

The death of an old friend

After four decades, there will be no more Ascot Saturday nights

By Joe Scalzo



Ron Hussey photo

For years, the fireworks at Ascot had been on the track, but the final night of racing—Turkey Night, 1990—announced end of an era

For those supporting sprint car racing on the West Coast, the great nights at Ascot always were the Saturdays.

But first came the vibrations of anticipation. They'd come driving south along the Harbor Freeway and passed the Imperial Highway turn-off. Imperial was only a couple of exits before Ascot.

Then, at the Alondra ramp, if it was a clear evening, blazing reassuringly in the twilight sky, the familiar arc lights could be made out.

Finally, Artesia Boulevard, Ascot's exit. Now all that remained was to scramble for a place in the grandstands. There were two choices. A seat high in Turn Four afforded a fine panorama of all corners. But sitting low in Turn One put you close enough to the sprint cars to absorb their muscle, feel their wind and heat, and, of course, get battered by their stinging dirt. Knowledgeable Ascot patrons alternated between the two.

But no longer.

Ascot—Ascot Park was its actual name, one hardly anybody used—was an extraordinary racetrack which stood through four decades. My Saturday pilgrimages there

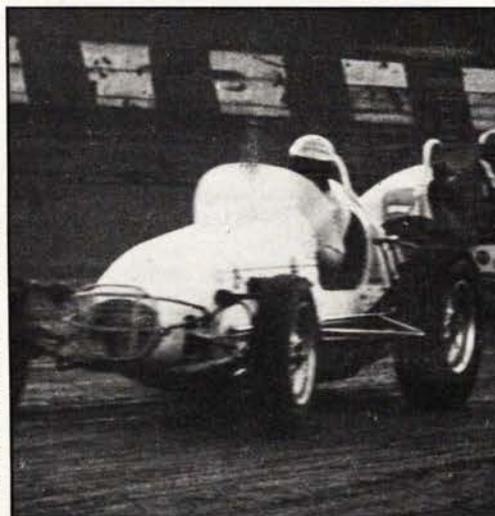
lasted 30 years.

Now all those Ascot Saturdays are at an end. Last month, following the running of the traditional 100-lap midget car race called the Turkey Night Grand Prix, Ascot closed ... forever. All that remains is for its assassins, the land developers, to move in and start sacking.

People in Los Angeles who lived through the razing of Ontario Motor Speedway and the slow demise of Riverside will understand the bereavement. Yet I think there are differences between those two tracks' deaths and Ascot's. They were vast and vibrant racing cities, even capitals. Ascot, a small and closed half-mile oval, was a clannish, yet extremely hip, village.

Neither Riverside nor especially Ontario was in business simply to please aficionados; both lusted to bring racing's message to the unconverted public at large. Ontario's opening-day crowd was so large it established a California sporting attendance record.

Ascot was intimate. Even when conditions were standing-room-only for a Camel Pro series motorcycle flat-track national, or a World of Outlaws two-nighter, or during the Califor-



Photos courtesy of Joe Scalzo Collection

nia Racing Association's Don Peabody Classic, the announced attendance would be only around 10,000. And such oversized Ascot crowds always were, to me, aberrations. Less than half that many people might appear on a routine Saturday night.

Yet they were family. And perhaps plea-

Ascot was built in 1957. Early in its history, it became home to sprint cars (right and bottom), often driven by the heroes of the Indy 500, and to such motorcycle racers as Al Gunther and Neil Keen (below)



santer ways to pass Saturday evenings didn't exist than to spend them in the company of your like-minded neighbors, all sprint car fanatics. You were apt to discover, for instance, that the guy seated next to you could lucidly discourse on why a Gambler chassis worked at Ascot and a

Raising a farewell toast from across an ocean

Among those he met at races was Dutch-born future wife

Maintaining Ascot's position as "the world's busiest track" always was taken seriously by the track's long-time promoter, the impresario J.C. Agajanian. Upon his 1984 passing, the mandate was taken up by his son, Carey, who promoted with equal fervor.

Ascot was more than sprinters. It hosted midget car races, including Turkey Night. It featured stock cars of all categories. Ascot usually edged away from destruction derbies, though on Sunday nights it did push Figure 8 racing: dilapidated cars on an infield track shaped like an 8, crisscrossing in the intersection, frequently colliding with grinding impact.

Ascot also had motorcycle races. The Friday night flat track milieu was rich with the same fanaticism found among the Saturday evening sprint cars.

Ascot's flat-trackers changed my life. One night, members of the BSA Gold Star faction invited me to a birthday party at the home of one of their tuners. This tuner had as tenants in his front house a family of Dutch immigrants. He had told father, mother and teen-age daughter that unless they attended the Friday night races, he would raise the rent. Not understanding American humor, and very little English, they had dutifully started going.

The daughter and I met at the party, and something happened. Much of our subsequent courtship occurred at Ascot, where she used to read the weekly racing program to practice English.

