

JAN OPPERMAN

It is not possible that a sprintcar driver in any era could remotely look like a hippie, let alone be one except perhaps for Gary Patterson!!

And certainly, the United States Auto Club (USAC) could never be mistaken for a receptacle for such people. USAC had a proud and long-standing tradition of upholding everything good that was to be found about auto racing. Until Jan Opperman came along.

To quote Jerry Miller from his 1997 article called "Reflections on Auto Racing's Original Outlaw",

"..... Jan Opperman straggled into western Ohio's Eldora Speedway March 31, 1974, looking more like someone who had made a wrong turn at Woodstock than a bona fide sprint-car driver.

"His hair was long and shaggy; he wore a floppy prospector's hat with beads around it and a crucifix on the front. And he wore his new-age Christianity on the sleeve of his denim jacket like a sponsor's patch".

If you look carefully in the photo from an earlier article of mine in SRN, you will see that same crucifix, on the front of his jet black Speedway Motors sprintcar which had just been beaten into second place at Eldora by Sheldon Kinser on March 28th, 1976. Mind you, whilst you could see the Maltese Cross you could also see every other dent and crack in the car as well because it wasn't Opperman's opinion that race cars were meant to look good ... they just had to be fast.

Jan figured that if he was gonna make it in the race car world, he needed to get away from the Pennsylvania tracks and get on the USAC merry go round. But those Midwest guys certainly weren't prepared for what was about to hit them. They allowed him and his reputation in to race, but not into their inner sanctum. It won't be long, they said, before he returns to Beaver Springs, Nebraska and resumes his rodeo riding and the AMA flat track motorcycles.

But try as they might, they just couldn't beat him. His first USAC race taught the opposition more about this colourful outspoken character than they needed to know. Nearly knocked rotten by a flying rock, he manhandled his open cockpit sprintcar into the winner's circle with blood streaming from every facial orifice. The sight of this unlikely champion emerging from his race car shattered the beliefs of what a sprintcar driver was meant to look like.

Jan would go on to win many more USAC events across the Midwest and as Jerry Miller says ...

“ “in that one afternoon, as he praised the Lord and passed the competition, Opperman single-handedly turned "outlaw" into a respectable term in the racing vernacular and provided the original inspiration for the highly successful World of Outlaws series of today”.

The free spirited Opperman was soon to find out just how serious sprintcar racing can be. But there was the next level that was still to be conquered and the Indy 500 loomed as his future goal. He made the cut in 1974 finishing 21st while racing for Parnelli Jones and again in 1976 he improved to 16th, but it was the lure of his beloved dirt track racing which caused him to relinquish all such ambitions and return to what he did best. And to what best suited his lifestyle

It wasn't just the dope he smoked that fuelled the fire in his belly. Those damned sprintcars gnawed away at him and when there wasn't a weekend drive in them, he turned his attention to the Champ cars. Now called Silver Crown cars, the line up in the 1976 Hoosier Hundred at the Indianapolis Fairgrounds saw Opperman up against eventual winner Joe Saldana (senior) and AJ Foyt, who was to come from dead last to take second.

The crowd was loud, vocal and alive, enthralled by the duel between the Hippie Opperman and the Red Indian Johnny Parsons. It was only when the two racers clashed in the third turn and Opperman corkscrewed into the fence that they became silent and sorrowful. It wasn't the triple flip that did the damage. It was the two cars that barrelled into him whilst upside down.

Critically injured and unconscious for three days, he was not expected to survive but his Lord protected him and made it possible for him to race again. But should he have done that? Probably not, because it only prolonged the agony that was yet to come.

Whilst still a winner on the bullrings, he was nowhere near as dominant as before. The artistry and talent which had taken him to a 1971 Knoxville Nationals victory and literally hundreds of features, was gone. Sapped by a timber fence in Indianapolis.

Jennerstown in PA was the finally calling, when in 1981 he was rendered a complete invalid, mentally and physically, following yet another devastating sprintcar wreck. For the next 16 years he relied on his mother and father to care for him, supported from time to time by fundraising from a devastated racing community who had moved on but had not forgotten the free-spirited hippie from Nebraska.

He died a lonely and long overdue death in Sept 1997 finally releasing his soul to the winds which had carried him from commune to racetrack for so many years. He had shied away from publicity all his life and got none in passing. It wouldn't have bothered him ...

Opperman drove countless numbers of cars for countless numbers of owners, but he is perhaps best remembered for his exploits in the Bill Smith Speedway Motors “Spirit

of Truth” Special # 4x. This wasn’t the car I saw him in at Eldora in late March of 1976. (See the first pic below.) That was the #64, which also resides silently in the Speedy Bill Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska alongside the more famous 4x. The second photo is the ‘USAC Beater’, as it should have been called, sitting in the Nebraska museum.

It rests there I’m sure, for no reason other than to evoke enormous memories for tragics like us.

The USA racing history is well preserved and taken care of in that country ... something we are still yet to finish here in Australia.

