

“This Race Will Never Get Run”  
(Charlie Swartz)

Volusia County Speedway, Florida, winter 1980

Charlie Swartz has been a hot topic of controversy and curiosity on the dirttracks of late model racing for almost four decades. He disputes those who label him the most obstinate race driver who ever lived. “Basically,” he maintains, “I think I’m an easygoing guy.” There is a class of person to whom Swartz’s nonchalance does not extend, however, and it is toward anybody foolhardy enough to tell him what to do. “Ask me to do something, and I probably will,” Charlie once explained. “But tell me – *order* me to – and, no, I’m, sorry, under no condition will I do it.”

Swartz is in his mid-40s, has a big moustache and a head full of curly dark hair. He is not intimidating physically. He is barely six inches over five feet tall, and used to weigh below 140 pounds. What’s more, a lifetime of stubbornness, disorderly conduct, hard racing, and little sleep have aged Charlie beyond his years. Even in his racing prime, he frequently looked in need of a good night’s rest. Additionally, his life was haunted by two fears: that somebody might attempt to tell him what to do, and by the unpleasant circumstances certain to follow when they did.

Reasonable people can disagree about which eruption showed Charlie at his most stubborn, but many are partial to the explosive chain of events which occurred in Florida at Volusia County Speedway, during February Speed Weeks.

It all started during a pre-race drivers meeting when Volusia County’s stewards declared that whenever a leader spun out, first place would be restored

automatically to him. This was because the faster drivers were complaining of lapped cars deliberately hitting them and spinning them.

Charlie Swartz sometimes sees his entire life as a running battle with delegated authority; timidity in the face of authority has never been one of his weaknesses.

“That’s a bad rule,” he immediately protests. “The leader shouldn’t be protected just because he’s the leader. If he spins out, he should go to the tail just like everybody else.”

The main event begins – 26 late models crammed onto a half-mile oval lapping at 80-plus MPH. And it transpires that early in the race, the lead car does indeed hit something, or perhaps gets hit. In any event, the leader spins out and stalls. The rule, though, is arbitrarily re-interpreted. And now the stewards mandate that the leaders must go to the back of the pack after all.

Unfortunately for everybody concerned, the leader is Charlie himself. And, upon refiring the engine, he brakes his car to an ominous stop in front of the grandstands.

A Volusia County official, a bearded individual whom posterity remembers only by his nickname of “Fuzzy,” doesn’t waste courtesies: “Charlie, you’re going to the tail!”

Discovering himself in the unique position of seeking enforcement of a rule he is on record as opposing, Swartz is momentarily speechless. “No,” he finally says. “I’m going to start first, just like you guys said at the meeting.”

“You’re going to the tail,” Fuzzy replies, “and that’s that.”

“I guess,” replies Charlie, “that I’m going to have to show you that none of you are big enough to put me on the tail.”

“You’re going to the tail or we’re hauling your car off the track.”

“This race will never get run.”

Just then a pair of big wrecking trucks arrive. “Hook him up and haul him out of here, boys,” cries Fuzzy, whom Swartz surprises by emerging from the cockpit, armed with an iron jack handle, and climbing on top of his car’s roof.

“I told this one wrecker driver, ‘You hook onto this race car, and I’m going to hook you in the head,’” Charlie remembers. “He started to anyway. And I said, ‘Now hold on, I don’t want to get into it with you, you’re just a wrecker truck driver.’

“So he backed off a second, and I yelled at the other wrecker driver, ‘Don’t you hook on, either. I ain’t going to hurt you guys, this is between me and the racetrack, but I will knock your brains out if you touch the race car.’

“They both backed off. But by then, this had been going on for a while, and I could hear the grandstands getting involved. So finally Dave Bailey – he’s my father-in-law – comes up and says, ‘Charlie, please stop. You’re making Leslie – Leslie’s my wife – you’re making Leslie a nervous wreck.’ And I got to thinking, well, maybe I better straighten out. But I thought, no, I’m going to stand up here a little longer. And then I saw Fussy and Dave Bailey. Fuzzy had his back to me, and Dave was facing me, and it looked like Fuzzy was shoving Dave down the racetrack. So I jumped into it to help Dave. Only it turned out that Fuzzy wasn’t pushing, but that Dave was pulling. He has hold of Fuzzy’s beard....”

