

FLASHBACK

RODGER WENT LEFT AND RIGHT



(Photo courtesy Dave Nicholas, barcboys.com)

By Lew Boyd

It was a time of free thinking, and USAC wanted in on the act.

With great fanfare the normally oval-based sanctioning body announced an event to be held July 25, 1959, on the twists and turns and ups and downs of Connecticut's Lime Rock Park. And, taking it a step further, they announced the rules would be "Formula Libre" (an up-town way of saying "run what ya brung") with a heavy purse on the line.

The money part really got the attention of road-racing guys used to running for trophies. Superstar Americans and foreigners alike such as John Fitch, Lance Reventlow, George Constantine, and the Rodriguez Brothers came to town. But sprinkled through the pit area was a cadre of oval-track specialists, including Tony Bettenhausen, Duane Carter, Bert Brooks, and Russ Kalar, who came up with something a little different. They brought midgets.

It was an interesting idea. How would a 900-pound flyweight with no transmission, a farm-like suicide front end, a hand brake, and a 91-cubic-inch Offy four-banger possibly compete with the sophisticated road-racing technology of the Europeans?

They figured the 1.53-mile layout at Lime Rock with its relatively small straights might suit the one-gear midgets which, with their short wheelbases, would likely be agile in the turns. For most, the experiment turned out to be a bust, but there was an alpha team among the bunch.

Everyone had taken notice when re-

spected car owner Ken Brenn pulled in with a beautifully prepared No. 24 1946 Meyer Drake midget. His driver was Rodger Ward, who just a few years earlier bore a dark reputation for accidents and drinking. Now he was back in shape and among the hottest racers in America, fresh off his first Indy 500 win in the Wilke Leader Card Special. To prove it, after just a couple of laps of practice, he stunned all present by motoring to a new track record. In the first of three segments on race day, having to rev his engine more than he intended, he ran second to Constantine in a Formula I Aston Martin. Ward and Brenn then noodled and decided to pop in a taller gear, a 4.48, while a crowd of Europeans watched in awe, never having seen the likes of a quick-change rear before. It worked like a champ, as Ward won round two formidably, despite a brief return to dirt tracking during an off-course excursion.

The final 60-lap segment was something to behold. All eyes were on Ward, who started up front and held the lead tenuously for 20 rounds, using every trick in the book. Then Chuck Daigh, powered by a Maserati, ruled the roost, looking like a winner. But "the little Offy that could" wasn't done just yet.

The loss of a bit of weight can mean a ton in a midget, and by now the #24 had burned a lot of fuel. Ward was ready and retook the lead, wheeling it commandingly to a glorious finish, as the Park rocked. The crowd went absolutely wild, hardly letting themselves believe what they had just seen. Neither could the Europeans. Ward himself later told Chris Economaki that that day in the midget made

him prouder than sipping milk at the Brickyard.

News of the upset reverberated far beyond those green Connecticut hills. At that time Alec and Mary Ulmann were deep in their planning to present the 1959 Grand Prix of the United States in Sebring on December 12. They saw huge potential in promoting a David-and-Goliath showdown. They urged Rodger Ward and Bob Wilke to enter with a midget, even though the two had qualms about a lowly midget on those endless straightaways in the Florida sun. But the persuasive Ulmanns raised the ante, providing the funds to modify the Offy engine and install a Model A clutch and transmission to allow two speeds forward. To ensure extra attention to the unlikely entry, the Ulmanns honored the midget from Wisconsin by designating it No 1. That number would normally go to the previous year's FI champion, but that was Mike Hawthorn, who had died that January.

On the very first lap of practice, things began to sour. The team's preferred engine blew violently, and when it came to qualifying, it was just plain embarrassment—ten seconds behind the second slowest car. Still, a fascinated crowd surrounded the Leader Card entry in the pits, and Ward was the clear favorite of the 20,000 spectators. They cheered him on in the race, and he drove brilliantly just for them, sliding the turns perfectly—and waving.

But it just wasn't meant to happen. He could not keep up with the rear-engine machinery and its power. Then, perhaps mercifully, the clutch gave out, reducing the #1 to a single gear, and Ward pulled out. After that, many of the fans left.

It was a deflating end to Ward's bi-directional adventure. Going home, he had to be wishing he'd listened to his reservations about running Sebring in the first place. But, then again, it hadn't been such a bad year. On top of dominating Indy and Lime Rock, along the way he'd captured the '59 USAC National title. **FSW**