

Gary Sokola

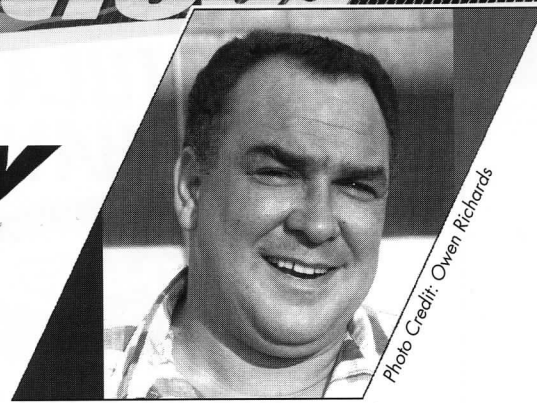


Photo Credit: Owen Richards

by Justin Zoch

For most people, they are lucky if there is one thing they can do really well. Gary Sokola did not have that problem – he seemed to succeed regardless of which endeavor he pursued and throughout his career in auto racing, he pursued plenty. Sokola was at times a car owner, track official, series president, sanction official and, finally, just before his untimely death, track supervisor of the construction of the sparkling motorplex in Dodge City, Kansas.

Although primarily known for his contributions to the California Racing Association (CRA) and the United States Auto Club (USAC) throughout his career, Gary P. Sokola was actually born in Livonia, Michigan, to parents Pete and Marie Sokola on August 31, 1941, and lived in the Midwest until joining the Navy in his late teens.

His love of racing developed during his youth, and once he finished his military service, he settled in California in 1960. He continued to attend races and soon became involved for the first time – as a car owner. He owned a sprint car for driver Lee Robison, and they competed with the CRA – an organization on which Sokola would soon have an indelible impact.

While Sokola was fielding cars on the CRA circuit, Don Peabody was the man in charge of the operations. In 1977, however, Peabody took a job with USAC to head up their sprint car division and CRA was left looking for leadership. Joe Hunt and David Vodden filled the position on an interim basis.

Shortly thereafter, in came Gary Sokola – full of exuberance and big ideas. He assumed the duties of Director of Racing and Director of Marketing for the membership-based club and immediately set out to make his mark. Over ten years, Sokola transformed the club from a regional powerhouse into one that was drawing national

attention – not just from race fans and drivers but from Corporate America. Sokola's primary achievement during his tenure at CRA was to recruit Compton, California's Kraco Enterprises, a manufacturer of floor mats and other rubber products, to be the title sponsor for CRA. This was a first for sprint car racing and helped pave the way for the immense involvement from multinational companies that the sport currently enjoys.

Under Sokola's tight-gripped reign at CRA, he is credited with reorganizing the sanctioning body, focusing on safety issues and ensuring that it was on sound financial footing. Another great achievement during his decade of direction was to bring the CRA to the Midwest for the first time in 1985, where they ran legendary venues like the Terre Haute Action Track in Indiana and Lanny Edwards' Devil's Bowl Speedway in Texas.

While Sokola was president of CRA, his son Mark also started his sprint car racing career, moving up from the three-quarter midgets. Unfortunately, Mark passed away in 2002 at the age of forty.

Concurrent to his commitment to CRA, Sokola also helped USAC found the Western States Midget Car Division and worked with the Agajanian family to promote the Turkey Night Midget Grand Prix. Sokola often mollified the tenuous relationship between CRA and USAC and eventually he, just like his predecessor Don Peabody, decided to leave CRA for USAC.

Sokola was heavily recruited by USAC Director of Competition Roger McCluskey while he was running CRA because of his ingenuity and the respect he commanded from all corners of the industry. Eventually, Sokola relented and was hired by USAC in December of 1987 to

recharge their sprint car division and serve as Assistant Director of Competition. In 1987, USAC ran just 14 sprint car races, and things were looking dire. Sokola immediately set out to re-energize the division and promoted an experiment with the use of wings and brought back pavement racing to the USAC sprint car division. Again, similar to his Kraco deal with CRA, his greatest achievement in USAC was to broaden the appeal and exposure of the sport by championing the "Thursday Night Thunder Series" on ESPN television at Indianapolis Raceway Park in Indiana and Ventura Raceway in California.

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Similar to his time in CRA, Sokola was at the helm of the USAC sprint car division for a decade before taking a new challenge. In 1997, he left USAC to relocate to Dodge City, Kansas, and oversee the construction of the brand-new motorplex being constructed there. Dodge City Raceway Park was a showplace, and Sokola brought in the USAC Western States sprint car division to run on the 3/8-mile paved oval.

Sokola was still working at the facility when health problems related to his gall bladder hospitalized him, and he passed away on November 8, 2000, in Wichita, Kansas. He was survived by his mother Marie, his ex-wife Valerie, his daughter Laurie and his granddaughter Kandace. Gary's father, Peter, who was of Romanian descent, passed away in 2001 in Grass Valley, California.

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