

FLASHBACK

BILL AND FATS

FIRE AT MIDNIGHT

By Lew Boyd

It was the mid-1960s, the colorful but dangerous decade of big blocks and water-pipe cages in the East Coast modifieds. Weekly NASCAR tracks dotted each state, while championship events at facilities such as Martinsville drew enormous crowds.

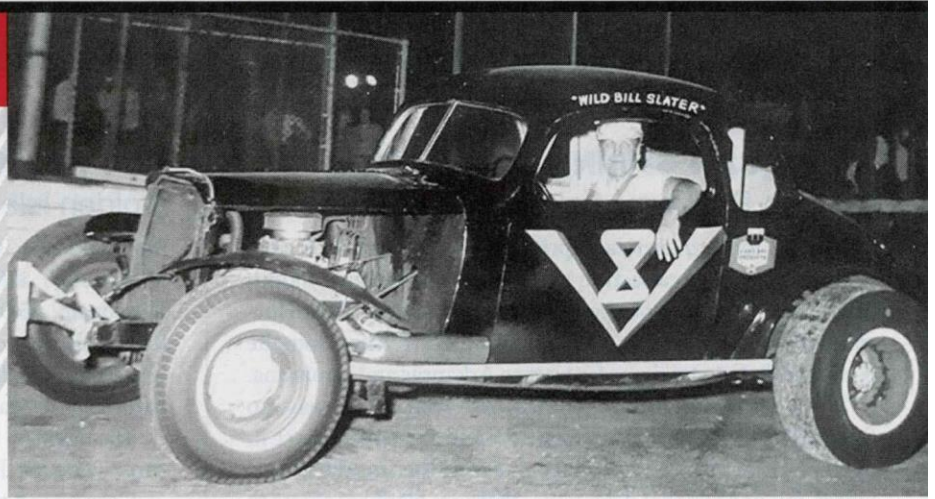
Two talented racers, Bill Slater and Mario “Fats” Caruso, veterans of jalopies in the 1940s and cutdowns in the ’50s, emerged as bright stars, battling it out regularly at Stafford Springs and Thompson in Connecticut and Norwood in Massachusetts. Both had brought national trophies back to New England, Bill from Langhorne, Fats from Trenton.

Known as the “Shrewsbury Flash,” Fats was gruff-talkin’ and beer-guzzlin’. Often aboard Worcester Sand & Gravel’s mighty No. 69 coupes, he was notorious for smoking the right rear off anything he drove in aggressive, take-no-prisoner demonstrations of testosterone.

Bill Slater, on the other hand, was a nattily dressed, coffee-sipping momentum driver, especially smooth in the famous black No. V-8 “Connecticut Valley Rockets.” He once said he drove around Norwood “with a rope tied to a post in the middle of the infield.”

Both were especially fast in the early ’60s. And, competing with such radically different styles, it was easy for announcers to whip up a rivalry. That may or may not have actually existed, but the racing was the definition of intense.

Then came the Sunday night of June 30, 1968, at the lightning fast $\frac{3}{8}$ -mile at Thompson. It was right after the summer solstice, but the planets just didn’t seem aligned. There was a huge field, lots of outsider cars, and immediate problems and delays. Two cars flew out of the place in the heats, Don MacTavish and Lou



ABOVE & BELOW: The V8 and \$ modifieds were driven by pilots with different styles, but both were fast. (Norwoodarena.com)



Austin were all smashed up, and then George Pendergast. It got very late, and everyone wanted to go home.

Finally, just before midnight, veteran starter Jimmy Costello unfurled the green for the feature. A racy lead pack formed immediately, with Jerry Dostie, Buggy Stevens, Eddie Flemke, and Fred DeSarro among their number. Just behind were Fats and Bill.

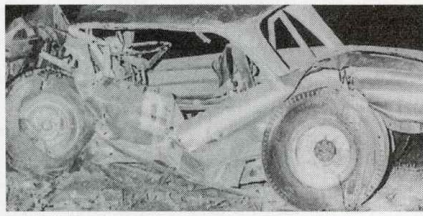
A few laps in, Dostie suddenly drifted up toward the dirt embankment in turn one. Then, as Bill recalled, “He came down across the track and just kept coming.” No place to go, Bill slammed into Dostie, and the V-8 limped to a stop just off turn two as the leaders sped down the backstretch.

By the time Stevens and Flemke, running one-two, came off the fourth turn, veteran fans were on their feet and waving their arms. There was Bill, still stopped—and no yellow light. Costello had not seen

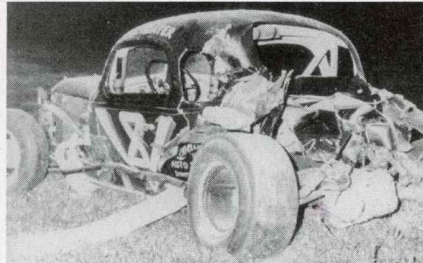
him, nor had the other drivers. And as the field blasted into turns one and two, several thousands in the pits and stands held their breath. Pros that they were, Stevens and Flemke reacted in time and split around the black V-8.

But then it happened. Fats’ son Michael recalls his dad saw what looked like an opportunistic hole in the middle and gassed it—right into Bill. The result was one of the worst wrecks in New England history.

The devastating impact launched the No. V-8 down the backstretch, while Fats’ No. \$ landed in the infield, both on fire. So was the beer-keg gas tank in the V-8 that, torn out, flew high into the sky in a huge blazing arc. There were other wrecked cars seemingly everywhere. Buggy Stevens, stopped by the starter’s stand, recalled looking over on the backstretch: “It was a war zone. Fire, destruction everywhere.”



ABOVE & BELOW: The remains of one of the most violent crashes in the era. (*R.A. Silvia Collection*)



There were unseen acts of bravery as officials and competitors ran to extinguish the flames. Bill and Fats were rushed off by ambulance, their demolished cars impounded by the police. The balance of the event was canceled, and a subdued crowd filed silently out of the speedway, acrid smoke still hovering in the summer air.

Both drivers were seriously injured. Caruso had major facial damage and broken legs as well as burns; in grave condition, he was given last rites three times. After two weeks, amazingly, he began to stabilize and improve.

Meanwhile, Slater was deep in a coma until the following Friday. A couple of his crew members were in his room when he woke up. "What are you doing here!" he barked. "You should be working on the car!"

The 1960s was an era when over-heads, big blocks, and lighter-weight cars began to outpace the available safety technology of the day—before the development of improved seats and harnesses, helmets, suits and fuel cells, more structural chassis design, and track lighting.

Drivers like Bill and Fats were tough hombres. Still, it seems inconceivable that the two not only returned to the races later that season but climbed back behind the wheel on opening day the next spring.

Both ended their careers as highly popular and deserving inductees into the New England Racing Hall of Fame. **FSW**