

Looks That Kill
(Fat Boy Ewing, Hank Henry, Bob Pankratz)

From *The American Dirt Track Racer*

Critiquing the contours of a Wally Meskowski sprint car – possibly it was the one exercised by Bobby Marshman during Bobby’s rim-ride assault of the Terre Haute Action Track – designer Larry Shinoda complained, jokingly, that it looked “a little Polish.” No one in racing was on the receiving end of more shopworn ancestral jokes than Nisei Larry, but he wasn’t really deriding Wally’s forebears (who came from Lithuania anyway). Instead, Larry was observing that Wally had committed the high crime of getting his styling off and had given the sprinter a swollen midsection.

Anyone who ever suggested that dirt track cars were primitive lumps designed solely to chew up the sod like tractors, surely had never encountered beauty fanatics like Fat Boy Ewing, Hank Henry, and Bob Pankratz. Fastidious tin beaters all – and even though they realized that their handiwork was one day probably going to get clobbered in an accident – they went to often ludicrous lengths making graceful hoods, spillover bodies, aluminum flanks and underbellies, and whatever else was their chosen specialty. Fat Boy’s obsession was grilles and noses. Ewing, who near the end got goofy and went off to live alone inside his decrepit Econoline van, once took a nose-building assignment from Gordon Schroeder, the power-steering titan. Following hundreds of distraught hours knowing that he wasn’t getting the nose right (even though Gordon was perfectly satisfied), Fat Boy completed his work. Then one midnight Gordon’s telephone rang. It was Fat Boy, still distraught. He couldn’t sleep from

agonizing about the nose, so would Gordon allow him to trash it if he made Gordon a new one at no extra cost? Gordon said sure, and Fat Boy destroyed the nose with pleasure. Afterward he hung up the remains to curse and glare at while shaping Gordon a nose that pleased him.

Hank Henry was yet another of L.A.'s natural craftsmen and primitives who owned no special tools and did everything by hand. While working, he'd straddle an old crankshaft he'd fashioned into a seat, which doubled as an anvil. Primitive or not, Hank fabricated noses, tails, hoods, seats, exhaust pipe headers, and aluminum fuel tanks of such exacting levels of craftsmanship that Eddie Kuzma once offered him a job, the highest compliment imaginable. Hank, however, said no – he enjoyed being an independent. His labor delivered more creative satisfaction than financial reward and he wouldn't make sprint cars for just anyone. His great work was the Parnelli Jones *Fike Plumbing Special*.

Exactly like Fat Boy, Hank had a critical eye for what looked good in the racing sense. When certain rival builders like A.J. Watson began producing sprinters without hood panels, thus exposing the engine, Hank was appalled – naked engines look ugly (Hank Henry cars came with panels *nobody* could remove). Aware of all fads and trends, he nevertheless stayed faithfully plugged into the past, and his cars reflected landmark builders he admired. His cockpit cowlings flared like those of Hiran Hillegass over east; Frank Kurtis was the other constructor whom Hank favored, and to some his cars looked like enlarged versions of Kurtis-Kraft midgets. A ruthless self-critic, Hank was never entirely satisfied with his perfectly proportioned cars. He complained that they looked like eggs moving down the track, meaning they were too rounded.

Hank was an unusual race car builder who also raced, and, really, he wasn't that good. A fiery smash-up on the Phoenix mile gave him serious burns over much of his body and especially his face and fingertips. Upon resuming work, he discovered that his mutilated fingers now lacked the dexterity to shape aluminum. But, as he optimistically noted, racing had gone to fiberglass anyway.

Occasionally, Hank did have his moments racing, and in a 1962 heat at Ascot he and Herk Hurtubise put on a wild display of crisscross dirt tracking that was long talked about and that Hank won. Ascot was also where Hank was killed: in 1968 he got tangled up with some rookies. It was a horrible wreck – one of Ascot's few out-of-the-ball-parkers – and witnessing it completely unnerved young Jan Opperman. Opp, who'd flown in by private plane and started just behind Hank, lapsed into shock while piloting over Bakersfield on the flying trip home, and he temporarily went blind.

