

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

John Mahoney

by Justin Zoch

It might look easy. You wait for the car to approach. Look into the viewfinder. Turn your head to the left. Click your right finger. Develop. But, it isn't that easy. With it comes hours and hours of travel time, short nights spent in cheap motels in dirty clothes, afternoons spent plying wares to thrifty racers and weeknights wasted sending packets of photos to newspapers and magazines, hoping for a small check and a complimentary copy. Being a racing photographer isn't easy nor rewarding, but John Mahoney never cared. He was too busy having fun.

For Mahoney, racing was part of his childhood growing up in Indianapolis. His father began taking him to the Indianapolis 500 on the city's west side in 1955. In 1957, I saw my first Hoosier Hundred. All of our Indy heroes were running the dirt cars then and that was really neat. Soon after that, I saw my first sprint car race at Terre Haute and I've been hooked ever since."

"I had always brought a little box camera to the races and after the show I'd go down to the pits and take pictures," said Mahoney. "Then, I got a little print-developing kit and my younger brother Steve and I started making our own prints. Steve actually did most of the darkroom work in those days. I didn't really get into the 35mm stuff until I married my first wife. Her father's hobby was photography, and he built a darkroom just for me. He (Gene Harris) taught me everything I know about making prints. In fact, I dedicated my Full Tilt! book to him, my family, and the late Rich Vogler."

Then, John Mahoney met Gene Crucean while attending Indiana University. The pair clicked immediately and soon began hitting races together, gaining access to the pits in a variety of ways. One was "representing" a fictitious northern Indiana newspaper dubbed Northwest News. "When we needed it, it worked like a charm. In fact, it helped me get published for the first time. I had moved to Sacramento and I told Gene to write to J.C. Agajanian on our phony newspaper's letterhead requesting credentials for the Sacramento 100. I kept checking with Gene to see if he'd heard anything, but he hadn't. I had resigned myself to buying a ticket and sitting in the stands. The night before the race, J.C. held a big movie party and I happened to run into him in the motel hallway. I asked him if he'd received our request. He said, 'yeah, I was wondering why a paper in Gary, Indiana, wanted to cover the dirt champ race in California.' Then, he pulled a pit pass out of his pocket and I was in! That race really started everything for me. A week later, Bill Marvel's Charger Racing News published my Sacramento photos and he named me his West Coast correspondent."

Crucean/Mahoney began publishing Sprint Car Pictorial a couple of years later. Among other things, their annual sprint yearbook provided a legitimate way into the pits at last! "We put the entire thing together for 15 years including the layout, paste-up, all the captions and finally, hauling all the boxes to the tracks to sell them."

Mahoney continued to hone his craft and soon became

intimately involved in the sport of sprint car racing, especially during the 1960's and '70s. "That is still my favorite era in sprint car racing. I was unbelievably lucky to be shooting during those years. There were lots of characters, partiers and nuts in those days, the racing was fantastic and everyone just had a great time. I remember one race weekend at Terre Haute during a two-day (Tony) Hulman Classic sprint show. After Saturday's preliminaries, we spent most of that night having a few beers with several drivers. Next day, it had to be 90 degrees and just as humid. I watched one of our fellow partiers strap himself into his sprinter, sweating profusely and generally looking like hell. I asked him how in the world he could party all night and race sprinter the next day with no more than a couple of hours of sleep. I still remember his answer: "Thank goodness for adrenalin!" "

"It was a lot looser back then, for sure. You could take pictures from a lot of different places around the track, and, as long as you didn't make a nuisance of yourself, no one really cared. It was much easier to get outside

the turns and get those trick angles and great head-on action shots. And, also, there were a lot fewer photographers," Mahoney said. "There may have been only 20 or so guys shooting total. Now there's that many in each turn!"

Throughout the years, Mahoney's work has appeared in almost every sprint car publication, including Sprint Car and Midget, Open Wheel and National Speed Sport News. Mahoney is also particularly proud of his contributions to books detailing the careers of Tony Stewart and Rich Vogler, each of which primarily utilized his work. "I was particularly proud of the Vogler book because he was a hero of mine."

Mahoney has shot for the United States Auto Club (USAC) since the late '60s and Gene and he also got involved in other aspects of the industry. They promoted a handful of races around the state of Indiana and owned a midget car for a spell.

In 2004, Mahoney released a collection of his work, Full Tilt!, chock full of all of his favorite and most historically relevant photos. While several pages feature wild wheelstands or death-defying crash sequences, the beauty of the book is Mahoney's eye for the candid shots.

"I love action stuff, but many of my favorites are the posed and candid shots of drivers. That's why working with the Vogler and Stewart books was so much fun. I had shots of them racing, of course, but also had lots photos of them away from their cars. For example, one of my favorites is a shot of Rich pulling a wagon full of baby toys and clothes with his wife, kids and mom Eleanor in tow," Mahoney said. "I'm a people person and not even remotely a technical type when it comes to the cars, and, for that matter, cameras. I just love the personalities associated with the sport."

When Mahoney was selecting photos for the book, he was aided by the fact that he's been meticulously organized throughout his career. "I have contact sheets of everything I've ever shot and I have

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John Mahoney, Continued

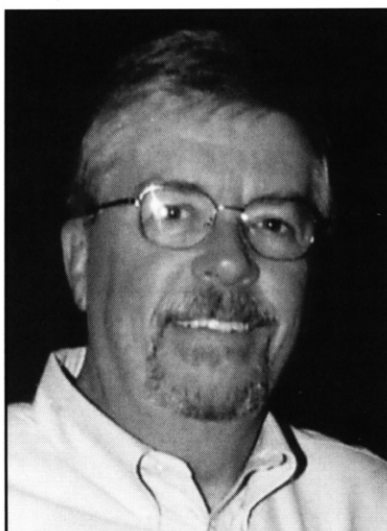
all the names and numbers of the drivers from each race. If somebody tells me a year, a driver and a racetrack, I can usually find something in five minutes or less. It's drudgery creating all the contacts but they're worth their weight in gold when looking for some of the older stuff."

The recent changes in photography, including the digital revolution, have chased off a few of Mahoney's old cronies. "I bought digital equipment last fall but I have to admit I was kind of resistant to making the change, but the digital stuff is getting better and better all the time. The technology is simply amazing these days. When I started, you had to figure out a lot of the camera settings for yourself. But, it is pretty exciting to learn the new stuff, too, with all the new possibilities."

Learning a new technology couldn't keep Mahoney from the racetrack. For nearly fifty years, he's known no other way to spend his weekends. At age 61, don't look for Mahoney to slow down anytime soon.

"So far, I don't think I've become one of those old codgers who whine that the racing isn't as good or will never be as good as it was. I still love it. I still love going to the racetrack and all the new talent running the open wheelers these days. And, I think all of us shooters never really get tired of seeing our stuff in print," Mahoney said. "That's probably kept me young. A lot of my old buddies have quit and done other things for one reason or another, and that's fine for them, but I've just never lost that thrill of being around these

folks. I've probably slowed down a little bit, although my wife Martha wouldn't agree with that. I'm usually off to the races almost every weekend, much like it was thirty years ago. I still feel like I'm 25."



Phil Rider Photo

