



Fred Linder

During the Fifties, two of racing's most revered names belonged to Pittsburgh's Linder brothers - Dick and Gus. In the decades that followed, the headliners were also the Ohio Linders, Jim and Fred.

The two siblings, Jim and Fred, have played significant roles in sprint car racing. Jim chose to remain closer to his Fremont, Ohio, home, while his younger brother Fred played the part of an outlaw, running races most anywhere between the country's coastlines. Fred seemed to care little about surface and size, and his victories came on both the dirt, as expected, and asphalt.

Today, Fred recalls the night in 1957 when his uncle took the Linder brothers to Fremont Speedway's season closer. Fred and his older siblings, Jim and John, were hooked. At the age of 16, after two years of watching his brothers race, Fred jumped headlong into his brother's tracks and inherited the same car from Chuck Keegan. While Jim stayed closer to home, and won seven track championships at Fremont, Fred slowly ventured out on the road. Much of his early racing was done on pavement.

Throughout his career, anyone putting him behind the wheel found not only a driver, but a top-notch mechanic to boot. Throughout his career, Fred built and maintained the engines he used and, to this day, he mentors countless racers in setting up their cars in his technician/engineer position at Pro Shocks. He regularly conducts seminars and Pete Walton of the United Sprint Car Series (USCS) has put Fred to work in that capacity in conducting seminars for his racers.

Jim Linder concedes that Fred and he are nearly opposites when it comes to personalities and driving styles. According to Jim, "Fred is more laid back, but behind the wheel he was much more aggressive. He would go for it on the first lap - not me. I was more conservative. Car owners look for someone who will bring their car home first while still in one piece. Fred has always been that guy."

The track surfaces in Fred's home state paralleled his vocation. After the infamous Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ban on the use of calcium chloride, speedway owners seemed to put cost-cutting above track preparation. So, in Fred's earlier days, the heavier surfaces favored the young and the brave. Over time, and with the onset of the use of drag tires, the surfaces became more suitable for the veteran drivers who chose not to be cowboys behind the wheel.

Almost every driver has interesting stories of their escapades in their first years of racing. As a high-schooler, Fred felt he had won his first A-main at Findlay, Ohio. After receiving the white flag, Fred pulled off the track with a mechanical failure. Jim, who was running second, saw him from the backstretch and raced under the checkers for the victory. He had such a lead that when Jim received the winning banner, Fred was already unstrapping himself in the infield.

In 1970, Fred claimed both Twin 50's on the pavement at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds in St. Paul in the Ed Wyporski upright sprinter against a stout field that included Norm Ellefson and Tom Sneva in their rear-engined machines. After claiming the first race in the conventional dirt-track car, Linder had to

start on the tail for the following race. He says racing to the front was actually easier the second time in the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) sanctioned event. He is proud to recount that sprint car racing heavyweight Doug Wolfgang, who was just a teen, was part of his crew that day and has since referred to Fred as his "hero."

Fred struggled with car problems in the '71 event but still finished fourth against the rear-engine cars. Fred's early career also included a United States Auto Club (USAC) win at Reading, Pennsylvania, in the Jack Vitte-owned machine in 1975. That same year, he finished second to champion Harold McGilton in the All Star Super Series circuit, with Kramer Williamson behind him in points. The following year, Fred finished tenth in All Star Super Series points, with Rick Ferkel taking the title.

Fred had a handle on the Sharon Speedway and over his racing years had a propensity for bringing home the loot to his wife, also named Sharon. His victories in Michigan came with such regularity that he was probably about as welcome to compete there as was his home state football team clad in scarlet and grey.

Fred raced for nearly 25 years without the benefit of a mega sponsor, so consistency was the key. He was a hands-on racer who concentrated on finishing and was respectful of his owners' equipment. With his easy going manner and technical knowledge, Fred was able to communicate well with the mechanics. Few communicated on "getting the car right" any better than he and George Gillespie, who wrenched for Fred for most of the Seventies and early Eighties. "I have to give lots of credit to George for my successes," said Fred. "He was a major reason that I won." Fred actually drove Gillespie's car during the summer of 1974.

"As opposed to most drivers, I preferred my cars to be on the tight side. I always felt a tight car was faster because you could keep it going straight, and straight is fast. I didn't mind a little push or plow coming off a turn and that helped me a bunch on pavement," said Fred.

