

STEVE'S SOGGY KNOXVILLE  
(The 27<sup>th</sup> Knoxville Nationals)

*Knoxville became the capital and symbol of winged sprintcar racing largely because most of the other big dirt track matches disappeared. But now, in the 1980s, Knoxville's machines were taking over – not a good thing. K-ville sprinters were so expensive and horsepower-bound it was getting ridiculous. Their big fat tires were pounding the half mile of black gumbo lifeless, even at night. And with their eyesore overhead wings, and square, gross silhouettes, the bulky monsters were so ugly I hated looking at them. Yet I always had great times covering Knoxville. I liked watching Steve Kinser race. This kooky, rain-battered edition of the Nationals was the only race meet I ever covered anywhere whose main event finished at two o'clock in the morning.*

Wednesday, August 12

Going into tonight's round of preliminaries for Saturday's 27<sup>th</sup> annual Knoxville Nationals, everyone is guaranteeing that Steve Kinser will win them for a record fifth time. Another conversational topic is the demoralized and banged-up state of his competition, so-called. Dough Wolfgang, after spending much of July detonating engines and tires in Pennsylvania and Ohio, is openly brooding and his Bob Weikert team may be coming apart. Bobby Davis Jr. hasn't always been himself since suffering the biggest concussion of his career at Knoxville last April. Ron Shuman, usually at his fastest at Knoxville, still is busy converting Warren Mockler's old U.S. Auto Club team into a successful World of Outlaws team. Sammy Swindell is in dire pain after smashing up a shoulder while crashing at Memphis last week. And word has just come that Dave Blaney, who briefly threatened Kinser at Knoxville a year ago, is yet another of this season's walking wounded. Last week in Ohio, at Eldora, Blaney threw a slide job pass at Kinser which put him in Kinser's sights when Steve was traveling at ramming speed. Blaney managed to survive the bump, but at the cost of a tender shoulder blade after he originally broke some weeks ago. This leaves, as possible and unlikely threats to Kinser, young Jack Haudenschield, who has picked up some broken teeth, old Bobby Allen, and bearded Brad Doty, none of whom has much of a Knoxville record, although Doty has at times been pressuring Kinser on other tracks. Tonight it rained out anyway. Few places pound the rain like Iowa in August.

Thursday, August 13

This evening, after Knoxville management had finished rehabilitating the track following last night's downpour, the dirt looked perfect and inviting. What Kinser would do when set loose on such a tacky surface made anticipation run high. Small wonder that an infield crowd gathered around our hero's silver No. 11 and when Kinser arrived –looking more broad-shouldered and hulking than usual, but also pale and somewhat dazed – it parted for him like the sea. Steve was in the car in a hurry, and his car owner, mechanic, coach, and distant cousin Karl Kinser had him out for one of the early sessions of hot laps, in a group of about two dozen fast cars, including Shuman's and that of Pennsylvania's Steve Siegel, whose mechanic is the stalwart Davey Brown Jr., formerly with Wolfgang.

Came the green flag, Kinser exploded. No other word will do. Bursting No.11 from the lowest corner grooves to the highest, he stampeded traffic on both straightaways, swallowed other cars alive, and left us gasping for breath and shaking our heads in shock at the exhibition we'd just witnessed.

After this, Jimmy Sills took his time trial in a year-old Challenger chassis with a Shaver V8 which had won four consecutive races in California, and it hit so hard that Sills set a Knoxville lap record. Afterward it poured rain again. Next came arching bolts of lightening and rattling thunder. Continuing to raise tremendous hell long after the races had been called, the fanatical storm evoked the Kinser of hot laps.

Friday, August 14

An admirer of Steve and Karl Kinser, who are distant cousins, with inside knowledge of the way their team operates, delivered this estimate of last night's hot-lapping explosion. "Karl knows that Steve already has every other driver him totally psyched out," he explained, "but he wanted Steve to get the point across even stronger. So, just before Steve went out, Karl probably told him, 'Listen, Steve, you go out there, and running those fucken corners HARD. Run the crap out of the engine, too. And don't come back here unless you do.'"

Tonight, too, both Kinsers went for the quick psychological kill. After Sills set another lap new lap record of 16.263 seconds, Karl delayed sending Steve out until conditions were optimum. Steve almost equaled still with a noisy lap of 16.313. Rising to the challenge, but lacking the horsepower of the other two, Bobby Allen came in third at 16.363, and Jeff Swindell fourth at 16.438.

