Short Track First Team. In the year 2000, he was selected by a panel assembled by the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum as sprint car racing’s greatest driver of the 1900’s. This only served to confirm what everyone with a shred of objectivity knew all along. Nobody else even comes close.

Today, Steve Kinser continues to call Bloomington, Indiana, his home with his wife Dana and three children, Kraig, Stevie, and Kurt. Dana manages the business side of Steve Kinser Racing, often with the help of her mother Helen Whitehorse. All three Kinser children continue in their father’s footsteps, with Kraig a regular winner on the WoO tour, Stevie a successful Indiana University student/cheerleader, and Kurt a champion high-school wrestler. Steve’s brother Randy, himself a former sprint car racer, helps run the race shop. Steve’s father Bob Kinser was inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999.