

“Sprint Cars”

(reprinted with permission from Allan Brown, author of
“The History of America’s Speedways, Past and Present”)

Sprint car racing is truly an American sport and is one of the oldest forms of auto racing in the country. The present day Sprint Car (called Big Cars until the 1950s) evolved over the years from the early Indy Cars, the Speedsters, the Roadsters and the Super Modifieds.

In 1915, the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) sanction was formed and it probably had as much to do with the development of the early Big Car as anything. The leaders of IMCA consisted of state fair managers who had become disenchanted with the major racing sanction of that time, the American Automobile Association (AAA). When AAA, or ‘Triple A’ as it was known, raised its sanctioning fee, IMCA started to sanction their own races. Back then, most of the state fairgrounds tracks were one-mile dirt tracks built for horse racing. The events were always held in conjunction with the fair, and in those early years, auto racing was considered only an added grandstand attraction.

Many smaller county fairgrounds belonged to IMCA, too, and most of them had smaller 1/2-mile dirt tracks that were also built for horse racing. The length of horse tracks is measured one foot off the inside rail, so the tracks were actually longer where the race cars used them.

About that time it was discovered that a lighter car with a shorter wheelbase was better suited for the smaller dirt tracks. Earlier it had become common practice to cut down Model T Fords and make them into race cars. They were called Speedsters and many a Model T chassis was shortened six inches to an 88-inch wheelbase. Interestingly, most of the present Sprint Cars have about an 86-inch wheelbase. In the 1920s, there were many racing parts available for the Model T engine, including the Frontenac parts built by Arthur Chevrolet.

After World War One, many half-mile dirt tracks built expressly for auto racing sprang up across the nation. All of these were staging Big Car racing and the sport became very popular. The majority of the cars of that era were powered by Fronty-Ford engines or other overhead valve or overhead cam conversions on the four-cylinder Ford block.

The late 1920s and early 1930s were a real boom for Big Car racing. But with the introduction of Midget auto racing in the mid-1930s, the larger half-mile tracks lost some of their popularity. IMCA continued sanctioning Big Car racing as did other organizations, including AAA, who by now had their own short-track Big Car series to complement their Championship division. Today, the most prominent Sprint Car sanctions include the World of Outlaws (WoO), United States Auto Club (USAC), and the American Sprint Car Series (ASCS).

Big Car racing was wild and exciting in the 1930s, but was also very dangerous and only the bravest men would drive the powerful brutes. The driver’s head was high above the rest of the car for optimal visibility, but in a crash the drivers were subject to grave injury caused by hitting any object that got in the way of the speeding car. The average career of a driver was only seven years in this era.

By the 1940s, the special built-for-racing Offenhauser became the standard engine for the top-running Big Cars. That engine continued its dominance until the early 1960s when the

modified Chevrolet V-8 became the dominant engine for Sprint Car racing, replacing the four-cylinder 'Offy.' Today, the fuel-injected 'Chevy' V-8 engines are in most Sprints.

The shape of the one-man Sprint Car has remained basically the same since the early days of racing. The driver sits upright directly behind the engine compartment. The bodies are only big enough to cover the engine, driver and fuel tank. The wheels are exposed with no fenders. Except for streamlining and chassis and tire improvements, today's Sprint Car looks and reacts similarly to their ancestors of seventy-five years ago.

In the mid-1930s, another form of race car known as Roadsters, which were basically cut-down passenger cars, started to gain popularity. They were the poor man's open cockpit racer. About the time they started losing their popularity in the mid-1950s, another form of open wheel race car appeared, the Super Modifieds. They were a hybrid combination of the Big Car, the Roadster and the Jalopy. As cut-down versions of the Jalopy stock cars, they kept the safety feature of the roll cage, but used cut-down bodies like the Roadsters. To conserve on weight, the starters and batteries were removed, thus the Super Modifieds had to be pushed to be started just like the Sprint Cars. It wasn't long before the Super Modifieds were as fast as the Sprint Cars and the cut-down passenger bodies or home-made bodies gave way to Sprint Car noses. Eventually the streamlined tails were adopted from the Sprint Cars, although the roll cages remained. Most of the Sprint Car organizations would not allow Super Modifieds, which were powered by modified production engines. It wasn't until the early 1970s, after public cries for safety, did all sanctions go to roll cages on Sprint Cars. Some other names used for the combination Super Modified and Sprint Cars are Caged Sprints, Super Sprints or Super Modified/Sprints.

Most modern day Super Sprints also have large wings mounted on the roll cages. The wings were first introduced on a Super Modified by Jim Cushman in 1958. His car was called the 'Aero Dynamic Special.' The wings not only give better stability and added downforce on the rear wheels for better traction, but they also are an added safety feature. Most Sprint Car sanctions now mandate the use of the wings except for USAC and the California Racing Association (CRA). Many tracks in Indiana also feature weekly non-winged Sprint Car racing.

Sprint Cars, which run mostly on quarter- to half-mile dirt tracks, are one of the most exciting forms of racing today and have the highest power-to-weight ratio. They also hold the majority of lap records on dirt tracks of one mile in length or shorter. The number of sprint cars with 410-cubic-inch engines is decreasing, although the number of 360 c.i. sprints is increasing dramatically. Even the 305 c.i. sprint car class is growing in the United States. Besides America, sprint car racing can be found in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

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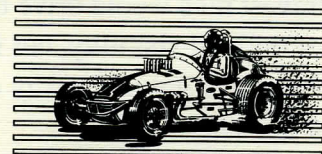
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