The mid-Seventies were memorable for Linder. In addition to a preliminary victory in 1974 at the Knoxville Nationals, he finished third in one of the wildest Western World finishes to date at the Manzanita Speedway. His 1976 run in Phoenix was in one of the most unique sprint cars of all time. "It was crazy-tight in a time before Doug Wolfgang and Bob Trostle made lightweight sprinters the norm. Shortly before Manzy, I went over the backstretch wall at Sedalia, Missouri, in the Dan Siebence machine and tore it all apart - cage and all. We took it to LaVern Nance to repair and he put an exclamation mark on weight-reduction by re-constructing the car

out of aluminum. I wasn't real happy about the idea, but it was fast and I felt bulletproof so I climbed in... but I was always happy to climb out."

Shane Carson ran the flyweight car once at Knoxville but was told not to ever bring it back. Said Fred, "I was leading Bubby Jones and Ron Shuman in the first turn after the checkered flag at Manzy, but I had come up short at the stripe. I made a bonal move on the inside and you could have thrown a blanket over us at the finish. One more lap and that one would have gone down in the win column!"

Fred claims 1981 as the year he became a full-time driver and it is significant that he also became the driver of the Harold "Flake" Kemenah number 3X sprint car. Running with the All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) became their emphasis and they made an indelible mark, never finishing out of the top four in points from 1981 to '87.

Fred finished second to champion Lee Osborne and ahead of Brad Doty in 1981, and second to champion Osborne and ahead of Dave Blaney in '82. In 1983, the final points listed Lee Osborne, Kenny Jacobs, Dave Blaney and Fred Linder, respectively.

Fred claimed the championship title in both 1984 and '86, working hand-in-hand with a young Brian Kemenah, who just won the ASCoC title with Tim

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Shaffer in 2009. At the time, Brian was just a teenager and he and Fred shared decisions on setup and had many good runs with the car. Current World of Outlaws (WoO) driver Chad Kemenah is another son of Harold's.

In 1984, Linder bested Kelly Kinser, Kenny Jacobs, Joe Gaerte, Jac Haudenschild, Rich Vogler, Rick Ferkel, Jack Hewitt, Dave Blaney and Kerry Norris, respectively, for Bert Emick's ASCoC crown. In '86, he out-pointed runner-up Kenny Jacobs and Kevin Thomas. Fred recalled that the second title was won without any ASCoC feature wins to his credit, "I guess you could say that we won the title with consistency with lots of seconds and thirds."

In 1985, the ASCoC point standings wound up with champion Jack Hewitt, Kelly Kinser, Joe Gaerte and Fred Linder, respectively. In '87, champion Joe Gaerte bested runner-up Linder and Rick Ungar for the title.

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Fred Linder, Continued

The 1987 season was very frustrating with good finishes snatched out of his hand by mechanical gremlins. So, Linder followed Gillespie south to the Atlanta area and became a full-time employee of Pro Shocks, where he has been instrumental in guiding participants in the sport. He also spends time traveling with his son Matt, who primarily competes in USCS and American Sprint Car Series (ASCS) races. George Gillespie had moved south to join Carerra Shocks, and then started Pro Shocks in 1983.

"George is a master of the art of watching a car and determining what changes will make it right. That is something I am trying to master as well," said Fred. With his consistency behind the wheel and ability to communicate, it is no surprise that they were able to run so competitively together.

Linder is enjoying going racing with his son and says his retirement from driving was made easier as he wanted to spend more time with his family. He regrets that "I didn't get to see much of Matt's sports or spend time with Kelly during all those years on the road."

In addition, Fred had witnessed Gus Linder's final race, a race in which Gus was involved in an unfortunate accident that claimed a fellow competitor's life. Another lurking danger of the sport was reaffirmed when Fred nearly ran over a pedestrian who stepped in front of him at Eldora Speedway in Ohio. He did not want to end his driving days with such incidents.

Meanwhile, back in Ohio, Jim is running Linder Speed Equipment and helping son Mike hone his skills at nearby speedways. That appears to be going well as Mike has tallied eight track titles at Fremont and has won 72 features between Fremont Speedway and Attica Raceway Park. Jim's son Stephen has no interest in driving but is more interested in working on his brother Mike's race car. Fred lends technical advice and helps with the upkeep of their supplies. Fans, family, and racers alike are winners having the memories of the unassuming driver's career. And they remain winners by having him available at the track, through his position at Pro Shocks, sharing his experiences and expertise. Just don't ask Fred Linder for his win total as he doesn't know; he was just too busy with his cars to keep track of such statistics. Said Fred, "It would have been nice to just arrive at the track and jump in the car, but I was never in a position to do that. If the work was to get done, I had to do much of it myself."

By Tony Martin
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