

The Big E in 1976

A previous story related our experiences in Poland for the 1976 World Final in Katowice. Whilst that was memorable in the extreme and bikes were king for me in those days, perhaps it was the first ever visit to the USA and in particular Rossburg, Ohio that created the spark for my love of sprintcar racing.

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We had been travelling by Greyhound Bus for weeks on end in the Bicentennial year for the United States of 1976. From Buffalo in New York State through Boston, NYC, Philadelphia, Washington, Miami, New Orleans, into Texas, Arizona, California, and the Midwest of America. It was here sitting in an Indiana bus station wondering where to go next, that I was reading the Indianapolis Star and noticed a small advertisement for the season opening USAC sprintcar race at a place called Eldora Speedway on March 28th.

I had naturally heard of Eldora, but being an Aussie on my first trip to the States, I had no idea where it was. And certainly the advertisement didn't help because I now understand that if you are a sprintcar fan you just don't need to be told where Eldora is. You're expected to know.....

In fact, I have subsequently seen modern day T-Shirts which proudly proclaim that *"You're not a true sprintcar fan if you need a road map to find Eldora."* It really is in the middle of nowhere. It was in 1976 and it still is to this day. Cornfields reign supreme out here except for a dirt half mile and Earl Baltes' dance hall, which (in 1976) was an auto racing museum.

But back to the bus station. We had been at Indianapolis all day visiting the famed 500 track. Inspecting the Museum and driving the track in a minibus wasn't really my wife Laima's idea of fun. So, to now suggest that we should take off to the sprintcars wasn't ideal, but it didn't take long to convince her that our next destination was the adjoining state of Ohio. Let me assure you that Greyhound bus schedules certainly don't have Rossburg as a destination.

However, those who were paid to know such things told us to catch a bus to Richmond, Indiana where we got a cheap motel room for the night and lay awake listening to the thunderstorms wreaking their havoc on the town. Just how the speedway would run tomorrow was my greatest concern? But whatever happens, I was determined to get to Eldora anyway, just to see that other magical kingdom in the USA. We agreed that hitch hiking was the way to go

Believe it or not, the day dawned bright and blue with not a cloud in the sky. We set off at 8.00am walking up the main street of Richmond and after 30 minutes a car

stopped. It was a middle-aged guy driving to see his father-in-law in Dayton. Now there's another infamous speedway city. Earl ran the track there too. So, I figured Dayton's OK. We were heading east and "sorta kinda" in the right direction. After buying us a cup of coffee, just so he could listen to our accents a little longer, we bid him farewell.

The next lift came quickly and it was a dude who knew less about the surrounding countryside than we did. We had a map and steered him towards Greenville where we got out. I still wonder to this day where he eventually wanted to go. At the northern end of this town is an intersection of six different highways. The only solution was to walk to there and then put the thumb out again once we were convinced that we were on the right road.

To be fair, at this point it wasn't difficult to get to Eldora. 90% of most passing cars and vans were headed to the track. It was only a matter of who stopped. A Dodge truck did the job. Four guys, already into the Budweisers, were happy to take us to sprintcar heaven. They too were infatuated with the Aussie way of life and listened intently to our tales of life with kangaroos hopping across the Harbour Bridge and causing peak hour traffic chaos. (I'm pretty sure they believed us!!)

And then it emerged, just as we crested a rise in the road. There in all its glory was a racetrack where legends are made. Laima couldn't believe that we had travelled all this way for what at eye level was effectively some tin sheds posing as ticket booths, flattened corn fields as car parks and a very large hole in the ground. But it was the hole that captures everyone's imagination. \$6 got us in and I must admit my initial reaction once through the entrance was one of astonishment. Today's word would be awesome.

High banks??? You want high banks, then go see Eldora. Just as we entered, a sprintcar fired up for an engine start. Its unmuffled exhaust emitted a noise like I had never heard before. I was standing in the grandstand incapable of moving. The decibels emerged from way down below on the track, past my ears, hit the back of the grandstand and then reverberated just as fast back to the track. To Laima it was ear splitting. To me it was beautiful music. And then there was the smell

It was just gone midday and with an hour to kill, I did the usual inspection of the track to find the best place to watch from. Unlike most tracks here in Australia where viewing areas virtually surround the track, Eldora does not allow access to the back straight and in those days, turn 2.

Having selected the start of the front straight off turn 4 as the place to be, I left Laima guarding the prized elevated vantage point about six metres back from the fence on a walkway between the grandstand and turn 4. Eldora veterans will know exactly the spot. I wandered off to the commentator's booth to let them know they

had a couple of Aussies in the crowd and I suppose hoping for something for nothing. But no such luck, although it was announced over the PA that we were there.

Motorhomes, or RV's as the Yanks prefer to call them, spilled over in Turns 3 & 4. Nowadays they only let them in on Turns 1 & 2 behind the massive grandstands which surround track (except for the back straight). In 1976 transporters in the infield pit area were non existent, with the race cars relying on open trailers to get them to the next track. March in Ohio is still virtually winter and the surrounding trees were bare of leaves as they tried to recover from the freezing temperatures of the past months. But the sky was azure blue and the sun was shining.

USAC had moved to cages by 1976, but remained wingless as they are to this day. **The cast of drivers** was immense. Larry Dickson, the '75 USAC sprintcar title holder and Gary Bettenhausen were set to continue their memorable on track battles. Eventual 1976 USAC champion Pancho Carter was there. Tom Bigelow and Rollie Beale were there. Rich Vogler was in town and ready to race. But perhaps the biggest name for me and most of the fans there was Jan Opperman.

Yet to be critically injured for the first time, which came at the Hoosier Hundred in Indianapolis a few months later, Opperman was the "original outlaw". He was unique in all respects. Flaunted authority, but loved sprintcars. To watch him race was something I'll never forget. But he wasn't to win this day. Steve Kinser's late cousin Sheldon took one of his 37 USAC victories in the bright red Genesee Beer Wagon Special. The accompanying photo shows the two champs getting out of their cars on the main straight.



The day was done and the tradition for me had started. But we had to get back to Richmond somehow to become reacquainted with our luggage in the motel. A ride with a young married couple did the trick and he was certainly a frustrated racer as he tried to emulate Sheldon Kinser on the freeway. In fact, that was where he dropped us off ... at an exit ramp!!

It took many, many years to get back to Eldora for another race, but as time goes by it becomes a little easier to make the journey and it is still as compulsive as ever. I remember Trevor Green one day describing Eldora to someone as *"it's like putting a sprintcar video on fast forward and watching them race that way"* he said.

If you've not been there, you just don't know what you're missing

Click on each of the links below for some classic photos.

Looking across to the back straight from the main grandstand in 1976. There is a heat race forming out there ...

The start of that heat race on Turn 4.

Looking up the front straight from Turn 4.

Mid heat race from Turn 4.

Looking down the front straight from Turn 1 as the field for the feature takes shape.

The USAC feature takes the green on Turn 4.

The victorious Sheldon Kinser has just vacated his car on the front straight. With him is 6th place finisher, the incomparable Jan Opperman.