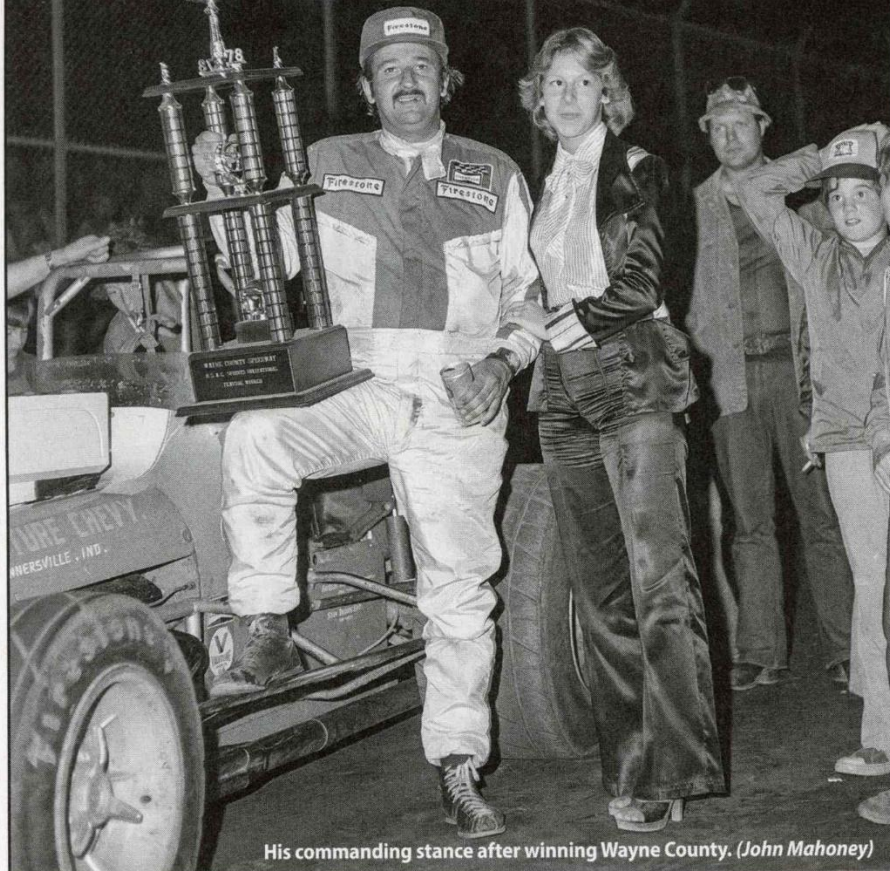


FLASHBACK

THE DUKE OF DIRT



His commanding stance after winning Wayne County. (John Mahoney)

By Lew Boyd

Quite possibly there could have been a zanier sprint car driver than Duke Cook, but quite possibly there never was.

From a start at Winchester in 1965 right up through the late 1980s, the Snyder, Ohio, native competed in USAC sprint cars and occasionally Silver Crown and midgets, and he built up quite a reputation. He was brave beyond question, but his notoriety stemmed largely from his unendingly boisterous personality rather than his performance on the track. His mouth ran faster than his foot.

California's Jimmy Oskie had a full view of Duke early on, perhaps a fuller view than he had in mind. Duke had phoned him and asked if he could stay with Jimmy during USAC's autumn swing through the West Coast. Jimmy concurred, but Duke stayed all winter.

Jimmy didn't take long to realize how Duke was always getting rides without necessarily delivering the trophies. "Duke was put on this earth to mess with us. He could talk his way into anything. Knowing no one, we went to Dodger Stadium and he talked us right into the locker room. He had a great sense of humor and soon everyone was eating out of his hand. Then, we were headed up to the broadcasters' booth, and, wouldn't you know, up popped 'Welcome Duke Cook' on that huge stadium billboard."

Despite his considerable bulk—and often in underpowered cars, Duke did have a few good runs, especially in 1978, and you could be sure he made the most of them. Quite surprisingly he ran second to Dick Tobias in the prestigious Tony Hulman Classic at Terre Haute, but afterwards he carried on, loudly claiming that the checkered flew too early and the win was really his. Tobias, a soft-spoken pro,

simply shook his head and headed back to Pennsylvania with the payoff.

