



Doug Howells

by Bob Mays

Talent is where you find it, and at no time is that more true than when speaking of Doug Howells. After all, Hunter, North Dakota is not exactly synonymous with places like Knoxville, Eldora, Terre Haute, West Memphis, East Bay, Belleville and Syracuse, but Doug Howells has tasted victory at all those hallowed speed shrines and many more in a career that has spanned close to 50 years.

The 1960's may have been the decade of discontent, but for Doug and his wife, Joanne,

the '60s was the decade when the foundation of an empire was built. The other ingredient in the mix was a potato farmer from just up the road in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. Don Mack was nothing fancy, but he could steer a fast race car right into victory lane. Starting in 1963, the Howells number 4 super modified with Don Mack at the wheel became the dominant force in the upper Midwest. Championship belts were won at Grand Forks and Minot in North Dakota, and race wins came by the dozens at additional tracks across Minnesota, South Dakota and Nebraska.

By the mid-1960's, the Howells-Mack combine decided to tackle the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) events that were close to home. With Max Campbell providing extra funding, they were 'top 20' material even though they ran fewer than half the races. In 1969, Mack and Howells made a concerted effort to win the title and finished tied for second, with more wins (six) than any other team on the circuit. Most years though, Mack's obligation to the family potato farm limited the amount of late season racing for the team.

As the 1970's dawned, the Howells-Mack team found themselves branching out again, this time on asphalt. The Golden 200 at St. Paul, Minnesota, fell to them in 1976, followed with consecutive Florida 500 victories in 1977 and '78. The topper was when Howells' white number 4 pulled into victory lane at the 1978 Little 500 in Anderson, Indiana.

Mack and Howells committed to the World of Outlaws (WoO) tour in 1980 and were having a good season when Mack decided to retire from driving. Mack's parents had been killed in an auto accident the previous fall, and the pressure of running the family business plus racing full-time became more than the likeable Mack could handle. Doug and Joanne didn't have to look very far for a replacement. Doug Wolfgang had just been put on waivers from his previous team, and the Howells number 4 was a perfect fit; the new team won early and often.

Perhaps the two biggest wins of the Howells/Wolfgang partnership were at each end of the 1981 racing season. The first to fall was the East Bay Winter Nationals in Gibsonton, Florida; the last was the Syracuse Super Nationals in Syracuse, New York. In between were WoO victories at Houston, Mesquite, Kansas City, Granite City, West Memphis, Oklahoma City, Belleville, Fairmont, Erie, Sedalia, Eldora, Butler and Knoxville. A second place finish in 1981 WoO points was the result.

The year 1982 started out well enough, with wins at the Florida State Fair, East Bay and Volusia County to begin the season. More wins piled up as the team won with the National Speedway Contest Association (NSCA) at Sedalia, Missouri and the All-Star Circuit of Champions at Brownstown in Indiana, and Fremont, Wayne County and Millstream in Ohio. WoO checkered flags were collected at Knoxville, I-70 and Eldora. At mid-season, Wolfgang decided to leave the team and Jack Hewitt was hired by Howells to drive the white 4. Despite Hewitt's limited experience on the WoO tour, wins were recorded at Butler, Michigan, and Santa Maria, California.

Over the next few years the names that Doug and Joanne painted on the side of the white number 4 were some of the best in the business. Jac Haudenschild, Danny Smith, Lee Osborne, Rocky Hodges, Joe Gaerte, Kenny Jacobs, Todd Mack and Rick Ungar took turns wheeling cars for Howells through the mid-1980's.

Eventually, Doug put the white 4 into semi-retirement, but still kept his wrenches handy. A stint with Del McClure's dirt championship car team in 1993 netted the USAC Silver Crown title for driver Mike Bliss. Howells' experience with asphalt played a vital role as four of the nine races contested were on the macadam, with the Bliss/McClure/Howells team winning three of them.

Doug has spent the last few years tutoring his grandson, Lee Grosz, who is just beginning his sprint car-driving career. Unfortunately, Joanne passed away from cancer just as the Howells racing team was getting back together. Doug and Lee have soldiered on, running the newly formed American Sprint Car Series (ASCS) Northern Plains regional tour in 2006. The new team acquitted themselves very well, finishing fourth in the ASCS Northern Plains points for the season.

In 2007, Doug and Lee won the ASCS North Plains regional series with a win at the North Central Speedway in Brainerd, Minnesota. They also finished sixth in the ASCS Midwest region and scored a win at Devils Lake Speedway in Doyon, North Dakota.

Following a career which includes wins in some of the biggest races in the country over the last half-century, it appears that Doug Howells is just beginning to have fun.



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