

SUCCESS STORY

From An Ohio Field To Victory Lane, Hoffmans Have A Winning Formula

With only seven races remaining in the USAC sprint-car season, the famed No. 69 Hoffman sprint car with Jerry Coons, Jr. driving is in the middle of a heated, three-way battle for the national championship.

"We're in a 'Tony Stewart sandwich,'" laughs Richard Hoffman, son of the team's founder, the late August "Gus" Hoffman, and now team owner, as he assessed the competition from Stewart's potent operation. Should Coons end up the top slice in that

sandwich, it'll be yet another historic triumph for the most successful team in USAC racing.

Gus Hoffman, a 2000 Sprint Car Hall of Fame inductee, founded Hoffman Racing in 1929, when he and two of his friends found an old car in a field near their Norwood, Ohio, home and converted it into a sprint car. It wasn't much, but they ran it with some success through the 1930s.

Gus finally got better equipment after WWII, when he made his money during the housing explosion that immediately followed that conflict. Every American dreamed of owning their own home and Gus did his share to fulfill their dreams.

Utilizing the same creativity he would later use in racing, he overcame lumber shortages by stopping lumber trucks on their way through Cincinnati. Offering the driver's larger

cash payments for their loads than had the original buyers would usually secure the load for himself. With such entrepreneurship, Gus created his lucrative Park Lumber Company.

He purchased a Kurtis midget formerly owned by Mutt Anderson and renamed it the Park Lumber Special. Anderson stayed on as the wrench, and the car won many races with Andy Linden and Eddie Sachs behind the wheel.

Since that time, the Hoffmans have raced a variety of cars, including Indy cars, with some of the biggest names in racing doing the driving. Rodger Ward, Pancho Carter, Steve Butler, Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, Ryan Newman, Jac Haudenschild, Tim Richmond, Dave Darland, J.J. Yeley, Robbie Stanley and Rich Vogler merely scratch the surface of the talent-laden drivers who have strapped into Hoffman cars.

What they're renowned for, however, is their famed No. 69 USAC sprint car. With it they have captured eight USAC national championships and the bulk of their 72 USAC feature wins. There are few more recognized car numbers in American short-track racing, and many fans are fascinated with the origin and significance of that double digit.

"In 1976, we bought a 1972 Eagle Indy car, and it had the No. 69 and a Playboy emblem on the rear-wing side panel,"



PAT HIRSCHFELD PHOTO

ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL SEASON: Jerry Coons, Jr., pictured here qualifying for the Indiana Sprint Week event at Bloomington Speedway in July, is currently in a battle with Tony Stewart Racing drivers for the USAC National Sprint Car Series title. (Below) Steve Butler bicycles the famed No. 69 at the Terre Haute Action Track in the early 1990s.



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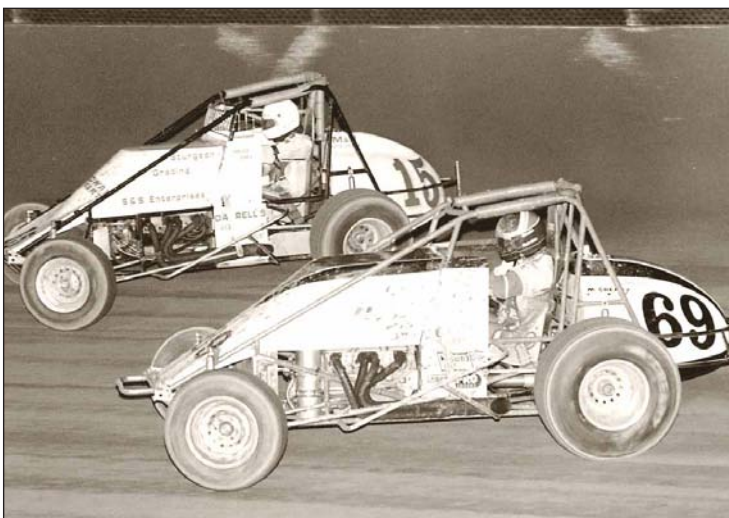


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KEN SIMON PHOTO

WORTHY ROSTER: A number of drivers have seen success with the Hoffman team over the years. (Top) Kenny Irwin, Jr. (69) races Dave Darland at Salem (Ind.) Speedway in 1995. (Left) Rich Vogler, in victory lane Sept. 3, 1989 at Moberly (Mo.) Motorsports Park, won seven races in the No. 69 in 1989. (Below) Cary Faas (69) battles Bruce Sims for position at Ohio's Eldora Speedway in 1994. (Bottom) Jerry Coons, Jr. celebrates his Indiana Sprint Week victory at Bloomington (Ind.) Speedway.



