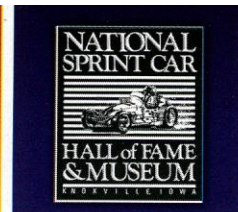




national sprint car hall of fame



gene Crucean

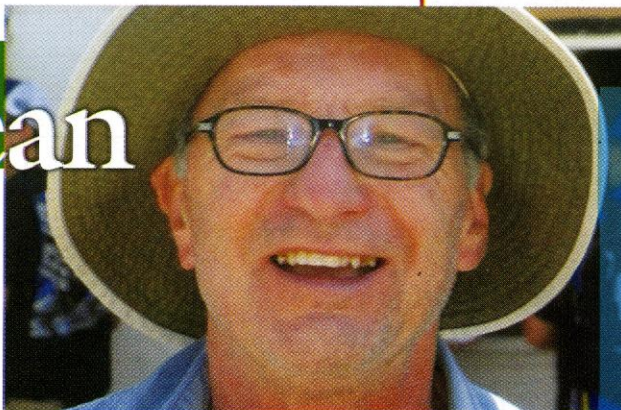


PHOTO CREDIT: MAX DOLDER

by Patrick Sullivan

Eugene N. "Gene" Crucean was born on February 16, 1943, to Eugene "Jim" and Wilma Crucean in Hammond, Indiana, once the site of a famed racetrack and not far from Illiana Speedway. Gene had one sister, Charlotte.

His father took him to the 87th Street Speedway in Chicago, Illinois, and his appetite was whetted just a bit. From there, all it took was a taste of the Indianapolis 500 and he was hooked for life. Like many, he was enchanted by those stands that would sell photos of racing heroes and he soon began collecting photos taken by the very best photographers in the business. It was soon clear, though, that this wasn't going to be enough.

In 1962, he met photographer John Mahoney at Indiana University and, from that point on, the party began. Never wanting to be outside the action, the duo would hitch rides to sprint car races in the area. Crucean would obtain a Yashica 35-mm camera and was credentialed for a United States Auto Club (USAC) race for the first time at the Action Track in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1965. If you look back to his photos from that era, he captures many of the candid moments. Arnie Knepper with a big smile getting ready for action, Don Branson with a towel over his head on a sweltering summer afternoon at Terre Haute, or Ron Lux, who looked so young and eager.

Now began a new chapter in his life as Crucean was truly hooked on sprint car racing. To continue his passion, it took a bit of ingenuity. Gene was able to get credentials to many events by working for the newspaper, Northwest News. It was a paper that didn't exist. It even got him credentialed at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. However, not long after, there was no need for further subterfuge because his work spoke for itself. He began contributing to Ray Mann's Racing Pictorial, which today are considered collectors' items.

It was from that experience that Mahoney and Crucean began publishing Sprint Car Pictorial in 1968. Simply thumbing through this publication provides one with a quick tutorial of the ferocity of sprint car action at that time.

You really want to understand the battles between Gary Bettenhausen and Larry Dickson? It was right there for you to see. Most importantly, it was a pure labor of love – and it showed. In his words, "Getting shooed away by drivers we were pestering for photos was a real thrill and honor."

There was more. First, there was a trip to an attorney where Crucean/Mahoney Adventures was incorporated on September 12, 1972, with the expressed intention of promoting some Car Owners Racing Association (CORA) midget car races in central Indiana. It began in 1973, when the pair leased the Indianapolis Speedrome from former racer and legend Leroy Warriner. All told, the partners promoted about a dozen events that Crucean deemed "an artistic success."

Having not learned a valuable lesson, Mahoney and Crucean purchased a midget from Robin Miller. Mahoney saw the light and bailed after a year, but Gene hung in there until 1995 and, in that period, his car finished sixth and fifth in USAC points. Later, he would also add a sprint car to his collection.

People contribute to the sport in many ways. For some, it is a livelihood and, for them, racing is, and will forever be, a serious enterprise. However, what racing is to everyone else is entertainment and fun. When it came to sprint car racing, 'fun' and 'Gene Crucean' were often found in the same sentence. Perhaps it really was a simpler time. Drivers didn't always use sponsor-speak when they talked. It was understood that there were times they could let their hair down without fear of reprisals. People didn't rush to the computer to toss dirt on the image of a driver who was obsessed with "the next level."

The Crucean/Mahoney wintertime movie parties presented at local motels attracted crowds of over 200 people and among that group were the very drivers that Gene had pestered all summer long. There were the Sprint Car Pictorial appreciation parties – often associated with two-day events or races

conducted at tracks in close proximity like Eldora (Rossburg) and New Bremen in Ohio. Crucean and Mahoney always considered this a public service effort. After all, everyone needed to be hydrated after the event. It was their madcap parties that caused some USAC officials to pull their hair out, yet some of the most enlightened came to realize that in their midst were two of the greatest ambassadors and champions for the product that they (USAC) were offering.

Gene Crucean's first book "Fearless" was published in 2014 and immediately sold out. His photographic work has appeared in multiple publications that took one right into the heart of the action. His longtime pal, John Mahoney, has remarked that "photographically, Gene was always a step ahead of the rest of us."

One secret to his success was his reverence for those who came before him, and he has earned the undying respect of his peers by demanding that they get adequate recognition, reasonable compensation, and that their work is properly credited.

Gene has brought the rare combination of keen wit, a lust for life, and pure talent to this sport for over a half-century. Because so much of his greatest work preceded the digital age we have a lasting memory of people and events, great and obscure, who have shaped the sport of sprint car racing.

Gene Crucean, who lives today in Valparaiso, Indiana, has four children: Scott, Jeff, Trina & Gene, Jr. During his career, he worked in the trucking industry as a safety director. Presently, he's a state supervisor in a federal program which helps older workers find employment.