Charlie subsequently got suspended then reinstated, and then, while racing all around the country, fell from grace over and over again. All this didn’t prevent

him from being among the fastest late model drivers of his time.

Swartz was born in Muncie, Indiana, but for years lived and worked in Kentucky, in the community of Ashland, where he did business as Charlie Swartz Race Cars. He labored away, cutting, pressing, welding together, and selling late models before crashing to the floor from exhaustion.

Meanwhile, as to the matter of his stubbornness, he says he honestly doesn't know what made him that way, but speculates that the first time he became aware of it was when he was a teenager chauffeuring a gravel truck belonging to his father, the vagabond racing driver Audie Swartz. After being informed that it was absolutely impossible to broadside a fully laden dump truck and trailer, Charlie attempted it anyway. The unsuccessful assault cost the lives of a telephone pole, three light standards, and the truck and trailer.

Swartz led a lean boyhood. He grew up with his mother, father, and two sisters inside a converted breeder house – a chicken coop. Asked the reason for this, Swartz reduced the situation to its essentials: "We didn't have any money."

His father drove racing cars, and soon Swartz was going on sorties of his own in an orange rattletrap with a #8 painted on it. His reputation was formed when he earned the distinction of being one of the few participants ever to get thrown out of the pits at Eldora Speedway for fighting. He'd just turned 16. "I was a poor kid winning races in an old car," he says, "and I guess some people didn't like it."

Swartz in those years got into fights that would have killed most people. By his account, he lost just one,

but it put him in the hospital. “They wouldn’t let me leave the hospital till real late,” he explains, “and I got home real late, and without a key. I was knocking at the door to be let in, but my face still was so swollen, my wife kept looking out the window without letting me in because she didn’t recognize me. I had one horrible time getting her to open up and give me something to eat.”

That wife and Swartz parted company some time ago. Swartz’s present spouse is the former Leslie Bailey. She is the daughter of Dave Bailey – racingtrack proprietor, car owner, former racing driver, and long-time associate of Swartz. The two men first met in strained conditions at Portsmouth Raceway Park in Ohio, where Swartz was under attack from the entire pits for some reason, and Bailey and some of his brothers came to Charlie’s rescue. Leslie was 11 then. For many seasons, Swartz campaigned a late model belonging to Bailey, and their relationship deepened until Bailey changed his mind abruptly and decided never to speak to Swartz again. This about-face was brought on by Bailey discovering that Swartz intended to marry his daughter. But the chill lasted only one summer. Today, all relations within the family are long restored, Leslie and Charlie have been married a dozen years, and have two daughters. Leslie on her husband: “When he’s being stubborn about something, never try and talk him out of it. The best thing is never say anything.” She loves Swartz very much.

Leslie also rates her husband as one of the relatively few late model drivers able to go equally fast on a fenderless sprintcar. Swartz agrees. “I feel like I drive with my head,” he says, “even though lots of people don’t think I do. But people say to me that even if I’m back in the pack, I’m causing something to happen. I like that.”

C.K. Spurlock, the entrepreneur and sprintcar constructor, liked it, too, and offered Swartz a ride in a brand-new Bob Trostle car, which resulted in Swartz going to live in Spurlock's headquarters in Henderson, Tennessee. And from there he set out along Interstate 40 to Arkansas to win a renegade race at West Memphis.