One sprint car Saturday night, right in the middle of the main event, a trans-



The late J.C. Agajanian (above with President Nixon) was the impresario of Ascot. J.C.'s son, Carey (left) ran the track until its recent demise

former blew out in San Pedro and all the lights in Ascot went out. Yet there was no accident. All the drivers merely followed each other's blue alcohol flames.

Another Saturday night race occurred in the middle of the Watts riots—we'd ignored reports of snipers along the Harbor Freeway and gone to Ascot anyway—and when we looked north from the first corner grandstands in the direction of the San Gabriel mountains, Los Angeles was ablaze.

That was a quarter of a century ago; we have been married nearly that long. But now, because we live in the Netherlands, we were spared the awful responsibility of attending Ascot's deathbed race.

We mourned by proxy, synchronizing Dutch time with Pacific Coast, imagining when the checkered flag would be dropping on the last time, we raised a sentimental toast of farewell.

— Joe Scalzo

Nance didn't, or why a Shaver V8 sounded more ravishing than a Gaerte V8; and he also could plot the line of history in dirt track rubber from the double-step diamond to the humper; and even agree with you that Ascot was wise to keep wings off its sprint cars; and then both of you could get down to solving real mysteries of the universe as to why, say, Ron Shuman automatically qualified well on dry surfaces and atrociously on wet ones, or why Lealand McSpadden couldn't qualify at all without jumping the cushion.

And so on.

Being in on Ascot sprint cars was like belonging to an exclusive, well-informed cult. The whole thing was a semi-secret. On a given Saturday night, for example, you might witness the greatest race you'd ever seen. But on Sunday morning, in the unlikely event your newspaper carried any results at all, they'd be buried in the meanest agate type.

Newspapers neglected Ascot, but not because they disliked it. Saturday races finished so late, they created impossible deadlines.

And that was another thing about Ascot—possibly the crucial thing. The racing there was at night. This was Ascot by day: a grim stand of vacant parking lots, tumble-down buildings, empty bleachers. And this was Ascot by night: fantasyland.

Nighttime racing was a dazzling spectacle. Everything sped up, including drama, anticipation, adrenaline.

And the sense of danger? Of course. Danger, at Ascot, sometimes existed in equilibrium to pleasure. In fact Ascot's most momentous era also was its most notorious and dangerous. Many of us paid with feelings of guilt.

And it was all because Ascot, historically speaking, experienced not one but two bonds with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

The first bond was during the epoch when Ascot used to send all its winners to the Memorial Day 500. The second, far more curious bond, was when Indianapolis used to send its winners to Ascot.

Constructed in 1957, Ascot in the beginning was like any other dirt track whose sprint car winners matriculated to the 500. This was wonderful. The bold and unknown Ascot rookie you had watched grappling on Saturday would that May become the mighty name who came blasting out of your radio as the wrecker of all Indianapolis speed marks (Jim Hurtubise, 1960); or even the 500's winner (Parnelli Jones, 1964). Ascot gradually gained the reputation of filling more Indianapolis starting lineups than any other



Ron Hussey photos



Ascot also has seen a succession of top midget drivers circle its dirt oval. Mel Kenyon (right) won his first national championship in 1967, his most recent in 1985. Newest star of the midget cars is Jeff Gordon (above)



dirt track.

This all changed when Indianapolis decided it preferred a different sort of race driver. Yet what didn't change, what went on repeating itself for year after year, was

Short track racing lives on after Ascot

At tracks such as Jersey's dusty little Flemington oval

A dusty decal on a spectator's cooler at the Flemington Fair Speedway in New Jersey says it all: "If you haven't got dirt in your beer, you're not at a real race!"

Fans who come out to the weekly Saturday night races and the occasional Sunday event at this track, halfway between Philadelphia and New York, have to cope with flying mudballs and a layer of dirt that seems to coat everything.

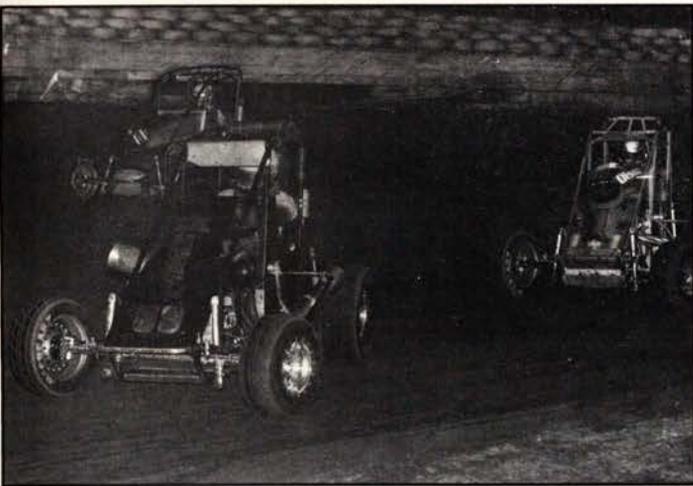
They don't seem to mind, however.

Rick Kuhl, whose father, Paul, has been running races at the fair grounds since 1971, noted that, "A lot of these fans like the action in the dirt."

