

DOUG WOLFGANG

by Rob McCuen

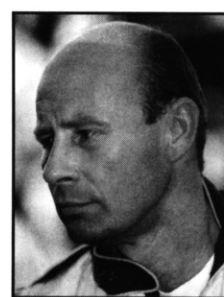
Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a racing hotbed if ever there was one, would prove to be an invaluable training ground for native son Doug Wolfgang. Long on ambition, moxy and natural ability, the young upstart got his first taste of life in the fast lane aboard a B-modified at nearby Huset's Speedway in 1970. Mentored by the likes of California transplant Bill 'Hillbilly' Hill and the late Darryl Dawley, the Wolf made an immediate impression as a kid who wasn't shy about mashing the loud pedal. 'He'll either be a champion or kill himself trying,' was the consensus among fellow competitors at the time. Finesse wasn't a part of his arsenal yet, but attention to detail and long-term vision were already in place. He won at Brookings, S.D., in 1974, and hopped around in several cars in '75 before settling down in Dave Van Patten's number 18 car during our nation's bicentennial.

"I liked sports but I realized my best attribute as an athlete would be to drive race cars. I wasn't gonna be big enough, couldn't jump high enough, run fast enough or hit hard enough. So, my design from day one was to become a full-time race car driver. Not to win Daytona, not to win Knoxville or Indianapolis – but to make my living in a race car," Wolfgang said. "In 1967, I realized that if you started in the midgets or modifieds, went to the sprints and were good, you'd get a shot at Indianapolis. You could be a professional. You could become a millionaire."

By the time Wolfgang was seasoned enough to flex his muscles with the championship car crowd, the Indy car scene had deteriorated to little more than checkbook politics. Sprint cars, however, had suddenly become an end unto themselves and Wolfie began to reexamine his career path. Never short on self-confidence, he contacted the already famous owner/builder Bob Trostle about a welding job. By the time he was through bending Trostle's cars, Wolfgang began the 1976 season steering one of the Midwest's premier rides. The Wolf was on his way and wasted no time showcasing his considerable skills to his new boss by copping the point championship at Knoxville. Then, in 1977, the Wolfgang saga went from impressive to storybook. 45 feature wins and a Knoxville Nationals crown later, the formidable duo mothballed the number 20

car away for the winter. Wolfgang had gone from being a virtual nobody to the most sought-after open-cockpit dirt jockey in the nation.

The good times were rolling in earnest, but Wolfgang was still thinking Indy Cars. Towards that end, he pinned his hopes on "Speedy" Bill Smith, who was making some noise about launching an Indy operation. It never happened, but Wolfie and Smith's famous



Doug Wolfgang
Dave Hill Photo

Speedway Motors number 4x made some beautiful music together in 1978, winning 24 features and his second consecutive Knoxville Nationals.

He returned to the Trostle camp for the early part of 1979 but finished the year with Smith again. "That was about the time they started to out-price Bob and it got to the point where it wasn't much fun for him," Wolfgang said. "I understood that, but I was still young and fired up."



Doug Wolfgang

John Mahoney Photo

the '80 season, Doug Howells came calling and he and the Wolf enjoyed three prolific seasons together. "No frills and chills, but it was a good race car. At the time, it was a first-class operation. It didn't look like much but it was," Wolfgang said.

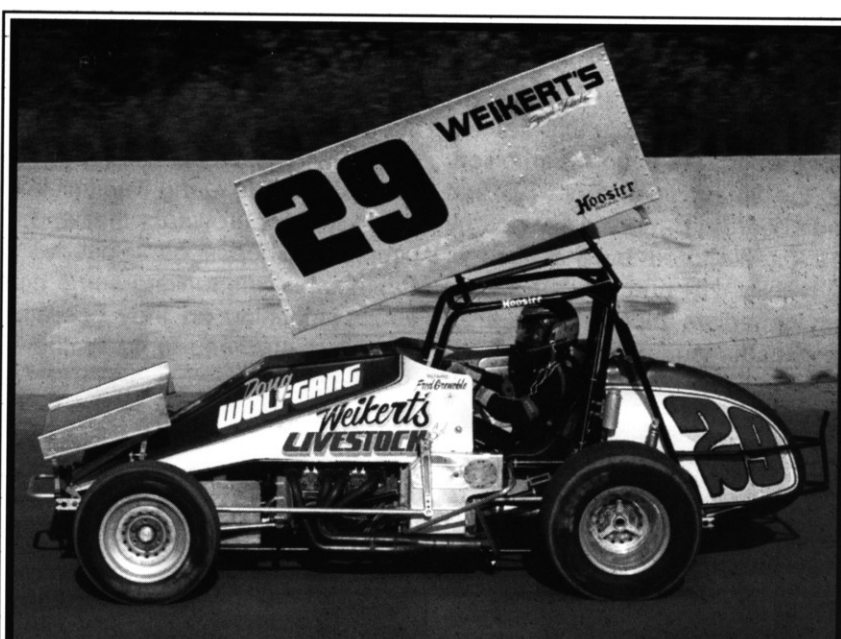
He closed out the 1982 season aboard old pal Gary Stanton's number 75, and then, as '83 opened, it appeared that Wolfgang's ship had really come in. The factory-car era was booming and Wolfgang was drafted for C.K. Spurlock's #18 Gambler house car. It was perhaps the most coveted seat in the sport and the stated goal couldn't have been anymore bottom line... win the World of Outlaws title or else. Despite knocking off 11 features, Wolfgang was dismissed before the year was out. "Everybody thought I was bitter. The only thing I was bitter about was I expected to do better myself, and I thought I gave up a little. I liked Kenny Woodruff (chief mechanic) something fierce. I knew him for five or eight years before that and I thought he was a special, super mechanic. But, I didn't go too good with him and it made me mad. I still ain't figured it out."

