CHUCK AMATI

by Dave Argabright

Over the past three decades, there has been a name that is elusive and exciting, enduring and colorful. Amati.

Chuck Amati is one of the original outlaws, a star who built his legend during an era when the term defied any organized definition. His career stretched across six different decades, 1959 through 2002, and he became one of the most popular and interesting characters in the sport.

Born November 16, 1940, Amati's father was a self-employed businessman living in Freeman Spur, Illinois. Chuck began his driving career in 1959 in a '49 Ford at Murfreesboro, Illinois, and within a year he was winning races. The cars soon evolved to open-wheel "supermodifieds," the predecessor of today's sprint cars.

He was especially tough at the old half-mile track at Paducah, KY, in 1961. His confidence grew and, in a moment that would define his career, Amati decided to hit the road searching for "big money" races. The road, it would turn out, would come to own Chuck Amati.

He haunted Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi in those early years. Cape Girardeau and Charleston in Missouri; Benton, Blytheville, Osceola in Arkansas; Millington and Milan, Tennessee.

It was at Riverside Speedway in West Memphis, Arkansas, that Amati met Clarence "Hooker" Hood. Hood was the leading star in the region, a prolific winner who earned an almost cult-like following with his colorful style and kind, fan-friendly demeanor.

"I wanted to be just like Hooker Hood," says Amati four decades later. "From that point on, that was all it was about. I wanted to outrun him, and I wanted to be just like him."

Those were fearsome days, racing on dangerous tracks in dangerous cars. Safety equipment was virtually non-existent, and dreadful hazards lurked at many tracks.

"At Paducah there were trees just a couple of feet from the backstretch, with no wall or fence of any kind," he says. "Board fences, the lighting wasn't very good, old worn-out ambulances that might not start, it wasn't very safe. But it was all we knew so we just kind of ignored the issue and went on."

His number nearly came up in 1964, when his car plunged through a board fence at Milan, Tennessee. A 2-by-6 timber nearly took his right arm off, ripping his bicep in two and damaging nerves, tendons, and ligaments, all of which took nearly a decade to heal. Amati, who made his living in the race car, couldn't afford to be idle, so he devised a leather harness that held his right arm in his lap while he raced, steering with this left hand. Within two weeks he was back in action.

Amati continued to win despite the injury, and people soon talked of "that One-Armed Bandit" who would roll into town and beat the locals, taking the prize money home with him. Although he eventually regained the full use of his arm, the nickname would stick with Amati for the remainder of his career.

In 1967 Amati moved to Tennessee and began driving the Hil-Bilt car owned by Les Hill of Greenfield, Tennessee. That car was the genesis of the career of Jack Elam, a local teenaged boy who would eventually create the famed "J&J" chassis.



John Mahoney Photo

Amati stayed with the team until 1970, winning frequently.

In 1971 he teamed with M.A. Brown of McKenzie, Tennessee, driving the soon-to-be-famous number 44. The move greatly increased Chuck's "range," as he and Brown raced as far north as the Dakotas and throughout the Midwest. In 1972 they pursued the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) title, and after a season-long battle with Ray Lee Goodwin and Dick Sutcliffe, ultimately finished second behind Goodwin in the final IMCA points chase.

He left the team in 1973, and moved back to his home in Freeman Spur. He continued to race in the area, and eventually teamed with Sam and Richard Short out of Marion, Illinois. In 1976 they had a monster year, hitting the road each weekend to race from Williams Grove to Kansas City, Mobile to Michigan, or anywhere in between. They won nearly 50 feature events in 1976, and Amati's legend was permanently forged as he swept into towns across the U.S., in search of "big money" races that often paid $2,000 to win, his name appearing in headlines in *National Speed Sport News* nearly every week.

In 1977 he and the Short Brothers returned to win 30-plus features, but Amati re-injured his arm in mid-season and struggled to regain his winning form. At the end of the season the team disbanded and Amati was once again looking for a ride.

He raced for a variety of teams during the next few years, then spent a productive couple of seasons with Indiana's Richard Briscoe beginning in 1980.

Amati teamed with Jerry Shields of Bloomington, Indiana, in 1982, with local wrench Daryl Tate maintaining the car, and with Kelly Kinser driving a second Shields car. In 1983 Shields elected to race just one car, and Amati and Tate left the team. Amati "bounced around" through a variety of rides, including his own team, which ended in a violent crash at the inaugural Kings Royal at Eldora in 1984. Amati was "wiped out" financially with the devastating crash, and suffered equilibrium problems for many months following the accident.

After a two-year layoff, Amati returned to the cockpit at Lawrenceburg, Indiana, in 1986 in Terry Winterbotham's car. After a few anxious moments of soul-searching, he regained the familiar "mojo" and won in his first time back.

In 1988 he and Tate reunited for three magical seasons in Indiana. Racing local tracks such as Paragon, Lincoln Park, Bloomington, and Kokomo, they won 20-plus features each season, including the 1989 and 1990 Indiana Sprint Week titles (in '90 he tied with Gary Trammell). Stretched both physically and financia ly, they disbanded the team at the end of 1990 and Amati spent part of '91 racing for Harry Bradham in Illinois and Indiana, before finally climbing from the race car and enduring a long layoff from the sport.

He didn't come to races, and for many years it was as if he had disappeared. People began to wonder what had become of the famed "One Armed Bandit."

"Being real honest with you, for many years racing was my entire life," he says. "I probably didn't get involved in any other parts of life, until after 1991, then I got involved in *LIFE*."

He built a close relationship with his grandson, Shane, and eventually worked as a salesman for his friend, trucking company owner Jim Hall in Missouri.

In 2001 and 2002 he made a part-time return to driving, racing a half-dozen times in Missouri and Illinois for both Guy Webb and Gary Cravens. He laments that throughout his entire career from 1959 to date, it was the only active seasons in which he was unable to win a feature race.

Chuck Amati's proudest achievement? It's his solid status as one of the original traveling outlaws.

"I traveled a lot throughout my career, before the Outlaws ever existed," he says. "If somebody had a big-paying race in Mississippi, Florida, Missouri, wherever, there were three people that you'd probably see at those races: myself, Rick Ferkel, and Bobby Allen. Wherever there was a race that paid some money, one or all three of us were going to be there."

His "on-the-gas" style is legendary, and while there is no documentation, it is believed that Amati won anywhere from 600 to 1,000 races in his career.

"There was one season that I was upside down 23 times," he says. "But I had also won 30-some feature races. There were nights that I flipped in the heat race, fixed the car, and won the feature.

"I'm not ashamed of the fact that I raced hard. I was very aggressive, because winning races was really important to me. I always felt that I had to try as hard as I could to win. That's the way I always raced: to win."