Jeff Funk, whose beer cooler carried the dusty decal, spoke for the diehard dirt track fans when he said, "If they pave it (Flemington's half-mile track), they'll never see me again."

Funk, his brother Joe and a neighbor, Jerry Howatt, drive 50 miles (each way) from their farm homes near Allentown, Pa., to see the modifieds and small-bore modifieds race at Flemington.

The Funk brothers became Flemington



Stan Fox (far left) drives his sprint car beneath the final checkered flag in Ascot history. Among the stars of the dirt track action through the years have been Parnelli Jones (lower left) and his son, P.J.



Mario, Johnny Rutherford, Bobby Unser ... Was it something deep in their racing ancestries—some atavism—which compelled them to continue being sprint car racers? Or did Ascot's night, the back-'em-in-corners and whole nerved-up ambience, make them as intoxicated as the rest of us?

It was astonishing racing.

Perhaps, in retrospect, Indycar champions raced no harder than the local Ascot drivers. But because they were who they were, it seemed like they did. And being an Ascot aficionado in those years meant taking Ascot as seriously as Hemingway took bullfighting.

And, just as Hemingway could overlook what his brave bulls occasionally were doing to horses, so we could overlook what sprint

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Our myopia lasted until 1966. Then hubris came to Ascot: old master, Don Branson and young disciple Dick Atkins got killed in a flaming wreck. That's when it ended.

Almost overnight—or so it later seemed—nobody in his right mind ever would want to participate in such races again. And nobody with an ounce of sensitivity could continue supporting or condoning such racing anymore. All the young Indy champions grudgingly abandoned sprint cars and Ascot of their own volition, or else were persuaded to.

And what did we do, the Ascot faithful?

We mourned; we agonized; in the end, we rationalized. We behaved like racing people around the globe traditionally behave when there's been a disaster.

And, as it always had, and until this year always would, Ascot went forward. Rarely with Indy champions racing there anymore. And not with open-cockpit sprinters anymore, either, but ones prudently equipped with steel umbrella cockpit coverings.

Ascot racing, even throughout the enlightened roll cage era, still could be quite lethally dangerous. Yet every Ascot Saturday I ever attended felt to me like an affirmation of life, not the reverse.

Tell me that it isn't really over. ■

You'd see them in October, when the USAC theater was visiting: Parnelli, A.J.,

regulars when the speedway in Nazareth, near their home, closed its half-mile dirt track and kept only its longer paved track. Howatt, who only started coming to Flemington this year with the Funks, said he was hooked on dirt track racing, too.

Spectators pay from \$10 for a bleacher seat at regular Saturday night races to \$27 for a seat in the track's covered grandstand for a dirt track championship race.

The racing is close and exciting with four-wheel drifts as the accepted cornering technique. A first-time spectator may be disconcerted by mudballs thrown up as cars warm up in practice and qualifying races, but fans in the bleachers get out of range by sitting in the upper tiers. However, you can't get away from the dust, as Jeff Funk's cooler showed.

By the time the first feature race is run, there is a layer of rubber in the groove and the mudslinging has stopped.

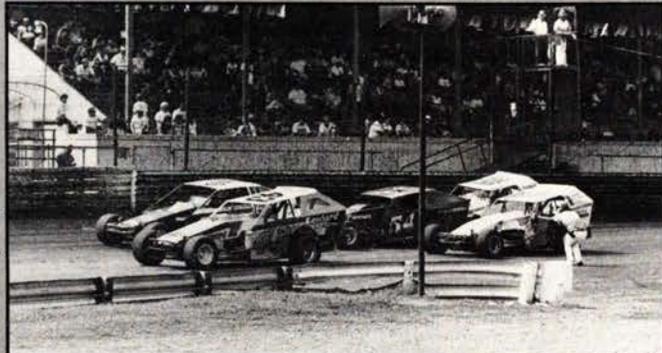
Rick Kuhl said speedway management

has considered paving the track to eliminate the dust and to reduce maintenance costs. Calcium has to be spread on the track periodically and then watered in. The watering is done with a large tank truck, which hoses down the track just before racing begins.

"A lot of labor is involved," Kuhl said of maintaining a dirt track, adding that only a change of tires and suspensions is needed for the dirt track cars to be raced on pavement.



Robert J. Salgado photos



The sticker on Jeff and Joe Funk's cooler tells the happy, though dusty story of short track racing

Flemington belongs to an association that calls itself DIRT, for Drivers' Independent Race Tracks. Each track has its own set of drivers and sponsors a series of races that provide points toward an overall championship.

Whatever surface the track might present them, the cars won't stop running at Flemington in the foreseeable future. Unlike many race promoters who are only tenants, the Kuhl family is the majority owner of the corporation that owns the Flemington Fair's 50 acres.

Fan loyalty is important. Jerry Ritter of Yardville, N.J., has been coming for 25 years and recalls the time one team let him take a lap in its car.

"It was no big deal," he says. Still, he hasn't forgotten. — Robert Salgado