Joe Scalzo's

city of Speed and elsewhere

Autumn Action

Three notorious racing tracks of the prior century, two dirt and one paved, and just one of them, Phoenix International Raceway, still standing, were Manzanita Speedway and PIR, both in Arizona, and Ascot Park in Los Angeles. Every autumn, over a three-week period, each one offered racing on a sort of racing track never seen any more, which is maybe a good thing, your call. Here's how the three weeks of autumn action unfolded three decades ago, beginning in 1982: 1) the four-night World Western Sprint Car Championships on Manzanita's dirt half-mile; 2) the four-night Pacific Coast Nationals on Ascot Park's dirt half-mile; and (3 the 150-mile Bobby Ball Memorial for Indy cars on Phoenix International Raceway's careening and oddball pavement.

Manzanita

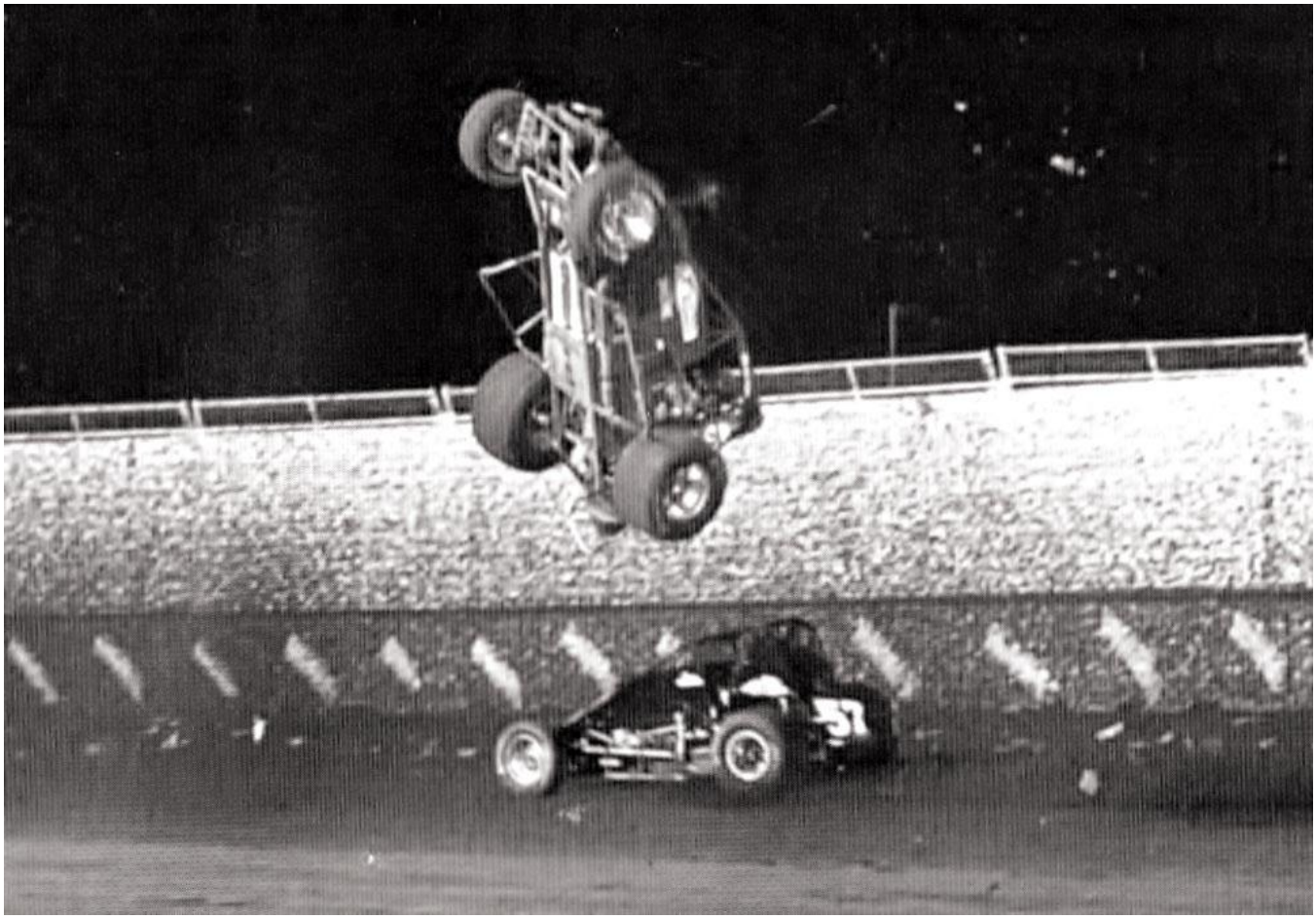
Manzy Speedway was a rough house sort of place, plus being an antidote for anybody poor-mouthing sprint car racing for becoming soft. Its rumpled front straight pitched uphill, while its dimly-lit back one went bananas and rumbled downhill like a rollercoaster. And, after bursting out of the gloom in excess of 100 mph, everybody shot to the top of the banking between corners three and four, which were narrow, then set out for corners one and two which discouraged smooth exits and encouraged vicious slide jobs.

