



Lee Osborne

by Doug Kennedy

He is the son-in-law of famous stock car and modified driver Donald "Dutch" Hoag and he built the first sprint car for 13-year old phenom Jeff Gordon ("He looked awful small, but he was talented. I didn't think that he could hang onto it."). But, above all, Lee Osborne is truly one of sprint car racing's best as a driver and a car builder.

The connection for Hoag and Osborne goes way back to when Hoag's daughter, Donna, and Lee were dating as high schoolers but each went their own ways and got married to someone else. At the time, Dutch was driving the number 18 orange modified for Ray and Donnie Turner. Lee, who was working as an excavator with another Turner brother, was given a wrecked modified by the Turners in 1964.

"It was in the back of their shop and I resurrected it," said Osborne. Instead of 18, Osborne turned the orange modified into the number 81. "It was my first modified," he said. "Dutch was a pretty talented guy, but that's how I got to know him." After Lee was divorced from his first wife and Donna's husband died, the couple re-united and got married.

Lee Osborne, a native of Spencerport, New York, began racing motorcycles in the early sixties. By 1965 he was racing modifieds at Shangri-La, Fulton, Spencer, Syracuse, and Waterloo Speedways where he would win 50 or so features over the next four years. "Wherever they had racing, I would be there," said the 63-year-old Osborne. "If we could get there, we would race."

Then in 1969, while living with an attorney and his wife, Jerry and Nell Kennedy, and at the age of 23, he bought a sprint car from Indianapolis 500 driver Steve Krisiloff and began racing in Pennsylvania. In his first race, a United States Auto Club (USAC) race at Reading, Osborne broke a rear end. In his second race at Williams Grove, a gearbox broke, and then in his third race, he lost a motor. "It turned out not to be a very good car," said Osborne. "That was the beginning of my racing education."

It would also be the year that Osborne and his first wife, Nancy, would move to Etna, Pennsylvania, just outside of Harrisburg.

In 1970 "Bud" Miller's original All-Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) series was up and running, and so was Osborne. He would run 100-lap feature races every Wednesday in eastern Ohio, western and central Pennsylvania, and the southern tier of New York. Lee's wins that year at Stateline and Erie enabled him to finish third in points behind champion Ralph Quarterson and Bobby Allen, respectively.

Sharing a speed shop with Dick "Toby" Tobias, Lee built his first sprint car a year later. Realizing that his career at the time was racing in Central Pennsylvania, Lee and his wife bought a home in Mt. Zion. Lee was a regular on Jack Gunn's tough Keystone Auto Racing Speedways (KARS) circuit. Following two years of dormancy, the All-Star Circuit came back in 1973 with Jan Opperman winning the title. Lee Osborne finished seventh in points, with his good friend Lynn Paxton in eighth.

Then, Indiana's Wally Meskowski, builder of a host of sprint and championship dirt cars including ones for Patrick Racing and STP, offered Osborne a full-time ride -- if Lee would move to Indiana. Lee Osborne won the 50-lap Winter Nationals in 1974. Osborne also went on to win four USAC sprint car races that year and captured the Rookie of the Year title.

Even though USAC was a high profile operation, it also limited its drivers to the number of races they could run. "USAC wanted us to drive exclusively for them but financially it was tough," said Osborne, who was used to running 70 to 80 races a year back in Pennsylvania. After moving to Jamestown, Indiana, in 1976 so that he could run USAC, Osborne decided to run the winged sprint cars in 1977 so that he could race more often.

In 1978, Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws (WoO) debuted and Osborne competed in their first ever race at Lanny Edwards' Devil's Bowl Speedway in Mesquite, Texas. In 1980, Lee finished sixth in the WoO points behind

champion Steve Kinser, Doug Wolfgang, Lee James, Tim Green and Sammy Swindell, respectively.

The following year Lee was back running full-time with the All-Star Circuit of Champions, capturing three straight championships from 1981 through 1983. In 1981, he defeated runner-up Fred Linder and Brad Doty for the title. One year later, it was runner-up Fred Linder and Dave Blaney behind Lee in season points. And in '83, Lee defeated runner-up Kenny Jacobs and Dave Blaney for the hardware.

According to ASCoC president Bert Emick, "Lee figured a lot in the success we had and really helped us during the early years. He was great in helping establish rules, and he was really good working with the other drivers with his experience and technical know-how. And when I screwed up, Lee was the first to let me know about it."

Despite it's small size, Lee's OzCar chassis-building business in Jamestown, Indiana was quite successful and a leader in the industry. Osborne had intended to run the entire World of Outlaws schedule in 1984, but something changed midway through that season when debates flared up over cubic inch displacement and engine blocks.

At Oklahoma City, Lee Osborne abruptly just up-and-quit as a driver in 1984. "I felt that sprint cars had outgrown the way that I was used to and that was an individual. We built our own stuff and assembled our own motors. That's when I bailed out and got into the hot-rod business."

And that business has been going strong since 1985. Over the last 25 years, Osborne estimates that he has built around 100 cars for drivers like A.J. Foyt, George Snider, Dave Blaney, Ken Schrader, Jeff Gordon, and a host of modified drivers throughout New York. "It's great to see a guy like Joey Saldana, whom we built a car for, do well," said Osborne.

When Lee Osborne first began driving sprint cars, he sternly believed that Central Pennsylvania was the hotbed and points to Friday nights when there were at least 65 cars and a field that was a "Who's Who" of sprint car racing. Drivers like Jan Opperman, Kenny Weld, Bobby Allen, Lynn Paxton, and Ray Tilley would all be there. "It was the toughest racing in the country back then," said Osborne, who now lives in Bluff Point, New York, a town about twenty miles from Watkins Glen.

He refers to Selinsgrove and Eldora as his favorite tracks. "But Williams Grove was the toughest and still is," he said.

"We won races in almost every division," said Osborne, who counts over 100 sprint car feature wins over his 16 years. "We won in Pennsylvania, Florida, with the United Racing Club (URC), USAC, the All-Stars and the World of Outlaws. If you won, you just had a good night. We never won any of the huge nationals, but we were always competitive."

Osborne admitted that he did it differently than most other guys who would drive for somebody else. "They were hired drivers," said Lee, "but I wasn't. I built them and worked on them. I usually had one guy with me. My wife and kids (Todd and Jennifer) would go with me. I just did it differently and I liked it that way. I have no regrets. I quit because it was the end of an era. It was the best 20 years of my life when I raced. Back then, you had to be able to build your own cars and try to figure them out and be competitive. If I couldn't do it on my own, then I didn't want to do it."

"The thing about racing that's different today is that you had more friends; it was a fellowship because nobody had any money," said Lee, who has 22 albums in his barn that document his racing career. "We all helped out each other. You spent all the money on the race car but that's what made it fun."

Osborne also believes that racing today is the only sport that you really don't have to have a lot of talent. "Today you need money. If you come up with enough money, somebody will put you in a car."

Osborne, naturally, has an eye on the history of the sport and is glad to be part of the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. "That's the most elite thing that could happen to a driver and I'm pretty proud of the whole thing. It's nice to be acknowledged for what you've done and it makes all the 100 hour work weeks worth while."