

Bob Hampshire

by Bryan Autullo

It was the end of Ohio Sprint Speedweek 2005 and another hot summer night in July at K-C Raceway in Chillicothe, Ohio. The All Stars were out in full force on the final night of their annual showcase that usually marks the middle of the racing season each year. The familiar white and red number 63 Bob Hampshire-owned, Barfield Gift Fruits-sponsored winged 410-cubic-inch sprint car piloted by young phenom Greg Wilson was burning up the track and looked to be a favorite to win as he did just

six nights earlier in the Speedweek opener at Attica.

Long-time All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCOC) car owner Bob Hampshire, who reached legendary status when Jack Hewitt was behind the wheel of the famous number 63, was contemplating retirement. His intentions were to finish out the 2005 season and then make his exit. However, on this particular night at K-C, with the costs of fielding a competitive sprint car team on a touring series increasing significantly over the years, Bob decided that concentrating on his engine-building business and his grandchildren were to be his immediate future.

Bob was never one to do anything half-heartedly. If he was not able to dedicate 100 percent of his time and energy to it, then it was no longer fair to his driver. He knew it was time to make his exit. Greg won the race that night, the \$10,000-to-win Ohio Sprint Speedweek finale. They celebrated in victory lane as they had done many times before, and Bob was able to walk away from it on a high note as so many legends have done in the past.

What determines a successful career as a sprint car team owner? Is it the number of feature wins? Is it the quantity of talented drivers that have sat behind the wheel? Or is it the number of series and track championships? In Bob Hampshire's case it is a combination of all these along with the many friends he made along the way.

Bob's demeanor is quiet, but the wheels in his head are always turning, and each move is calculated and intentional at the racetrack as well as in life itself. His "hands on" approach to running a sprint car team sparked the careers of many drivers over the years. He has most recently mentored son-in-law Chad Kemenah and nephew Greg Wilson over the last six years to a total of six All Star championships, none of which came in his car, but he was always there to lend a hand and some advice.

Bob started his racing career in 1964 as a drag racer and racing Modified Production Corvettes but soon found that the thrills of dirt track racing were far greater for him. He drove mini stocks and late models before discovering that there was more money in sprint cars. Ironically, he has never driven one. He decided in 1979 to become an owner and hired Jay Pilcher to pilot that first ride.

Next to strap into the Hampshire 63, in 1980, was Johnny Beaber, who finished fifth in All Star points that year. Then between 1981 and '82 came Rick Ungar, Rick Ferkel and Keith Kauffman. Then Jac Haudenschild took over in 1983 and '84.


In 1985, the magic started to happen. Bob hired Jack Hewitt and the two bonded like brothers. "Hamp was like 'Radar' O'Reilly on *M*A*S*H*," Hewitt recalled. He knew what Jack was thinking before Jack could say it. "If my driving was a bit off one night," said Hewitt, "Hamp would fix it with his mechanical knowledge. If he was a little off, my driving would take up the slack. If we were both on the same page, sorry about everyone else's luck."

Their career together netted more than 100 feature wins and countless top-five's running with or without a wing against the All Star Circuit of Champions, United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint cars and Silver Crown cars. The two were almost unstoppable in the late '80s and early '90s. Hewitt nearly lapped the entire field twice on two separate occasions in that dirt championship car.

Hampshire has seen many drivers come and go. His memory recalls roughly 35 guys who have driven for him over the years, some for just a race or two. It was fitting that he finished out his career with his nephew Greg. They had a good run together and launched Greg's career as one of the top sprint car drivers in the country today. Bob can still be found roaming the pits helping out son-in-law Chad Kemenah and spending time with his grandchildren and daughter Tracy.



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