

FLASHBACK



Ping pong along the way. (Gary Balough collection)

GARY the UNINTIMIDATED

By Lew Boyd

There was good reason when folks began talking about Gary Balough as “the Dale Earnhardt of the short tracks.”

The scrappy kid from Miami needed a rev limiter when, hardly old enough to pee, he saw his first race. By 15 he'd leaned relentlessly on local racers to help assemble a seriously tricked-out '51 Chevy street stock. He trounced the field his first night out at the rough-and-tumble Hialeah Speedway.

It never stopped. A decisive win at the '68 Governor's Cup at Golden Gate opened vast new horizons, and, thanks to Tom Pistone, Balough was off to work the dirt late model circuit in western Pennsylvania. A few dramatic seasons followed in the Ferraiuolos' mighty No. 73 modifieds then dominating the Northeastern tracks and the Syracuse Fairgrounds, seasons also notoriously noted for Gary's on-track disagreements with both competitors and officials.

Gary just never seemed to lift, weekdays or weekends. And his experience at the 1980 World Series on the New Smyrna asphalt summed it all up. He won five nights in a row, and on the sixth broke his neck.

All the while, though, his attention was glued to the goal of NASCAR Cup. The next year he had a few rides with the RahMoc team with audacious plans about winning—and, in fact, they did get one. But not in Cup. On October 10, 1981, Charlotte ran the NASCAR Winston Racing Series Late Model Open Competition Miller 300. It was a big deal, with 43 starters and lots of the big boys. RahMoc brought a Pontiac Ventura, No. 75. It was a rocket ship, and Gary was ready.

As the race developed, Ricky Rudd, Mark Martin, and Sam Ard looked like contenders, but Jody Ridley, Dale Earnhardt, and Balough were coming through the pack. And, as they did, the bumping and banging began.

Gary says Dale and Jody were drafting well together so they began ganging up on him as the newcomer. At one point, Jody had the No. 75 completely sideways. A crash was avoided only by Gary's competence from years on the clay.

But it was Dale Earnhardt who was most warlike. Using his polished ability to take air off competitors' cars, he danced on Gary's right-rear quarter panel—and Gary fought back and hung on.

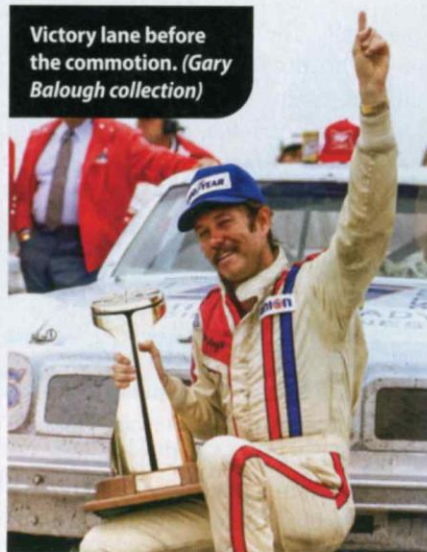
Finally, as the checkered loomed, Gary had had enough. With Dale riding tight to his right rear, Gary took the two into

turn three too high and too fast. Both out of control, he managed to straighten out and win it. Dale struggled not to wreck big time, settling to a 25th-place finish. Jody was 13th.

Gary had originally considered the Intimidator a hero, but their previous encounters had been mixed. One time he outran Dale so dramatically on the dirt at Metrolina Speedway that Dale, impressed, came to watch him race at New Smyrna. Gary smiles, “I couldn't believe he was there. I was so proud.”

And, curiously, just before Charlotte,

Victory lane before the commotion. (Gary Balough collection)



in the No. 75 Cup car, Gary had blasted from 41st to lead one lap at Talladega. Along the way, Dale had motioned to Gary to pull in behind him for the draft, but Gary thought otherwise, charging on by, delivering his message with a finger. Dale replied in kind.

The atmosphere was thick at Charlotte as Gary pulled into victory lane. Both Earnhardt and the media were all over him about rough driving. Gary was cool at first, but became increasingly riled up from the criticism. Fortunately, Donnie Allison came over, put his fingers to a closed lip, and warned, "Gary, don't say a word. You're messing with the crown prince."

Gary calmed down and began to relish the biggest win of his career.

As Gary left Charlotte, he hoped his relationship with Earnhardt would settle back down. He told Dale Jr. he hoped to be a teammate with his father. In the meantime, the short remaining Cup season did not go well, and the RahMoc gang turned all their attention to Daytona. Gary was fast there, running with the leaders for a while and ending up a credible 11th. They were all wound up for '82.

But the very next Thursday, Gary's home phone rang. It was the Feds, and the sky was no longer blue. But it was no surprise.

Gary knew that to be successful in sophisticated racing required really big money, and he saw that handling drugs was one way to access it. Years earlier, he had tangled himself up in an enormous marijuana-smuggling operation. He was aware he was being watched, but he chose to continue. It seems incomprehensible that despite that, he could still maintain the focus necessary in the highest and most-demanding levels of motorsports. In any case, he was arrested with 80 others.

After doing time, he began to rehabilitate his career and one day, taking a deep breath, he walked tentatively into the Cup pits. Dale Earnhardt spotted him and waved him over.

"You're back," he said. "Are you going to race with us?"

"Maybe," Gary replied.

Dale considered it for a second or two, offered a faint smile, and said, "I hope not." **FSW**