

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Sammy Swindell

by Justin Zoch

You can pretty much explain the modern era of sprint car racing in three words: Steve, Doug, and Sammy. 'The Big Three' as they were affectionately known. Now, all three are permanently together again, enshrined just off Knoxville Raceway's second turn, where so many times the trio chased another down the famous back chute. Three larger-than-life personalities arose quickly through the ranks, albeit separately, at the perfect time for a sport in need of a boost. A roadblock has seemingly been put up on the traditional midget to sprint to Indy Car path in the late Seventies, and people within sprint car racing were becoming increasingly frustrated. However, the actions and decisions of three men (Steve, the ultimate champion; Doug, the people's favorite; and Sammy, the quiet engineer), with the help of others, changed the face of the sport forever.

Sammy. Long before he was a one-named wonder, he was the humble son of a racing father who not only gave him a namesake but a B-modified to race at age 15 and a heavy right foot to power it. Success came quickly for the teen and he captured eleven victories in his first season. Losing has never been easy for Swindell because he's never had to get accustomed to it. Swingin' Sam's son was a winner right out of the box.

Throughout the 1970s, Sammy stayed reasonably close to home and raced a mix of modifieds, late models, midget cars and, of course, sprint cars. He waltzed into the next decade with over 140 modified wins, around 20 late model wins, a USAC midget score in Denver, Colorado, and over 100 checkered flags in sprint cars. All of those numbers were compiled before Sammy was age 25.

Together with his younger brother, Jeff, Sammy became an intricate part of a resurgent Memphis-area group that included the Swindell's, Bobby Davis, Jr., Terry Gray and Rickey Hood. As Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws (WoO) started to grow into the premier series in the nation through the early 1980s, Sammy was there every step of the way, finishing second to Steve Kinser in the second tour in 1979 and winning his first WoO title, on the strength of 28 victories in 1981. He backed it up with 14 more Outlaws wins in 1982 and his second WoO championship. The youngster had quickly moved from wonder kid to one of the Big Three. With Steve, Sammy and Doug all up-and-coming, the modern era of sprint car racing, winged and non-winged, looked to be rejuvenated.

The next August, Swindell went to his 10th Knoxville Nationals without a win the sport's biggest event. Over the past four classics, Sammy had three top-fives. In 1983, he put it all together, passed Steve Kinser on lap 25 and scored the \$15,000 victory. Sammy had 30 other victories in 1983 and figured to be a lock for several more Knoxville Nationals championships. To this date, nearly a quarter century later, Sammy is still chasing his second Nationals title. He's been close, oh so close, several times. His epic battle with underdog Bobby Allen in 1990, his crash with Mark Kinser while battling for first in 1997; nine times he's been a top-five finisher since his victory.

Throughout the 1980s, Sammy continued to chase Ted Johnson's Outlaw series but not necessarily its points as he often wandered off the trail just enough to remove himself from title contention. Case in point. In 1985, Sammy had 14 wins and finished seventh in points. In 1986, he had 12 wins and finished eleventh in points. Only Steve Kinser had more World of Outlaws wins during the 1980s. The 1987 season was the only season from 1981 through '89 that Sammy missed twenty checkered flags. He was at his prime and he knew it. He also knew he was not getting any younger and if he wanted to race anything other than sprint cars for the rest of his life, he had better do it soon.

Long before it was fashionable, Swindell made the move to big-time racing. In 1986, he missed qualifying for the Indy 500 by one spot in Pat Patrick's entry. He went the NASCAR route in the early 1990s and made several starts in the Busch Series and competed in the inaugural season in the NASCAR Truck Series in 1995. He was greeted with moderate success, finishing eleventh in the standings the first season in trucks, but soon realized his destiny lay in the dirt; just as he did as a young man when he made the agonizing decision to quit college to go racing.

Upon his full-time return to the sport, Swindell immediately picked up where he left off and scored eleven wins in 1996 before winning his third World of Outlaws title as the series turned 20 years of age. Sammy had been an integral part of the success of the World of Outlaws, minus the rebellion of the United Sprint Association (USA) series in 1989 of which Swindell was a part, and it was appropriate to crown him champion in WoO's anniversary year.

