



TRACY HINES - DRIVER

By Bill Blumer Jr.

FROM 1992 TO 2015, Tracy Hines was the prototype of an open wheeler. He worked his way up from local tracks to the USAC midget, sprint car and Silver Crown ranks. He won often in each of those divisions, be it on dirt or pavement. Hines also earned full time NASCAR rides in the Craftsman Trucks and Busch Series.

He's been hired and fired from some of the best cars in the tumultuous non-winged world of USAC's "Thunder and Lightning Division." He suffered hard crashes and heartbreaks but over the span of his career, he garnered a championship in all three USAC disciplines.

Born on May 1, 1972, to Faye and Jim Hines, he raced quarter-midgets from age 5 to 14, winning various regional championships, showing little interest in any aspect of racing, other than the driving. "I was too busy playing sports and chasing girls to work on cars," he said. Hines was an excellent student in high school, finishing in the top ten percent of his class.

In January of 1991, his brother, Ted, won the USAC Midget Hoosier Dome Invitational. Ten years Tracy's senior, Ted was someone he looked up to. With that win, something clicked in Tracy. It became his mission to be a better racer than his brother. His father Jim was a winning midget driver and former C.O.R.A. champion himself and Tracy asked if he'd give up his midget. Dad agreed and, in 1992, Tracy started racing on pavement at the Indianapolis Speedrome, earning Rookie of the Year honors.

During this time, Hines discovered the love of working on the cars he was racing.

He'd hoped to become a mechanical engineer. He couldn't afford college, so he used his skills to make race cars as fast as he could. Between driving and wrenching, Hines soon saw he could make a living at racing. "I had a way to talk to people and secure rides. I'm a little guy and I wanted to be the alpha dog. I wouldn't take 'no' for an answer."

In 1993, Hines started driving for Corky Wheeler. Tracy finished a spot behind Ted in USAC National Midget points, at 21st. The next season's standings showed little brother in seventh with big brother in tenth. Mission accomplished.

But Hines wasn't done and he started to branch out in 1997, with some runs in Boyce Holt's sprint car, primarily doing the local shows at Bloomington Speedway. They ventured to Eldora Speedway and the 4-Crown Nationals where he finished fourth, in what was his first USAC sprint car show.

Dick Newkirk hired Hines for the 1998 USAC sprint car dirt season. "I crashed a lot, which led to being let go about three-quarters of the way through the season," Hines recalled. With Holt, he won twice on the pavement at Indianapolis Raceway Park, finished tenth in points and was the USAC Rookie of the Year.

For 1999 on the dirt, his car owner was Pete Willoughby, with Keith Kunz on the wrenches. This combination picked up three wins, including Eldora Speedway and Terre Haute Action Track. Willoughby and Hines parted ways in early August and after a couple of one-off rides, Bill Biddle and his BWB Racing team picked him up for the remainder of the dirt year.

On the pavement side, he was still

driving for Holt, scoring wins at IRP, Winchester and Salem. Late in the season Holt ceased operations. Hines borrowed a car Richard Booe and copped the season finale at Winchester, with Jim McQueen as the chief mechanic. Hines was runner up in USAC National Sprint Car points.

Hines loved the big tracks. "I didn't consider myself a super brave driver. But I won a lot on the bigger tracks. So, I guess I had to be brave to run one inch from the wall at Eldora."

The cars had barely cooled down in the pits at Winchester, when Hines started politicking for 2000. Knowing he needed a ride, and hearing Dave Steele was heading to NASCAR, leaving the Graton Motorsports seat vacant, Hines approached Bob Graton about his plans for next season. "You might as well hire him, because he just beat me in that piece of crap," said Steele, pointing to the winning car.

The 2000 and 2001 seasons saw Hines in Graton's car on the pavement and the BWB team on the dirt. He won with both and finished third and fifth in USAC points respectively. Late in that 2001 season, he was let go again. He won at South Boston Speedway with Graton. During the race he tangled with another Graton driver, Steele, who had returned from NASCAR. Graton canned Hines before they left the pits.

Hines still had the dirt ride, but there was one pavement race left and he went into survival mode. Races missed and point positions lost, meant a cut in wages. While he wasn't certain he was qualified for such a storied ride, he called Richard

Hoffman of Dynamics, Inc., and asked if they had anything for Salem, the last race of the USAC season. Hoffman gave him a shot in the famous 69. Hines responded by topping the field in qualifying and finishing the race in 2nd. If that wasn't enough to secure the ride, Biddle called Hoffman and told him he should hire Hines. In doing so, Biddle would let Hines out of his BWB obligations, as the Hoffman's campaigned on both pavement and dirt.

Hines became the new Dynamics driver for 2002 and a championship team was born.

He credits Rob Hoffman with helping him vastly improve on the shorter tracks USAC visited.

They took the USAC National Sprint Car Driver's Championship and the Entrant honors. 2003 saw the team finish 3rd in points and then NASCAR came calling.

Nonetheless, from 2004 to 2006, NASCAR teams, such as his ThorSport Racing organization, were not opposed to Hines moonlighting with USAC and he took sprint car wins throughout that span with the Hoffmans. In 2007, his NASCAR contract was over and he teamed up with Tony Stewart Racing to chase USAC points once again.

That season was quickly lost. A dirt bike crash cost him the year. Hines had been hurt in on-track accidents before and he'd always worked hard to get back to racing. He once showed up at the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals on crutches due to a tib/fib break and won his preliminary night feature. But the dirt bike crash nearly ripped his leg off at the knee, severely damaging all four ligaments. He worked hard and in 2008 he was back to form with a win in the spring and a third place finish in the standings for Stewart's sprint car program. In 2009, he was fourth in points.

In 2010, Hines was caught in a downsizing at TSR and he teamed up with Dave Calderwood, to form a new USAC sprint car team. After Calderwood's passing in 2012, Hines ran the team on his own. From 2010 to 2014, he rattled off at least one win each year. In 2015, he completed USAC's Triple Crown with a midget title. It was also the first time he failed to win in USAC since 1996. With nothing left to prove, he retired at the end of the season.

Duke Thorson, the NASCAR truck owner Hines raced with, sponsored Hines' sprint car through The Carolina Nut Company. This relationship led to a job offer for Hines. He accepted a position as Director of Competition for ThorSport Racing, later moving up to Director of Operations for ThorWorks Industries, while retaining his role at ThorSport.

Fellow National Sprint Car Hall of Fame inductee, Pat Sullivan, witnessed the brilliance of Hines. He feels Hines came to sprint cars when people were somewhat skeptical about midget drivers making the jump. He notes Hines proved them wrong, scoring 47 wins, fifth all-time, with an almost equal split between dirt and asphalt wins. "His instincts were impeccable, he made decisions quickly in traffic. He was mechanically savvy, professional and brought a lot to the table," noted Sullivan. Sullivan wonders how many wins Hines could have nailed if it wasn't for the doomed 2007 season or his venture into NASCAR.

When asked what he thought of being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, on top of his National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame and USAC Hall of Fame inductions, Hines replied, "It's pretty cool. You know what you think you've done. You did your best. But, you don't know what others think. When you get inducted to three Halls of Fame [Midget, USAC and now Sprint Car], apparently others thought my career went well, too." ■

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