

FLASHBACK



Kenny Wallace and Jimmy Oskie assisting KO with watch sales at the Chili Bowl. (Coastal 181 Collection)

KO

By Lew Boyd

When my phone rang at 1:30 a.m. on July 19, 2019, it didn't take long to wake up. It was a bubbly Kevin Olson saying he'd just been on the phone with the White House informing the President he'd won the midget feature at Wisconsin's Angell Park.

It clearly didn't matter that KO had already won there 46 times or that he was 66 years old. He was simply over the moon, with the giddy exuberance of a teenybopper.

By the time he had graduated from high school, KO's obsession with midget racing was at a boiling point, interrupted only occasionally by a streak of light-hearted zaniness and a propensity for misadventure.

He lost all of 1971, his first season of racing, before the inaugural green flag. An explosion in his garage burned him so badly he had to learn to walk again after several months in the hospital. But, somehow, he managed to make it to the Daytona Memorial Stadium in February '72, where, surprisingly, he captured a trophy dash. Some celebration ensued, and one of his buddies sailed out of a third-story motel window, fortunately too lubricated to be injured.

These were grand times for midget racing, with local clubs performing weekly shows, and the prestigious USAC scheduling 60-70 events nationally. At it full time with zero money, Kevin was relentless, there for almost all of them—countless grinding miles in his “1963 Chevy hotel” on or beside the road, towing his own midget but praying to find a ride in something faster.

There were wrecks and broken bones. He admitted it felt like he got a concussion once a month, but he'd still end up at a distant pit gate the following night with eyes cherry red. One time he raced in Arizona, hit the road and was in Wisconsin for the first heat at Angell Park the next night.

It was rough going but he had the moves. He began to run up front and soon racked up local series titles.

Winning with USAC was a different story. It finally came in 1982. He topped the national point chase with no feature wins, something no one else had ever done. At the annual awards banquet, his enthusiasm and irreverent remarks raised a few eyebrows, including when he joked he'd backed off from the lead many times so as to become the only winless champion.

While his mischievous behavior may have hindered the possibility of a future in Indy cars, KO was now becoming a cultishly popular national figure, appearing in top-notch rides, on his way to well over 100 wins, a second USAC midget title, five Badger Championships, and the USAC and National Midget Halls of Fame.

His success led to his selection for the American team in some winter competitions in Australia and New Zealand. He was very fast, but some of the off-days were on the sketchy side—like the time he introduced a young and wide-eyed Jeff Gordon to a nudie beach.

He just could not put away that twinkle in his eye, whatever the situation. Meeting Mario Andretti, KO respectfully asked him for a photo. Mario was taken aback when Kevin handed him the camera to take KO's own picture.

Much of the time, KO was the subject of his own humor. On the podium after a race, he could be off the wall. Asked what



Winning at Angell Park for Keith and Rusty Kunz. (Olson Family Collection)



Hamming it up with Danica Patrick and Ashley Judd. (Olson Family Collection)

he did for a living other than race, he delighted the crowd by explaining he'd become a light bulb repairman, diligently working with utility companies attempting to dominate the market.

Fortunately, though, his popularity did lead to some much-needed side gigs, such as announcing on Tony George's Indianapolis Motor Speedway Radio, writing outrageous columns for *Sprint Car and Midget*, and peddling used watches and "asbestos-soaked" KO tee shirts at the Chili Bowl, two dollars off if autographed.

As the seasons passed, the rides became less frequent—and at last some time at home. It was no hardship. Somehow along the way, Kevin had managed to raise a loving family of five kids—Katie, Kallie, Kassandra, Karoline, and Kevin Jr. He said, "I watched all of them walk across the stage and receive their diplomas. I cried, but I stood 10 feet tall."

There was also the partnership with Nancy Nelson, a talented former university administrator and the love of his life.

But, all the while, the enduring desire to head off to Angell Park with an Offy on an open trailer just never went away. The late-night call following that final win came from a place of deep joy, a love of life, family, and racing.

Then came the other call, on February 12, 2022. Returning home at 7:30 the previous evening, a drunk driver had crossed the road and slammed into KO's car. He died at the scene. Nancy was very badly injured but eventually recovered.

It could be said that in many ways the racing community never did. **FSW**