Manzy was sandwiched between a pair junkyards in rural Phoenix, and its outside walls consisted of wrought iron posts supporting crude sheet metal fencing: out-of-control drivers used to smash through and knock down the fencing; go into barrel-rolls; crash-land in the junkyards; and sometimes get mauled by blood-thirsty attack dogs.

Crazy crashes always seemed to be a Manzy specialty: one sprinter that went somersaulting into the junkyards seemed on trajectory to land on the roof of an old bus, only to crazily changed directions in mid-air and expire on top of an ancient truck. But the record for crazy crashing was probably held by the driver who - after clearing the fence posts and junkyards and disappearing into the night - didn't stop flipping until he was in the parking lot of a 24-hour market across the street.

Wednesday night at the Western World saw Dub May suffer head injuries; Ken Schrader fracture a collarbone; Doug Wolfgang and Brad Noffsinger harm their legs; Dick Phillipi break one wrist and dislocate the other; Lee James and Brent Kaeding damage their arms; Jim Edwards bruise his back; Roger Stevens crack his ribs; and Billy Shuman re-injure his injured shoulder.

The toll climbed on Thursday night with the worst wreck of the Western World. It exploded without warning in the darkness of the narrow back straightaway. Ronnie Shuman blew an engine, slowed suddenly, and was struck by half a dozen pursuing sprinters, which also struck each other. Five flipped. The sixth hit so hard it shed its roll-over cage and then broke into three pieces. No one was seriously hurt, nobody knew why not.



Saturday night, of course, featured what everybody had come to Manzy to see, the 50 laps of the Western World, which had attracted formidable visiting firemen from the World of Outlaws like Steve Kinser, Sammy Swindell, Jac Haudenschild, and Wolfgang's name was still painted on the Gambler he was supposed to race but C.K. Spurlock, owner of the car, had thrown him over the side in favor of Kinser, who'd just won the summer's giant Nationals at Knoxville.

One of Kinser's many strengths was the ability to go flat-out the instant a race started. Swindell veered for Manzy's infield side, Kinser toward the junkyard side, and it was no contest: Kinser took off on another of his risk-seeking missions, and Swindell, less adventuresome, faded and got gobbled up by the coil-over Stanton being raced by the hyper Manzy regular Lealand McSpadden, who began raising tremendous hell with Kinser. Then McSpadden, too, faded and was overtaken by Shuman, back with a fresh engine.

The 14th lap brought yet another rollover and a red flag stopping the Western World and this gave Shuman the opportunity to erode Kinser's lead if he could. He couldn't. So, after he was paid his $11,000 first place jackpot, a Hawaiian lei was thrown over Kinser's blocky shoulders and he and his cutie-pie girl friend, herself a world-class track & field athlete, set off on an expense-paid vacation to the old Sandwich Islands, which was a nice extra perk for them.

Ascot Park

During its peak seasons, when it was Ascot Speedway instead of the more imposing "Ascot Park," it was racing's busiest dirt half-mile. But then along came a fly-by-night impresario named Harrison Schooler, whose previous racket had been dancing, ten-cents-a-dance dancing, dancing out of the old Aragon and Lick Pier ballrooms. Knowing that Ascot had been built on top of a rubbish dump, the shady Schooler , making an attempt to spruce up Ascot's ramshackle reputation, re-christened it "Ascot Park," his intention being to add jug-head horse and sulky races to Ascot's existing sprint-, buzzbomb midget-, and stock car menu. But it didn't work. The lakes turned into swamps and the palms became rat-infested.

