

Kenny Woodruff

by Norm Bogan

Born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1940, Kenny Woodruff grew up not far from the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame that he now enters. Woodruff's endeavors leading toward his induction actually began in Iowa as a young teen. Initially trying his hand as a driver in one of the stock car classes and then wrenching for his brother, Kenny soon realized that utilizing his skills to prepare a winning car for others to race was more rewarding.

Relocating to California at the age of nineteen, Woodruff's interest in fast cars was a natural for a teen in the Fifties. While Kenny operated an auto repair business on the side, he soon gravitated toward high-powered race cars as a welcome respite from his job in a factory. With supermodifieds racing at the West Capital Speedway near his Sacramento base, Woodruff was able to hook up with these racers. Kenny used his natural mechanical ability while honing his skills that would eventually lead him to over forty years of wrenching for some of the most storied drivers that ever strapped into sprint cars. His list of pilots is like a Who's Who of sprint car racing. Woodruff became respected for his work ethic, teaching many drivers about their machine, and how to apply that to different race track conditions.

As the supermodifieds evolved into sprint cars, Woodruff traveled with the Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC) throughout northern and central California. Kenny's cars gained a reputation of coming to a race to win, and Woodruff's attention to detail gave his drivers a machine capable of victory. While many teams would run a weekly schedule with one of the racing clubs, some competitors became roaming gypsies in pursuit of the big money races throughout the country. Each summer, Kenny would return to his native Iowa for the Knoxville Nationals sprint car championships. Then in the fall, he would travel to Keith Hall's Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix, Arizona, for the Western World, and on to J.C. Agajanian's Ascot Park in Gardena, California, for the Pacific Coast Open. Each of these races showcased the elite sprint car drivers from throughout the United States, who had traveled great distances in pursuit of the brass ring and the large reward that came with winning a 'Triple Crown' show.

In 1978, this band of nomads was gathered together by Ted Johnson to form a circuit of racers known as the World of Outlaws (WoO). There would be races scheduled with increased purses, allowing the teams to travel in a more organized pursuit of big money races. With the inaugural \$2,000-to-win WoO race scheduled at Lanny Edwards' Devils Bowl Speedway in Mesquite, Texas, Woodruff and his driver, Jimmy Boyd, towed from Sacramento to pick up the first-ever World of Outlaws final-night feature victory and the winner's share of the pot. This one race identified them as the 'Best of the Best'.

In 1979 and '80, Woodruff traveled on the World of Outlaws circuit with Sacramento drivers Johnny Anderson and Tim Green at the controls. During this period they garnered eight feature wins. In 1981, Danny Smith took over as Kenny's driver and, in 1982, Woodruff and Smith campaigned Gambler Competition's 'house car'.

During Woodruff's tenure as crew chief for the number 18 Gambler car, drivers like Doug Wolfgang, Steve Kinser and Sammy Swindell each got behind the wheel. In 1984 and '85, Bobby Davis, Jr., sat at the keyboard and the team finished third and second, respectively, in WoO points, while winning eleven features.

In 1987, Woodruff and Davis moved to the Beverly & Casey Luna team and, in 1989, they claimed the prestigious World of Outlaws title. After his return from heart surgery in 1990, Kenny had an all-star list of drivers in the number 10 Luna-owned sprinter. Johnny Herrera, Lealand McSpadden, Danny Lasoski, Jac Haudenschield and Jeff Swindell all drove for the Luna's and Woodruff.



Keith Wendel Photo

In 1993, Kenny formed an alliance with Dave Blaney that lasted for five years. Dave commented that Woodruff reminded him of his Dad, as he "worked extremely hard and expected to win, each time out". This was a most prolific period for both of these veteran campaigners, as together Blaney and Woodruff won the World of Outlaws point title in 1995, and finished the grueling season as runner-up on four other occasions. This team also captured several of the country's most prestigious events, including two King's Royal championships at Eldora Speedway, the Historical Big One at Earl Baltes' same speedway in Rossburg, Ohio, the Gold Cup Race of Champions at Chico, California, and the Knoxville Nationals in Iowa.

Woodruff enlisted with the Donny Schatz Motorsports team for three years and became a mentor to the talented young driver, providing him with a well-prepared and reliable car. They amassed fifteen WoO feature wins, including two victories in inaugural races at tracks in NASCAR country, the Dirt Track at Lowe's Motor Speedway and the dirt-covered Bristol Motor Speedway.

Kenny served with Dennis Roth's Beef Packers team with Sammy Swindell doing the driving chores, and then joined the Sather Racing Team providing Natalie Sather with quality equipment and years of wisdom to optimize her learning curve.

While a revered mechanic in his own right, Kenny is also a proud father as his son, Jeff, has followed in Woodruff tradition and is now the crew chief for Oklahoma's Wayne Johnson, one of the favorites at the weekly Knoxville Raceway events.

Kenny would probably name Eldora as his favorite track, where his cars have accumulated four Historical Big One titles, each with a different driver (Dave Blaney, 1997; Dale Blaney, 1998; Kevin Gobrecht, 1999; Donny Schatz, 2002). Of course, there is always the Knoxville Raceway and his cherished 1997 Knoxville Nationals win there with current NASCAR racer Dave Blaney. While the gruff-exteriored Woodruff has been associated with nearly every star over the past four decades, he still idolizes a couple of his early heroes, A.J. Foyt of Texas and Parnelli Jones of California.

Kenny and his wife, Annie, have settled in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, placing them in the center of the nation as they criss-cross the country regularly during the racing seasons.

