



Photo by: Gritz Family

By Bob Mays

Kenny Gritz was born June 27, 1944 in Odell, Nebraska and grew up in Beatrice, Nebraska. He moved to Lincoln and went to work as a machinist at Bair Tool & Die. In 1964, he started helping Larry Williams with his supermodified race car. At the end of the season, Williams let Gritz race the car a few times, and Kenny caught the bug.

Gritz eventually bought the car from Williams and became a regular at Midwest Speedway in Lincoln and Eagle Raceway in Eagle, Nebraska. With help from his new bride Jeanne and father-in-law Bob Whitlock, Kenny made racing a real family affair.

By 1967, Gritz finished construction of a new supermodified and began running much closer to the front of the pack. He won his first feature race at Midwest on Sept. 17, 1967 and finished second in points for the Nebraska Modified Racing Association. Kenny added Knoxville Raceway to his resume in 1968, along with weekly stops at Eagle and Midwest. Gritz scored his first win at Eagle on May 30, 1968, but the highlight of the season was winning the B-main at the Knoxville Nationals. This win let him know that, with the right equipment, he could run with the best.

Enter Larry Snyder. Larry was the owner of Snyder Fiberglass in Lincoln and a long-time supporter of racing in the area. Following the 1968 season, Snyder could also see that Gritz's star was ascending. Larry and Kenny went all in, ordering a four-bar sprint car from Don Edmunds. This machine came with a four-point/full coverage cage for supermodified events, such as weekly races and the Knoxville

Nationals, and a two-point roll for sprint car events on the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) circuit. When it debuted, everyone agreed that a more beautiful car had never been brought to the track in the area. Metallic blue and loaded with chrome, this piece would be unbeatable in 1969 if it ran half as good as it looked!

However, this was no Miss America pageant, and there were some minor issues to work out. By June, Kenny was finishing races consistently in the top five. On June 14 at Knoxville, he had victory in sight when he tangled with Earl Wagner coming to the checkered flag. Joe Saldana seized the win, but Gritz still managed to run second. The next week, Gritz took the victory at Knoxville, and the first to shake his hand was the promoter Marion Robinson.

The pre-race publicity for the 1969 Knoxville Nationals was focused on three drivers. Defending champion Ray Lee Goodwin in Gary Swenson's car was beginning to build momentum. Bob Williams, driving for Jack Cunningham, was having a career year, winning almost at will across the Midwest; and newcomer Jan Opperman in Speedy Bill Smith's sprinter was quickly becoming the fans' favorite. Other big names being bantered back and forth included Joe Saldana, Ed Leavitt, Bob Kinser, Earl Wagner, Bubby Jones and Jerry Blundy. Kenny Gritz was hardly mentioned in the run-up to the big race.

Gritz had a solid qualifying night with the seventh fastest time, second in the heat race and fifth in the feature.

Then things got scary.

On Saturday morning, Kenny was welding on his teammate's fuel tank when it exploded, burning Gritz about the face. After a trip to the emergency room, Kenny was back at the track preparing for the biggest race of the season.

When the championship race saw the green flag, Williams took off in the lead with Opperman, with Jon Backlund and Gritz quickly falling into line. Opp had contracted the flu on Friday and was not feeling well, but nevertheless, he was challenging Tiger

Bob Williams at every turn. Finally, on lap 18, Jan made a pass that stuck, and he was now the leader of the 1969 Knoxville National A Main!

Kenny made a bold move to the outside of Williams and gained second. Now, there was only one more car between him and immortality.

By now, Kenny's burns were causing his eyes to water, and Opperman's facemask was filling with mucus. The biggest race of the year was going to be decided by two drivers that could barely see!

When starting lap 27, Opp missed the entry to turn one and slid high, and Gritz was there to take advantage. Kenny led the last four laps and won the 1969 Knoxville Nationals!

Kenny's win at Knoxville should have been the start of the second act of a great career, but fate would soon bring the curtain down on this underdog story. Just 16 days after his Knoxville triumph, Kenny Gritz was killed at the Nebraska State Fair when his car caught a rut and landed upside down on the guardrail. His car normally carried a four-point roll cage, but because this was an IMCA event, Gritz was required to remove the cage and install a rollover bar, which went behind the driver's head. Had he been using the cage, Gritz would likely have survived the crash. Kenny Gritz was 25 years old at the time of his death. Survivors at the time included his wife Jeanne, daughter Teresa, stepdaughter Lori, parents Mr. and Mrs. Walter Gritz, his brother Fred, and sister Jan Sanford.

The fallout from Kenny's crash and subsequent lawsuit by Jeanne Gritz caused a seismic reaction within the sprint car community. Every sprint car organization legalized roll cages in 1970.

It's not too bold to say the most significant safety advancement in sprint car history was due to Kenny's sacrifice. Every sprint car driver who has ever crawled out from under his wrecked race car since 1970 owes Kenny Gritz a debt of thanks. Because of Kenny, this sport became exponentially safer on Sept. 1, 1969.

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