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explains Richard Hoffman. "The original owner had numbered the car like that and put it outside of a Miami hotel where a Playboy convention was being held. He had hoped to attract Playboy sponsorship with it.

"We liked the number, so we kept it and used it on all our cars. It does seem to attract a lot of attention. But I like it because it reads the same right side up as it does upside down, not an unusual position for a sprint car. I suppose others could derive different meanings from it," added Richard coyly.

The Hoffmans' long, rich history in sprint-car racing began in 1956 when Gus sold his midget and bought the Kuzma-built, J.C. Agajianian-owned sprint car that Cecil Green lost his life in on the infamous Black Sunday in 1951. With Mutt Anderson as mechanic and Don Branson driving, Gus won his first USAC feature at New Bremen, Ohio, in 1957.

Many victories were destined to follow.

Gus campaigned the car with a variety of drivers through the 1960s, including Bud Tinglestad, Jim Hemmings and Al Miller, and saw steady if not spectacular performances and solid finishes in the USAC standings.

In 1964, Richard became more directly involved with the team, first as the mechanic, and then in the early 1970s as a part owner. He signed Larry Cannon to drive, and with his management, as well as his excellent mechanical work, the Hoffman car blossomed into a steady winner and a regular threat on the USAC sprint-car circuit.

During the 12 years the Hoffmans ran Indy cars, they ran sprint cars hit-and-miss and actually took a brief hiatus for a couple of years. They returned to the USAC sprint-car wars in earnest in 1986. The breakthrough that propelled them from mere contenders to dominators occurred in 1988 when Richard's son Rob, who was helping with the mechanical work by then, created a purpose-built pavement sprinter from an old Gambler dirt chassis. Kevin Huntley nearly won a feature at then-Indianapolis Raceway Park.

That caught Rich Vogler's attention and he contacted Gus about driving for them. "My dad talked to me about it," recalled Richard. "Dad had some reservations. He thought there were other drivers out there better than Rich on dirt. But here was a guy who came with a 100 free Hoosier tires and access to a Buick V-6. So, I told Dad, we're going to do it!"

Rob built an innovative pavement car around the Buick, and the Hoffmans proved nearly unbeatable in 1989, winning seven features and the national championship.

Yet, as is the case in racing, great triumphs are often intertwined with profound tragedy. At Salem, Ind., on July 21, 1990, Rich Vogler was killed on the last lap while leading the feature in the No. 69.

Gus and Richard were at home where Jeannette, Gus's wife of nearly 50 years, was dying of cancer. The news jolted them to their core. They even considered pulling out of racing.

"Quitting was one thing we thought about," admits Richard, "but Rich's mom, Eleanor, told us we needed to continue. She's an amazing woman. She lost her husband and son to racing, yet she encouraged us to continue."

Continue they did, and with phenomenal success.

USAC champion Steve Butler took Vogler's place in 1991, finished third in the points, and then won the car owner's championship for the Hoffmans in 1992. Butler was followed in the coveted seat by yet another former USAC champion, Robbie Stanley. He gave the Hoffmans a repeat championship in 1993. Like Vogler, however, Stanley died in the Hoffman car at that other daunting Hoosier high-bank — Winchester Speedway.

"Those things continue to haunt you," reflected Richard quietly. "Even today when we go back to those tracks, the memories are still there. But you can't dwell on them."

The Hoffman steamroller pressed on. With Rob doing the mechanical work, Richard managing and Richard's brother, Tom, helping out, it was a very much a family operation. They won USAC national sprint-car championships in 1996, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004. Besides the phenomenal driver talent, much of the Hoffmans' unparalleled success can be attributed to their methodical preparation and mechanical innovation.

Richard set the tone with his efforts, bringing the team its first true measures of success. Rob followed in his father's footsteps, with creative, innovative cars. Now, Dan Launerbille is the mechanical backbone of the team.

There's opportunity to take on other forms of racing, but the Hoffmans' intent is to focus all their energy behind the Kroger/Tide/Pringles No. 69 and to continue to win races and championships.