Never one to dwell on disappointment, Wolfgang

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DOUG WOLFGANG, cont.

hauled his helmet bag to Wichita and salvaged his 1983 season with two more feature wins for new employer Lavern Nance. They stayed together through the early part of '84, but Wolfie was disillusioned with what he called, "the hi-fi cars." Not knowing what else to do, he reunited with Doug Howells and stayed close to home, quickly reestablishing himself as a Midwest kingpin by finding victory lane twice at Huset's, twice at Knoxville and once, for good measure, at Hawkeye Downs. But Wolfgang was still determined to practice his craft on a more national stage.



Doug Wolfgang

Dave Lawless Photo

Bob Weikert had been trying for years to coax Wolfgang to come to Pennsylvania and on July 18, 1984, the Wolf took the plunge. The results were immediate. Less than a month later, the new team rewarded him with his third Knoxville Nationals ring. "I figured I had nothing to lose and everything to gain," said Wolfgang of the move. "The first time I tried the car, the way they [Davey Brown, Sr., Brown, Jr., and Fred Grenoble] did things fit me better than the other three cars put together."

He stayed in the Beefmobile until the end of 1987, running a relentless schedule of up to 150 nights a year. The wins came fast and furious. A Tuesday night cherry-pick here, a weekly show there, and some All Stars, World of Outlaws; they raced and they won. In 1985 alone, Wolfie won a mind-boggling 52 mains, including the Nationals at Jackson, Sharon, Williams Grove and his second consecutive Knoxville Nationals. Just to seal his reputation as the ultimate big-money racer, he banked \$50,000 at the King's Royal.

Nothing lasts forever and nowhere is that truism more right on than in the rough and tumble world of a profes-

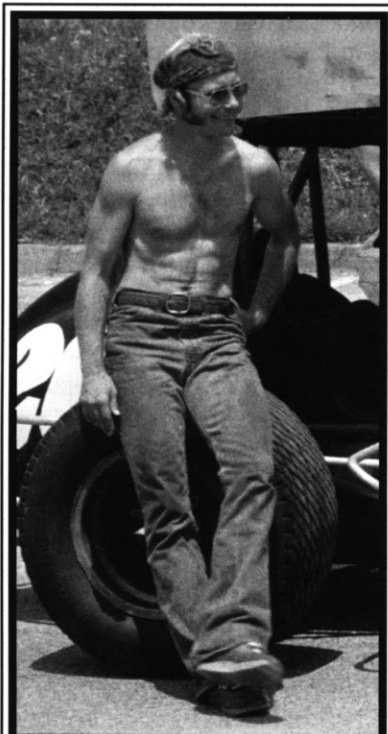
sional sprint car racer. Wolfgang tired of living in Pennsylvania and was longing for the one thing that had eluded him – a World of Outlaws (WoO) title. Wolfgang moved back to Sioux Falls in the spring of 1988 with the intention of running his own deal. Armed with backing from Casey's General Stores and Challenger Racing, Gary Stanton and he hit the road. It didn't take long to see it wasn't working. Says Doug, "Stanton and I are great friends but we never raced

together good. We sucked. He knows it and so do I."

They agreed to pack it in and Wolfgang hitched his wagon to the Fred Marks/Les Kepler Kodiak number 18, which had been vacated by Brad Doty. The Wolf won right away and, in August, he made his famous alphabet charge to fifth at Knoxville. He quit the car before the California swing and finished out the year with Iowa farmer Max Rogers, running a fall series with the fledgling United Sprint Association (USA). "I didn't have nothin' else going on, and we won one and did ok and I liked Max. Then, I got a deal lined up with Danny Peace and Gary 'Deuce' Turrill to run...just run."

