



Roger Rager

by Tom Savage

Roger Rager was an outlaw racer, a cushion bustin' stab-it-and-steer-it renegade long before Ted Johnson gave birth to the 'World of Outlaws' tag. Rager, who was born on September 3, 1948, in Lincoln, Nebraska, started racing in '68 and found his way to the scene quickly.

He was the 1975 Knoxville Raceway season point champion and ran second to Eddie Leavitt

at the prestigious Knoxville Nationals that same year. Rager boasts over a dozen feature wins at the Marion County Fairgrounds oval in Iowa on his resume.

Eldora? He ran 'er right up against the wall, right rear churning Darke County mud. He ran West Memphis, Manzanita, Volusia or any arena with a surface of dirt and enough of a payday to make it down the road.

Roger is a Nebraska born son of a racing man from a gene pool comprised of ample doses of bravado, methanol, quick wit and sharp tongue.

In his lifetime, Rager banged and nerfed with some formidable foes including Jan Opperman, Kenny Weld, Doug Wolfgang and crusty old Lloyd Beckman. Like his fellow combatants, he was never much for rules, clubs, dues or shiny chrome-plated race cars. He just wanted them to be loud and to go fast. His wardrobe was blue jeans and a handful of racing t-shirts, he towed his racer behind a pickup truck, he drank warm beer from a can, ate cold hot dogs on stale buns, showered in car washes and raced when and where he wanted. He was indeed the real deal, a bonafide chisel-it-in-concrete epitome of an outlaw sprint car racer.

Except for one thing – the one story that truly defines Roger Rager.

Deep in his innards he had this long festering urge, an unbridled desire and an all-consuming dream. Dirt track sprint car racers were a vanishing breed on the entry list for the 1980 Indianapolis 500 as most new aspiring drivers were coming from across the pond. Still wanting to run the 500 and knowing that owners were not calling, he decided to become an Indy car owner as well as a driver. He scrimped and saved, robbed the piggy bank, warped the credit card and purchased an old hand-me-down used engineless Wildcat chassis. With the aid of some of his sprint car pals they inserted a healthy 350-cubic-inch Chevrolet sprint car engine out back and the newly formed team headed for the West 16th Street and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

When the Speedway opened on May 1st huge transporters inched through the

gate loaded with spare cars, spare engines, spare mechanics, computers, personal chefs and personal attendants. Rager towed through the gate on an open sprint car trailer complete with a WoO sticker, tire racks, tool boxes, a roadmap and a case of beer on ice. But Rager came to race and with the Chevrolet horse screaming down the long chutes he posted the tenth fastest time of the 33 qualified cars.

Now Roger became a media darling, a dark horse and was hounded by TV and radio reporters wanting interviews. One of the media asked about the origin of the Chevrolet engine. Roger, his wit honed to perfection, enjoying the limelight and wanting to get a job at the Indy establishment said, "Aw, we got it out of some old wrecked school bus in a junkyard." Carpenter Bus, a local manufacturer of school bus bodies, saw that interview and came forward with a race day sponsorship to join Advance Clean Sweep on the car.

At the start of the race Johnny Rutherford, Bobby Unser and Mario Andretti staged a dogfight up front. Roger lost two spots early but was back up to ninth by the tenth lap, passing A.J. Foyt for that position. A turn two crunch brought out the yellow flag early in the race and all the top runners opted to pit for tires and fuel, except for Roger. He stayed on the track and became the new leader. Now sprint car fans were really whooping it up. "Hey, a Sprint Car racer is leadin' the damn Indianapolis 500."

Roger pitted on the next lap, lost his front running position and resumed the race in 21st spot. He slowly worked his way forward and was running in 17th place when his race day ended. Jim McElreath, who had been fighting an ill-handling car all race long, lost it and spun in front of Roger off the second turn. Roger swerved hard to the left to miss McElreath and spun off the course and into the infield retaining wall.

Rutherford won the race, while Rager was officially credited with leading two laps and awarded 23rd position with a payday of \$26,500. He never returned to Indianapolis. He didn't have to do so. He fulfilled his dream and in the process stood the Indy establishment on its ear.

Roger Rager semi-retired from racing to "coach my son in wrestling and do some other sports with my daughter," and to run a resort with his wife Gail at their home near Brainerd, Minnesota, called Rager's Acres. He was still a racer, though, and was coaxed from retirement in the late nineties and enjoyed another decade in the cockpit of winged and non-winged sprint cars, and championship dirt cars.

He's introduced his outlaw spirit and style to a whole new generation and won point championships with the WISSOTA Promoters Association in 1999 and the Midwest Sprint Series (MSS) in 2000 and '01. Roger has also cruised to victory against fellow 'old guys' in the winged 360-cubic-inch Knoxville Masters Classic three times – in 1999, 2001 and '05.

Roger Rager was inducted into the Nebraska Auto Racing Hall of Fame in 2005.

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