Over the next three years, Swindell was third, fifth and second, respectively, in the point standings as he finished out his final years of full-time point chasing with the World of Outlaws. In the current decade, Swindell has run a more relaxed schedule. This has allowed to pick and choose his events to spend more time with his wife Amy and their only child, Kevin. The youngest Swindell, much like his father before him, raced locally (in the mini-sprints) around Memphis. He traveled sparsely in his first few years as a sprint car pilot and now runs a full schedule with his father. Sammy, just like his father before him, has gone from being a racer to a racer and mentor.

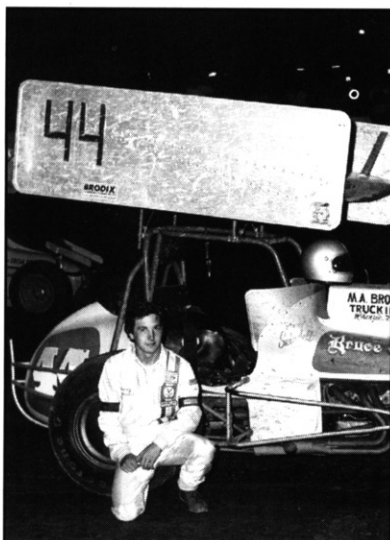
Over the past 30 years, Sammy Swindell has won nearly every major sprint car race and has hugged trophy queens at every important racetrack in this country and several others. In addition to his Knoxville Nationals title, he won the Don Martin Memorial Silver Cup in 2003, scored both \$65,000-to-win Fram Dashes in 1990 and '91, the \$50,000-to-win Selinsgrove Open in 1990, the All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) Ohio Speedweek in 1991, the Western World at Manzanita, three Syracuse Super Nationals titles on the terrifyingly fast mile in upstate New York, and Eldora Speedway's showcase event, the Kings Royal, twice.

He's got plenty of other victories and unusual records, too. He scored the Slick 50-sponsored winter series championship at Manzanita in 1993, recorded the first clean sweep in World of Outlaws history at Bridgeport in 1995, won two World of Outlaws races in one day at Rolling Wheels and Syracuse in October of 1991, and won both WoO shows on Bristol's high banks. In midget car racing, Swindell has mastered the impossible Tulsa Chili Bowl Midget Nationals four times, a race that no other driver has won three times.

All total, Swindell has been to victory lane about 540 times in a sprint car and that number could not doubt have been much higher if not for his ventures into Indy Cars in the 1980s and stock cars in the 1990s. Indeed, they probably would have been higher if not for his insistence at trying out untested equipment and ideas. There have been two hallmarks to every Sammy Swindell race car; it's shimmering, well-polished beauty, and the fact that there is probably something on it that you've never seen on any other sprint car. Swindell has helped pioneer several unique chassis designs, coil-over shocks, and many other devices that he used until everyone else had one. By then, Sammy was on to his next engineering project. His mechanical mastery gets lost in his numbers, but Swindell could be enshrined simply because of his mind, not his foot.

In his career, Swindell has often owned his own race car and was the first owner/driver to win the World of Outlaws championship in 1997. But, he's also straddled some of the most famous driveshafts in sprint car history, including notable stints for Raymond Beadle, Les Kepler, Harrold Annett, Dennis Roth, C.J. Jeffreys and Guy Forbrook.

Thirty-three years after he first shimmied into a sprint car on the banks of the Mississippi mud, Sammy Swindell is not only racing with the World of Outlaws, he's beating them. And, he's not just beating them with talent and experience. He's beating them with brash and bravado, slammin' off the cushion and bangin' off the walls. Earlier this season, Slammin' Sammy Swindell swept a pair of weekend events at Tony Stewart's ultra-tough Eldora Speedway. And now, he's right where he belongs, next to Steve and Doug in the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. He's a true legend all his own.



John Mahoney Photo