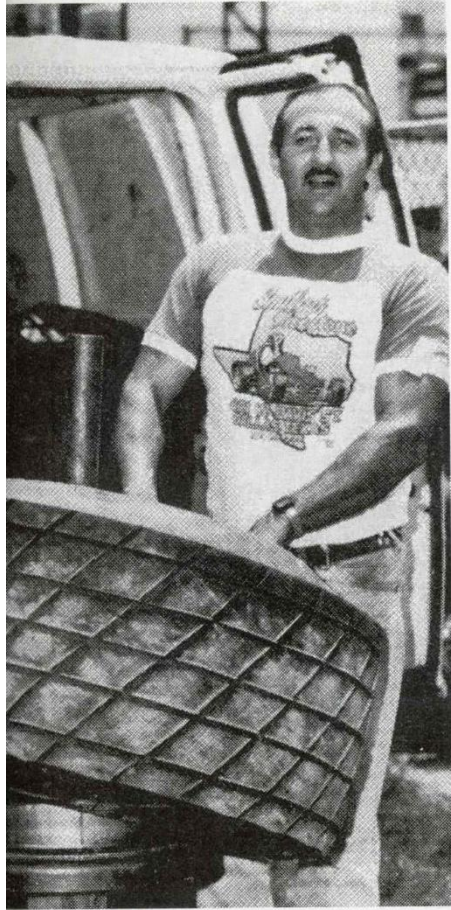
Then, just a couple of weeks later, the tour dropped into Wayne County, Ohio, to run on a squeaky tight track with minimal passing. Duke won it, his only victory, making sure all present understood that they had just witnessed the greatest performance in USAC history.

Duke's tireless search for glory in the cockpit ran second only to an insatiable obsession with money. Everyone in the pit area knew it and held tightly to their billfolds.

Kenny Schrader smiles about a twin-feature Silver Crown event at IRP in 1989. Ken won the first one aboard the Boston Louie No. 29, but the car was unable to start the second leg. Kenny says, "Duke hadn't been running too well so he asked me to jump in his car. We actually got up to fourth, I think. Afterwards everyone told me that jumping in Duke's car without being paid first was the bravest thing I'd ever done."

As time passed, Duke made a deal with Gene White to sell Firestone racing tires. One time he sold a midget tire to seriously underfunded journalist Robin Miller, who was giving driving a try. Unfortunately, Robin was hurt in qualifying before he could mount the tire and was taken to the hospital. Duke did go to see him, and Robin was deeply upset because his crew had reported that the tire had been stolen from his van. Duke assured Robin not to worry, he wouldn't charge for it. What he didn't tell Robin was that for fear of not being paid, he had gone over and taken the tire back himself.

And nothing, however sketchy, would get in the way if Duke thought his tires would give a driver a special advantage. A young and anxious Shane Carson, just starting out in the Laverne Nance car, arrived in Lake City, Florida. The freshly oiled surface was wearing out, and Duke marched over and told him to mount up double-step Firestones. There was no barrier to the infield, and Duke just knew Shane could get a good bite way downstairs with them. It worked. Shane rocketed to the front, spraying marbles up onto the groove. Soon everyone—Pitzer, Saldana, Wolfgang—was down in the infield chasing him, as the push trucks moved farther inward to get out of their way. "Then," says Shane, "I forgot where



"You could win with his tire." (Gene Crucean)

I was, clipped a drainage ditch, and flipped. Duke didn't do me any favors. He told Nance, "You should have won. I thought that kid's memory was longer than his [private part]."

In his later years, never far from the sport, Duke would attend the Chili Bowl. I had a table there selling books before COVID, and next to it we had a sitting area honoring the late racer Buzz Rose. Lots of Buzz's friends would convene at the "Rose Garden," including Johnny and Betty Rutherford, Bobby and Lisa Unser, Ken Clapp, Trudy Ruttman, and the like. One day Duke barged in, took a seat, and began uttering outrageous comments to any female or person of color walking by. The women in the booth became more and more incensed.

Then, suddenly, Duke started twitching and squirming. It turned out he had been bitten on the rump by a spider. It got worse. And worse. And finally, Duke gave in. As he hobbled out the door to the ER, the ladies held a funeral for the bug. **FSW**