All four fastest qualifiers inverted for their 10-lap heat races. Sills couldn't overcome traffic and took fifth; Kinser, starting 10th, swept high off turn two catching Fran Bruns and T.J. Giddings, took the lead, then threatened to lap everyone else, winning easily. Allen got put on his head by Randy Smith, after Smith was sent spinning by Leland McSpadden; and Swindell, competing at Knoxville in between Winston Cup and Silver Crown engagements, erupted from 10<sup>th</sup> to first, just like Kinser.

Possibilities for seeing plenty of passing and fighting in the 20-lap "A" feature appeared excellent, what will Sills lined up way in back after winning the "B" feature, and Kinser and Swindell starting in the middle of the 22 cars. Having the fast and unpredictable McSpadden on the pole position gave Kinser and Swindell someone formidable to chase and run down. Everybody was looking forward to watching it, but more rain arrived first.

Saturday, August 15

Knoxville is sprintcar racing's Indianapolis 500, and not only because Knoxville Raceway is located in the middle of a city, or because of its own longevity and prestige, but also because, like the Brickyard, it has the power to reschedule and conduct its program the way it seems fit.

The postponement of the Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday night shows has led to an orgy of racing this afternoon and evening. It's going to consist of the Wednesday and Thursday night "A" mains, as well as Thursday night's time trials and heat races, then three more last-ditch qualification races, and finally the 15-mile National feature that we're all here for. But this

isn't quite the feast that it sounds, because the two "A" mains are going to be daytime races, and winged sprintcar races in the daytime aren't much to watch. But one astute observer put things into focus, saying, "Day races, night races, I don't care what they give us. Whatever happens will be worth it, just to watch Stevie do his moves."

And I suppose it was. Accustomed as everyone has become to Steve's look-out-I'm-passing aggression, it was worthwhile observing his tactical side in a one-groove, tire-devouring, daylight environment. He was racing in the first "A" main, and at first, the two leaders Danny Lesovsky and Ronnie Daniels – having the Knoxville of his career – tediously ran around Indian file, mostly. Just behind them, showing a self-imposed restraint, Steve was setting up for business to break the deadlock. On lap eight he made a tentative move that Daniels rebuffed. On lap ten he passed Daniels and made it stick. Then he passed Lesovsky. Having purposely saved his rubber for a roaring charge over the last ten laps, he won in yet another route.

Kinser entertainment over, the rest of the day was, mostly, punishment.

Afternoon temps zoomed into the 90s, and the three rain-lashed nights were forgotten. Hellish as the humid conditions were, a few surprising things managed to occur, and one gem. After 71 roaring sprinters (it was the big field that had been scheduled to compete Thursday night) took time trials, Bobby Davis Jr., with the mildest-sounding engine of the bunch, set the fastest qualifying lap.

The next surprise was Shane Carson's performance in the much-maligned Casey Luna aluminum Ford from New Mexico. Prior to Knoxville, the difficult vehicle had refused to cooperate with any of its found different drivers; in Carson's hands, it captured a heat race. Then in the third heat, Lee Brewer Jr. appeared in a new untested that Daryl Saucier had constructed in a Des Moines garage in barely six days; Brewer's surprise victory saluted both his own considerable skills as well as Saucier's personal mastery of daytime racing.

Now the gem: desperately employing brains, ploys, stratagems, patience, guesswork, cunning and trickery –using everything in his formidable arsenal, in other words, expect hard driving, which he was incapable of – a ravaged Sammy Swindell somehow captured the afternoon's "A" final. Though he is the size of a dwarf, Swindell normally looks as physically tough as his great enemy Kinser. This time Sammy looked truly terrible. Oozing sweat, bright red in his pain-pinched face, he appeared totally wiped out from the ungodly ache of his abused shoulder from the Memphis wreck, which he described as the worst crash of his long career. Swindell's car owner Raymond Beadle, the drag racer, is ever the joker, whether it's appropriate or not. Gawking at his stricken driver in open admiration, he needled, "Sammy, do you need a cot?"

