Sports View

Sprint car racing alive in Lincoln

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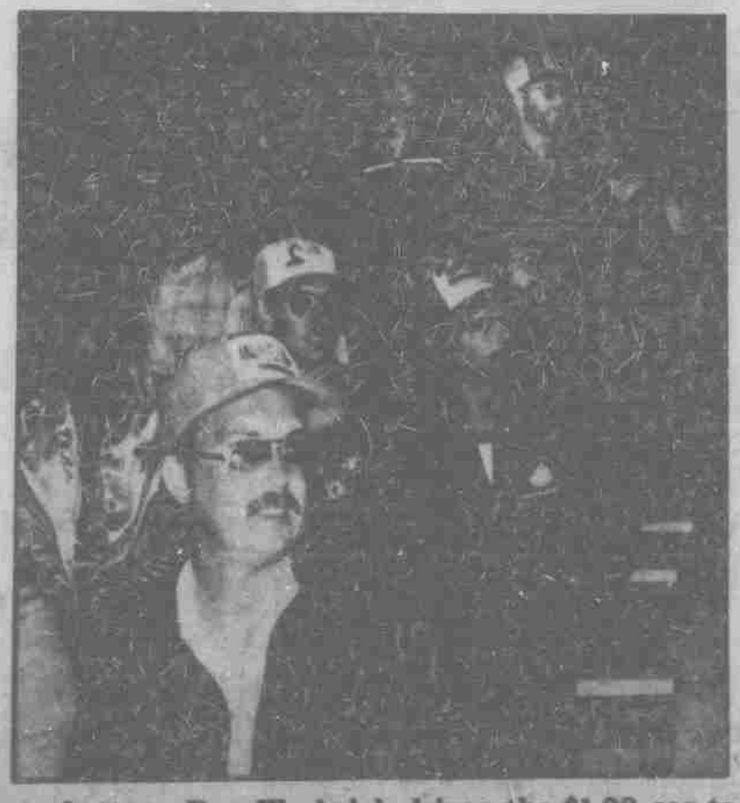

From top to bottom: Don Weyhrich drives the $1.98 car to victory. Terry Hollaman checks his sprinter's gauges just seconds before entering the track. Spectators leap to their feet to catch all of the action.

Steve Frisell, a 29-year-old farmer from Holdrege, drives more than 170 miles twice a week so he can risk his life driving in circles at breakneck speeds up to 100 miles per hour.

Frisell races spring cars as a hobby.

"It's a challenge," he said of his sprint car racing hobby. "I like to see what I can prove from week to week."

Sprint car racing is alive, well and stronger than ever in the Cornhusker state.

Lincoln, a racing hotbed in the '60s and early '70s was deserted by sprinters in 1976.

"As far as Eagle Raceway is concerned," track co-owner Marty Beecham said, "the previous owner let the facilities go bad and didn't pay well, which made the drivers unhappy."

Beecham also said the lack of local drivers played a role in the demise of the sport.

"Most of the drivers came from cities like Des Moines and Kansas City and when they left, the fans went too."

Sprint car racing remained dormant in the area for three years until racing enthusiast Larry Sinner revived it. Sinner promoted an outlaw program at Eagle Raceway and three more at Midwest Speedway.

"When it (sprint racing) died around here I started travling around the country watching races," Sinner said. "It got kind of expensive so I decided I might as well bring it back to Nebraska."

Sinner found out there were a large number of veteran drivers and few rookies. He said he started the racing program at Midwest to help create a new generation of drivers.

"We knew some of the older, veteran drivers would retire and the new guys needed help getting started," he said.

Sinner is the assistant pit steward at Midwest, 27th and Superior streets. His brother, Lyle, drives car No. 6. In 1981, Sinner and Midwest owner Pete Leikam created the tracks' own program, which runs May through September on Sunday nights and features limited modified sprint cars. The limited modified sprinters have equipment restrictions — outlaw card didn't.

Midwest's program took off in the spring of 1982 when 44 cars registered at the track, 14 with rookie pilots. Nightly attendance doubled from 1,000 to 2,000 fans, and sponsorship and support for the track grew.

"Local involvement makes it go," Sinner said. "The spectators, sponsors, car owners and the drivers — all of them."

City Councilman Bill Hoffman said he has received several complaints from residents in northwest Lincoln concerning the roar of the engines racing at the track. The Health Department checks the noise at the track and the surrounding area upon public request.

Midwest has a mandatory muffler rule, which restricts engine noise to less than 78 decibels. Hoffman said the mufflers decrease engine performance, so drivers don't like to use them.

"You can't police it," Hoffman said. "The word gets out that they're checking and everybody buttons it up.

"There is no fine or penalty for not running one," Hoffman said. "The drivers who abide by the law and run mufflers are at a disadvantage."

When Midwest was built in 1962, the surrounding area was undeveloped.

"I don't care who was here first," Hoffman said. "They are not abiding by the law."

Eagle Raceway, located one mile east of Eagle on Highway 34, launched its Friday night sprint program last spring after Beecham Entertainment, Inc. bought the track from Mable Elliott of Alvo.

Marty Beecham, a former announcer at Midwest, and his brother, John, began renovation immediately. Tons of dirt were hauled in to smooth the one-third mile racing surface. Other improvements included new bleachers and a remodeled press box. The Beechams have planned more renovation for the upcoming winter.

To help get their sprint program into full swing, Eagle had a two-day "World of Outlaws" show in late June. Indiana native Steve Kinster won the race, billed as the "⅓ Mile National Championship."

Midwest closed out its racing season Sept. 9 and Eagle ended its initial spring year with the running of the Nebraska Cup Sept. 15.

Sinner said it's difficult to keep the sport alive in the area.

"This is a professional sport, one of the few pro sports in Nebraska," Sinner said. "It's tough making it go in this state because everyone pays so much attention to football."

J.J. Riggins and Don Weyhrich proved that the element of surprise is a valuable weapon in racing when they claimed their respective divisions in the Nebraska Cup Championship held at Eagle Raceway.

In the sprint car division 'A' Feature, Riggins worked his way through the pack before pushing past Lonnie Jensen on the 15th lap. Jensen led from the start and was pressured for the first half of the race by Ray Lipsey.

A flat tire on Lipsey's Gambler car forced him out of the race on the 10th circuit. Gambler Chasis, the company that built Lipsey's car, is owned by country-western singer Kenny Rogers.

After Lipsey's departure, Jensen held a sizable lead on Riggins, who had moved into the second spot.

The lead disappeared two laps later, when Ray Lee Goodwin Jr.'s car stopped on the track, bringing out the yellow flag.

Under the yellow, Riggins moved up on Jensen's tail. Three laps later, Riggins shot around Jensen and cruised to the checkered flag.

Ironically, Riggins won the race in a car he had never driven before. The first time he climbed into the cockpit of the No. 4 car was for the Nebraska Cup hot laps.

Heat race victories went to Paul Riggs, Lipsey and Don Maxwell. The top four in each heat advanced to the Nebraska cup 'A' feature.

Four more cars advanced to the 'A' by placing in the top four in the 'B' feature. Omahan Dave Jacobs won the face, followed by Keith Hightshoe, Steve Frisell and Skip Ross.

The 'B' feature cars started in the rear of the Nebraska cup championship race. Jacobs and Frisell moved up through the pack to finish third and fourth, respectively.

In the late model stock car division, Don Weyhrich hid in the shadows and motored past Sammy Jacobs midway through the feature when Jacobs had to slow down to avoid hitting a lapped car.