This became a lucky and unlucky journey. Somewhere between Memphis and Nashville, Swartz lost his wallet and all his traveling money, then found them again on the Interstate right where he'd dropped them. At West Memphis there was a serious crash which wrecked Spurlock's new car and cost Swartz three days in the hospital. "I went back to Henderson," Swartz recalls, "knowing C.K. was going to say it was the end of things. But what he said was, 'I just called Bob Trostle and ordered two new cars. Soon as you get well enough, you'll have to go to Des Moines to pick them up.'" So Swartz acquired a short but exciting history with the World of Outlaws while the association was holding its inaugural campaign. To cut expenses on the road, he often traveled and shared a motel room with a 25-year-old unknown called Steve Kinser. Years afterward, when asked to describe Swartz, Kinser chose the term "crazy" – adding that he meant it in a flattering sense.

"Seems like in sprintcars I had some awful bad luck," Swartz says now. "Seems like that's kind of the story of my life." He was Spurlock's driver and mechanic both, and the grind of overhauling the sprintcar, traveling 36 to 40 hours without sleep, then being almost too exhausted to race, caused Swartz to quit Spurlock and begin working for the famous Arizona car owner and constructor Gary Stanton.

Two weeks later, Swartz crashed Stanton's car violently enough to put himself inside a hospital for a

week, and to get discharged wearing a cast. Cast and all, he went back to Spurlock to beg a ride for a \$10,000 meet at Eldora. And, still wearing the cast, he clocked the fastest qualifying lap, then while leading, had a spark plug go dead.

Swartz and Spurlock attempted to resume their partnership on a full-time basis. They failed, and Swartz moved back to late models again, including competing in a fender-bending United States versus Australia series.

Interviewed on the Australian radio, and asked his opinion of the country's race drivers, Charlie answered, "Well, I really haven't seen that you have any." His reply was incendiary, and intended to be, for Swartz was getting paid a salary to attract Australian audiences by antagonizing them.

He was a huge success. Paraded around the various racing tracks in the bed of a pickup truck, Swartz hollered and made threatening gestures at the grandstands, and the grandstands, roaring, responded to his attentions by throwing objects at his head. "They served me beer without taking it out of the can," Swartz recalls. The vocation of villain suited him, and he was enjoying himself fully until finding out to his disappointment that Australia, too, had people who believed they could tell him what to do.

He made this discovery in the province of New South Wales. A racing official delivered a tirade and screamed an ultimatum; the same racing official fell to the ground. The party who prostrated him was Swartz, who, far from satisfied, next addressed the spectators with disparaging gestures and taunts, leading to a gigantic riot which culminated with Swartz departing under police escort while whole grandstands struggled to scale fences to get at him.

An inquest was called to determine how Swartz might be punished. And he was informed that he was forever barred from racing in Australia again. Shrugging this off, he returned to the U.S. seeking only friendship. Instead, he arrived just in time to provoke the uproar at Volusia County.

The early to mid-Eighties were Swartz's great years in late models, and he won almost every major dirt tournament, including Eldora's and Pennsboro's. Along the way, he revealed what motivated him to race. "If a racing car doesn't thrill you a little bit," he explained, "then I don't see any reason to drive it."

Finding existing late models unstimulating, Swartz and builder Ray Callahan put together a machine which could go faster than a sprintcar. This turned out to be a slab-shaped automobile with a broad beam, an engine in its middle, and 5-foot-high sheets of clear plastic on its sides; to this day it is remembered as being either technologically advanced or the ugliest racingcar anybody had ever seen.

It certainly was fast. Other car builders began plagiarizing the design, which delighted Swartz, for he wanted such vehicles to propagate. Unfortunately, relatively few racingtracks cared for slab cars, even though Swartz got into many debates with racing promoters – carried out at shouting level – the slabs generally disappeared. Swartz felt ostracized. "It's stifling," he moaned at the time. "The rules don't let a car builder be inventive." Frustrated, he briefly abandoned late models and unsuccessfully tried getting back into sprintcars again.

Swartz recently turned his Kentucky car-building business over to his son (from his first marriage) Audie, then moved to Georgia to work in Atlanta for Carrera

shock absorbers. He refuses to say, however, that he has reached the status of retired race driver; in fact, his life-long ban having been rescinded, he is contemplating paying another racing visit on his old friends the Australians.