Following Beadle's burlesque, all activity ceased for several hours. Darkness fell. Track maintenance crews worked hard grading the track surface free of accumulated rubber and spilled engine oil as best they could; and, when hot laps finally commenced at 11:20 p.m., had the surface looking somewhat revived.

Hopefully revived, too, was Doug Wolfgang. Next to Swindell, Wolfgang is Kinser's greatest, most age-old, Knoxville rival. Wolfgang in the afternoon had succeeded in toasting a tire, wasting a \$25,000 engine, then losing oil pressure in a replacement \$25,000 engine. Now performing with his third engine, he took a rear row position in one of the preliminaries. Even when operating at three-quarter effort, as he seemed to be here, Wolfgang has a boxer's-style

driving technique which always looks classy. After easing into a second place finish behind Andy Hillenburg, Wolfgang, in yet another preliminary, mounted Knoxville's only serious passing job, decimating drivers not of his stature and cars not of the Sweikert team's big budget, until hobbling himself with yet another flat tire.

Not having Wolfgang around for the National's 15 miles was bad enough. But Allen never returned from his Friday night rollover. And Haudenschild, an afternoon victim of an especially violent tire blow-out, wasn't around either. Blaney – perhaps remembering what Kinser did to him at Eldora – wasn't himself, and Doty, beset with three days of problems, was buried in the starting lineup rows and rows behind Kinser on the pole.

Only Sammy Swindell's baby brother Jeff, lined up next to Kinser on the outside, in an orange car belonging to the to the clannish Trigueiro brothers of Fresno, California, a tribe of Portuguese famers, had a prayer of giving Steve a race.

You can't start Steve Kinser on the pole of the Nationals and not expect him to run wild.

In one lap he was 100 yards head of Swindell and in 10, already a straightaway ahead of Davis Jr. Steve had the opportunity to relax, take a nap, read a book, or watch television. Rather than do anything that boring, his raging ambition seemed to be to lap the field, never accomplished at Knoxville before.

He lapped Joe Gaerte, Danny Smith, Danny Thoman, Spiegel, Kelly Kinser, Smith, McSpadden, Lasovski, Steve Butler, Carson, Brewer, Blaney, Terry McCarl, Rick Ungar, Daniels, Doty, Shuman and Jeff Swindell, whose front row Trigueiro had had its handling disappear. Some of them Steve lapped more than once. The only cars he didn't lap were those of runner-up Davis, third-place Mark Kinser, Karl's son, fourth-place Kenny Jacobs, fifth-place Sills, and sixth-place Sammy Swindell, one-armed but ever battling.

Lapping Sammy at Knoxville is something Kinser hadn't done in years, and, trying too hard to, Steve briefly lost his rhythm and drove two poor laps compared to all the other perfect ones. Then Steve eased back and let Sammy go. He and No. 11 took the checkered flag at something past two a.m. For his nine minutes of work, he won \$30,000. Interviewed on the public address, he sounded out of breath, but making he was faking so not to rub in his embarrassing humiliation of the entire Knoxville field.

Sunday, August 16.

It was appropriate that Terry McCarl finally win something, after putting in worthy heat and preliminary race performances, and he captured tonight's close-out main event. It was a race originally scheduled for Friday, and was anticlimactic. The real story of the 27<sup>th</sup> Nationals turned out to be two-fold: the weather and Steve and Karl Kinser.

It really wasn't so much all the rotten weather but how Knoxville's usual sell-out mobs and the participants themselves coped with it. Grandstands and teams alike not only put up with the endlessly storming skies, but also tolerated inexplicable delays and imbecilic schedule changes. A racing promoter visiting Knoxville from a big-city track in California was stunned by the crowd's patience; his own fans would have rioted.

Yet the way Knoxville's drivers, mechanics, and car owners behaved was more incredible still. Rain made Knoxville's infield a swamp of oozing mud too soft to accommodate transports and trailers. Working quietly and grimly for three grueling, consecutive nights, teams hand-

pushed or drug their heavy sprinters in and out of the pits through the bottomless mud, additionally toting wheels tires and toolboxes, without complaint or discharging two many four-letter words.

One team complained. No 11's men, Steve and Karl Kinser, are hard-core types who easily get cranky. Quickly tiring of the mud pantomime, they voted to leave \$30,000-winning No.11 parked all by itself on the open infield where it got lashed, harmlessly, by torrents three straight nights.

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