Hank's ride that night had been one of the top chugs in the California Racing Association, a winner of many races, and a machine that was claimed to be what was left of an ancient single-tube Kurtis-Kraft linked to Johnny McDowell, Elmer George, Jerry Hoyt, Eddie Sachs, and Tony Bettenhausen. But this was a case where for once everyone was so pissed off about what a race car had done to a good man that nobody tried restoring it. After being chopped into pieces, Hank's last ride was buried in a secret place where nobody could ever dig it up to try to race it again.

Still another "missing link" who tried bridging the gap between constructing cars and racing them was Bob Pankratz. But Bob, too, took a mauling from his racing.

He got into his first major spill before World War II and then experienced the big one from which he never quite recovered not long afterward.

Even before the spills, Bob was turning out gorgeous stuff seemingly better suited for the race car beauty contest than the dirt track. Pankratz sleds hugged the ground, displayed swoopy lines, employed the sort of Clyde Adams-like flat tails that Kuzma also favored, yet were extremely innovative with their low torsion bars and trademark Pankratz double radius rods. One notorious 1948 Pankratz midget, a looker as well as the kiss of death, nailed three different drivers. The first, a cinematically handsome Rex Mays protégé named Mel Hansen, absorbed paralyzing wounds after the Pankratz jumped on top of him. The second – we don't have to reveal his name – was a thief TV repairman and would-be racer who in 1952 ripped off the Pankratz and its trailer when he saw them parked on an L.A. street. He patiently cached the Pankratz for two years waiting for his theft to blow over, and then in 1954 at a Bay Cities Racing Association show in Sacramento didn't live through one lap's worth of time trials when the puppy jumped on top of him, too. A photo of the fatal flip made the AP wire, and everyone's knee-jerk reaction was "the dirty bastard yellow press is persecuting racing again!" but there was a brighter side. Someone identified the Pankratz from the picture, and in time it was returned to its former owner, the trucking magnet and ex-Barney Oldfield associate Pat Clancy (himself an eccentric who had a six-wheel Indy car that was later converted to four by Fat Boy Ewing and campaigned by Diz Wilson). Pat in turn returned the Pankratz to its regular driver, the 110 Offy specialist Jimmie Davies. Better than a decade later, in 1966 at Chicago's Santa Fe Speedway, the same little car bit again,

when the Pankratz stuck its throttle and plugged Jimmie into the wall. But the 17-year-old midget had by then won three straight USAC national championships and Jimmie had been working on a fourth.

Hands down the most luminous member of the Pankratz line was the *Cheesman* sprinter. Constructed in 1951, it raced in the Pacific Northwest and then was all over the Midwest, on the dirt tracks as well as the slants, winning the 1958 USAC title with Eddie Sachs up. Bill Cheesman died not long afterward, and Paul Leffler, a Wally Meskowski pupil just starting his own racing life as owner and chief mechanic, purchased the *Cheesman*. Despite being nearly 10 seasons old, it was arguably sprint racing's best-looking car, so Paul did his best to preserve its looks when he finally had to get rid of the outclassed Offy and open things up with a V-8 stove crammed inside the narrow Pankratz chassis. The makeover failed. In 1964, the *Cheesman* sailed over the fence at New Bremen and crash-landed so hard it cracked into four pieces.

Paul salvaged what he could and rebuilt the chassis as *No. 16*. In 1966, just before the start of the June main event at Reading, Paul felt the hair on the back of his head standing up as he listened to his driver, none other than Jud Larson, uttering the standard Jud-ese about running it backward into the first corner. But Jud was past his prime and got hung up in the cushion instead, knocking out himself as well as Red Reigel in Johnny White's old car. And seemingly the *Cheesman*.

But not quite. Parts of it subsequently went on appearing on other cars. You can go to the loony bin trying to verify such stories, but five partners in West Virginia reputedly used bits off the *Cheesman* to construct a juggernaut that may have won 18 races on the West Virginia circuit.

It might appear that Bob Pankratz's reverence for beauty led him to create designs that jeopardized safety. But in 1951-1971 nobody expected race cars to be safe anyway. So maybe it's better to put it all down to the wisdom of Jack Kerouac. "Pretty chicks make graves," Jack wrote. So did pretty race cars.