One more time, Wolfgang came off the mat and put together another amazing year. With Turrill and Robert Hubbard maintaining the car, brother-in-law Brian Schnee building the chassis and John Singer supplying the power, the team spent 21-year-old Danny Peace's money wisely. They grossed over \$500,000 in prize money in 1989, including a \$50,000 payoff at Selinsgrove, first place loot at the Syracuse mile and, most importantly, Wolf-gang's fifth and final Knoxville holy grail. When all was said and done, Wolfgang stood on the victory podium 44 times. Sadly, though nobody could see it coming, it was to be

DOUG WOLFGANG, cont.



Doug Wolfgang
Bob Thomas Photo

Wolfie's final year as the undisputed king of the sprint car beasts. He wasn't quite through winning, but the domination days were over.

He won another King's Royal and finished second in World of Outlaws points for Ray and Jay Williams in 1990, and though the car banked around \$300,000 at the pay window, he was cut loose at the end of the year.

He was reunited with Rogers in 1991. "I remembered his motors ran good and I just kind of wanted to make the big races and forget about going to California. I didn't want to quit but I wanted to

curtail my effort down to like 80 starts," Wolfgang said.

1991 proved to be a return to his roots for the man called Wolf as he had a solid, if not spectacular, season. They won every time they visited Knoxville, Wolfgang's self-professed home track. In a perfect world, it should have been the foundation for another breakout year. Instead, while practicing for a World of Outlaws pavement show at Lakeside Speedway in Kansas City, Kansas, in April of 1992, the wheels came off the dream forever.

Wolfgang was severely burned and nothing more needs to be said about that hell-on-earth experience. A lawsuit, an appeal, countless reconstructive surgeries and an eventual return to the sport that had given him the best and the worst of times. Late 1993 through '97 brought the man known simply as 'Doug' several wins in the upper Midwest as part of his comeback. In July of '97, as he struggled with the pride-wounding spotty performances aboard Dan Motter's number 71m sprinter, Doug shook his head and said, "I'm a little frustrated. I like being Doug Wolfgang, but I ain't him no more. I know that."

A mere two months later, in a grinding Granite City crash while racing with the All Star Circuit of Champions, a brilliant career was smashed into the Tri-City dirt. There would be no more comebacks for the reluctant legend. Leave it to Wolfgang to keep it all in perspective, "If you're lucky, you get to go home when you are done."

Only numbers can make it any more clear what this man has accomplished throughout his storied career. Even if he had never ventured beyond the confines for Knoxville's fabled half-mile, he would be Hall of Fame material. Besides the two track championships and five Nationals victories, he has 60 career features wins at the Marion County Fairgrounds oval, second only to Danny Lasoski, and he has eleven top five finishes at the August extravaganza. Need more? He's won twice at the Kings Royal, the Syracuse mile and the Dirt Cup at Skagit.

Multiple wins include the Jackson Nationals (4), the East Bay Winternationals (4) and the Williams Grove National Open (3). He's also been first across the stripe at Chico's Gold Cup, the Jayhawk Nationals, National Cheater's Day and the Jerry Weld Memorial at I-70's white knuckle high-banks. In 1996, while still recovering from his Kansas City injuries, he scored his only post-crash championship while wheeling an International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) 360-cubic-inch sprint car. On Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws stage, Wolf amassed 107 career wins, good for fourth on the all-time list, and had 20 feature wins apiece in 1981 and '89 while running the circuit on a part-time basis. He won under the All Star Circuit banner an additional 37 times and just to prove his versatility, Wolfgang bested the United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car clan on three occasions.

Just in case his adaptability needed more leverage than 481 sprint car wins for seventeen car owners in 29 states at 105 tracks, he can also boast of a dominating USAC midget car win at the Iowa State Fairgrounds for owner Nick Gojmerich, a win in a Midwest Auto Racing Association (MARA) midget at I-70 in Odessa, Mo., a National Championship Racing Association (NCRA) super-modified checkered at the Devil's Bowl Speedway in Mesquite, Tex., and two trips to victory circle with Gary Stanton in the USAC Silver Crown division at Flemington, N.J., and Denver, Colorado.

And his many sprint car triumphs have come with life-long, car-owning friends: Mark Burch, Greg Gunderson, Doug Howells, Ray Lipsey, Lenard McCarl, Dick Morris, Lavern Nance, Danny Peace, Max Rogers, C.K. Spurlock, "Speedy" Bill Smith, Gary Stanton, Gary Swenson, Bob Trostle, Dave Van Patten, Bob Weikert and Ray & Jay Williams.

So, what does it mean to Doug Wolfgang to be inducted into the Hall of Fame? Not surprisingly, Wolfgang waxes philosophically on the subject: "If you're an aspiring sprint car driver, I guess, in the end, it doesn't get much better than this. It means you've done your job to the best of your ability. I respect being there a lot. It's not the biggest day of my life, but this would be one of the biggest days of my mom and dad's life if they were alive," Wolfgang said. "My mom taught me how to drive. She taught me how to slide the car into a '55 Chevy. That's how nutty she was. And my dad, although he never put his arm around me and told me that I was the biggest thing in his life, he was my biggest fan."