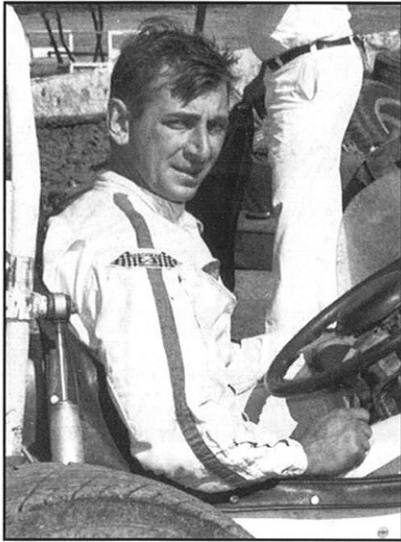


Leroy Byers Photo



Earl Wagner

by Tom Savage

Earl Wagner started his driving career at the old Kessels/Pioneer Speedway in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1957. His 'racer' of choice was a Ford coupe stock car that had a body that closely resembled a used-up tube of toothpaste. Despite the appearance of the car, Earl wheeled it to a feature win in his rookie year at Kessels and also won a feature that same year at the Chariton, Iowa fairgrounds.

Wagner won his first of 43 feature events at Knoxville Raceway in 1958 and was also

the '58 season champion at the famous speedway. He successfully defended his championship title in 1959, but by then the 'stock' cars were losing their identity and the birth of the super-modified dawned at Knoxville. Pre-war coupe bodies were no longer used and instead fabricated sheet metal was housed around roll-caged drivers and fire-breathing horses were housed under the hoods.

He was the 1961 Knoxville super-modified champ and started touring to outlaying joints. Between 1961-64, he went on a winning rampage with the super-modified, winning features at Waterloo, Rockwell City, Des Moines, Mason City, and Boone in Iowa, in addition to his triumphs at Knoxville. He also scored at Marshall and Kirksville in Missouri and Sioux Falls in South Dakota. He ran his first sprint car (cage-less) race in 1959 and divided his time between the supers and the sprinters until 1965, when he became a full-time sprint car racer. His modified and super-modified rides were with owners Dean Sylvester and Harold "Slim" Gutkencht, and he steered sprint cars for Bob Trostle, Hank Smith, Fred Kain and Bill Moyer among others.

Wagner continued his winning ways with a sprint car and assaulted cushions -- he always ran up top seeking or building his own cushion -- and scored victories at Cedar Rapids, Boone, Des Moines, Spencer as well as Knoxville in Iowa; Sedalia, Missouri; Topeka, Kansas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Sioux Falls, South Dakota and the 1973 Western World Championship at Keith Hall's Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix in Hank Smith's number 5 car with a badly bent front axle and a B.F. Goodrich recap white wall on the left rear.

Known as a genuine sprint car racer, Earl was also an accomplished stock car racer. He won several features in Iowa including the 100-lap feature at the Iowa State Fair. He joined the United States Auto Club (USAC) on a Temporary Permit (TP) and, with a door-handled Dodge, traded slide jobs and fender wrinkles with Roger McCluskey in a USAC Knoxville run. He attempted to qualify the Dodge at Pocono, Pennsylvania, but returned home to Iowa saying that the "damn thing handled like a pogo stick."

Wagner returned to his beloved sprint cars and, in 1974, won two features at the Iowa State Fair and promptly retired from driving race cars. In 1975, he became the chief pit steward at Knoxville and held that position through 1999, when he retired. He served as a one-term mayor of his hometown of Pleasantville, Iowa, in 1994-96, and he was a Marion County supervisor from 1997-2001. And, on July 7, 1985, the *Des Moines Register* named him 'Iowa's Best Race Car Driver', which was an honor presented to Earl by the Governor of Iowa.

Earl has always been laid back about his racing accomplishments with an aw-shucks-weren't-nothin' attitude. But indeed he was one of a very, very few gifted men who could manhandle a sprint car with the finesse of a brain surgeon. A sprint car fit him like a glove. He could interact the steering by throttle response, could 'read' a quickly changing dirt surface, adapt his technique and never ever breathe the throttle. Earl was a charter member of the Knoxville Raceway Hall of Fame in 1979 and received the Heritage Award from the same speedway in 1990.



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