



Photo by: Paul Arch

By Ashley Zimmerman

Damion Gardner's (born March 23, 1974) racing story does not follow suit in way of today's traditional stories. It did not begin with a child barely old enough to walk slithering into karts. Gardner did not strap into a race car, a hobby stock at that, until 1998 at the age of 22, and then later a winged sprint car. While competing in winged 360 sprint car competition, Gardner found success but it would not be in the winged wars where Gardner made his mark. In 2002, Gardner removed the wing at Perris Auto Speedway in California, where he drove from 24th to 5th. On this trip to Perris, in an interview with Bones Bourcier in 2023, Gardner shared, "I tried to knock the fence down in qualifying. I just didn't know how hard to drive it into the corners." It was on this trip to Perris Speedway that Gardner left the wing in the past and committed to non-wing sprint car competition.

Throughout his racing career, Gardner was nicknamed the "Demon," a moniker earned in childhood that superseded what was to come and defined his fierce competitive driving style. Gardner's career statistics make him one of the most successful West Coast sprint car drivers of all time, with 106 USAC wins in total. The first win was on pavement, the remaining 105 on dirt. Gardner is just one of seven drivers to win 100 or more USAC feature events. His wins encompass 95 with USAC-CRA, 16 with the USAC National Sprint Cars, two western states midjet, and one western states sprint car. Gardner accomplished the longest winning streak in

DAMION GARDNER DRIVER

USAC CRA sprint car history [4 in a row] three times and is the only one to accomplish that feat. He did so in 2005, 2014, and in 2022. In Gardner's first USAC-CRA sprint car win in 2004, at Hanford, California's Kings Speedway, he beat National Sprint Car Hall of Famers Rip Williams [finishing 2nd] and Cory Kruseman [finishing 3rd] to the line.

In 2005, Gardner earned his first USAC National sprint car win at Perris, passing Cory Kruseman with four laps remaining, to earn the Oval Nationals preliminary night win. Gardner is a three-time Oval Nationals winner at Perris (2009, 2011, and 2016). While Gardner's first attempt at Perris Speedway was filled with excitement sans victory lane, Gardner recorded 51 of his 95 career USAC-CRA sprint car wins at the track where it all seemingly began. Gardner is a ten-time USAC-CRA sprint car series champion (2005, 2013-2019, 2021-2022). From 2013-2022, Gardner recorded nine consecutive titles, with the 2020 season not being held due to COVID-19. In his time with the CRA, Gardner earned 104 quick time awards with a record 22 in one season. His career 95 CRA wins are the most by any driver, earning 15 in just one season, setting yet another record with the CRA. Pairing Gardner's 95th CRA win in 2022, with his 13 SCRA wins, totaling 108, broke a win record held by Hall of Fame driver Dean Thompspon.

Throughout his non-wing career, Gardner picked up occasional rides with Harlan Willis and Billy Wilkerson. In 2004, he was hired to drive for Ron Chaffin in his 50, replacing five-time champion Richard Griffin, who was retiring. With Bruce Bromme, Jr. wrenching on the #50, they won twelve times together, and earned the 2005 USAC-CRA title. Gardner's ten USAC Championships are the most by any driver in a single USAC series, and only second overall to A.J. Foyt's 13 USAC titles. Gardner traveled full-time with the USAC National sprint cars between 2007-2012. Sponsored by Pace Electronics' owner Pat Kehoe,

Gardner raced out of Indiana from 2007-2012, and they recorded thirteen national USAC wins together, five of which were in pursuit of Levi Jones in their attempt at the 2010 national championship. He was second in championship points to Jones that year and fifth in 2012. Following the 2012 season, Gardner left full-time with the USAC National sprint cars following the passing Pat Kehoe and returned to California, driving for Mark Alexander in the 4, wrenched on by Mark's brother Steve. From 2013 to 2021, the pairing won every crown USAC/CRA had to offer, aside from 2020 due again to COVID. Gardner was a four-time California Sprint Week Champion, earning the titles in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2019.

In Gardner's 21 appearances at the Chili Bowl, he has 18 preliminary feature starts, with five top five finishes, and 11 top ten finishes. He has eight Saturday night A main feature starts, with three top ten finishes, two top fives, with two podium finishes. In 2008, Gardner won the Chili Bowl driving for Jason Leffler. The most noted of Gardner's career is his 2014 trip to the Bonneville Salt Flats. While there, he made six passes, with his last four recording speeds over 200mph. There is no other driver in history that has driven a sprint car anywhere near the record set by Gardner of 211.5884 mph on that day. The record and Gardner's career were well documented in an 86-minute film by Sean Buckley, which premiered at the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame on August 11, 2023. In 2023, at 48 years old, Gardner announced his retirement from racing. In the aforementioned interview with Bones Bourcier, Gardner shared, "I reached a point where I said, I've done what I want to do. You guys can have it." While the next generation has taken over the racing landscape, careers such as Damion Gardner's will be the legend their accomplishments are compared to.

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