Meanwhile, for as long as Ascot stood, its riddle went unanswered: why was the oval slick as wax paper in the daytime but sticky as flypaper at night? Visiting Western World champion Kinser loved a tacky track like Ascot, but he was unlucky to be racing in the Pacific Coast Nationals against Dean Thompson, the formidable Ascot homeboy who dominated the regular Saturday night California Racing Association shows.

Thompson was special. Probably not since the era of Allen Heath, a colorful character and remarkable dirt track driver who'd grappled the famous Famighetti Brothers sprinter to Ascot win after Ascot in spite of having one hand – he had a hook where the other hand was supposed to be – had an invalid raced as fast as Thompson, born with one arm shorter than the other. Compared to those of Manzy, Ascot's Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings were innocuous – hardly anybody got upside-down. For Saturday night's 50 laps Thompson, as expected, had parked his red Bruce Bromme Special, with its factory Shaver V8, on pole. Both Swindell and Wolfgang had scratched, so enemy divers behind Thompson included Shuman, McSpadden, Danny Smith, Shane Carson, Chuck Gurney, Bubby Jones, and Jimmy Sills, But the dangerous one who counted the most was Kinser, back on the outside of the second row.

Came the green, Thompson was off like a shot, and his lap times would have been Ascot Park track records had they been recorded officially during time trials. By ten laps Kinser had fallen a full straightaway behind and Ascot's grandstands started rocking. Thompson, their

Ascot homey, was embarrassing the country's best and fastest sprint car driver - and that had never happened anywhere before!

Continuing to burst ahead, Thompson had lapped most of the field, including Shane Carson, who turned over on the 44th lap. So just like at Manzy, out had come the red flag. On the re-start, Kinser and all the rest of Thompson's humiliated competition, knew that unless "Dino" got tired he was going to humiliate them all over again. Thompson didn't get tired. And at the conclusion of the six remaining laps he'd again dusted Kinser by a straightaway. And just a few autumns later, during another Pacific Coast Nationals, Thompson got to relish a second big moment against the great Kinser This time he got Steve in his clutches during the daytime, when the Ascot Park was wax-paper slick. But Steve couldn't grab hold of anything, and Thompson and his big red Bromme again won by a straightaway.

PIR

Phoenix International Raceway, out in the wild, uninhabited, sun-blasted, rocky boondocks on the south end of 115th Avenue, an hour southeast of downtown, was never constructed to host the Indy cars. Its builder, a rabid sports car-racing enthusiast and equestrian named Richard Hogue, had originally intended spending half a million dollars of his wife Nancy's money, transforming PIR's 320 acres into a world-class road-racing circuit. But then, almost as an afterthought, Hogue had added plans calling for a mile-long oval track accommodating

Indy cars; another, smaller, half-mile oval for sprints and stocks; a drag strip for fuel-burning slingshots; even a big infield lake for drag-boat racing.

Hogue didn't realize it until later, but his PIR sat on the northeast corner of the shameful Gadsden Purchase of 1851, when for only $10 million Uncle Sam had trimmed Mexico out of 45,500 square miles of land.

Whatever, Hogue held groundbreaking ceremonies in June of 1963, and in attendance were a distinguished body of politicos, including Arizona's Secretary of State, who sat behind the controls of a big earth mover. Nine months later, in the spring of 1964, following the cancellation of a NASCAR race, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of its road course, PIR hosted its first Indy car meet , the Bobby Ball Memorial, a tribute to the popular Indy car driver lost in the costly 1950s.

The Indy car gang agreed that whatever else PIR might be, it was an original. Nobody, in fact. could remember another racing track quite like it. To begin with, PIR's uncovered grandstands were on the wrong side – what normally would be a front straightaway was, at PIR, a back straightaway. And PIR wasn't shaped like a conventional oval, or a D, or a Langhorne-type O, or like any other letter in the alphabet. Instead it had its own unique – oddball – shape.

It started out flat, then grew banked ,then flattened out again, then headed off in the direction of Casa Grande, then veered left onto a tricky dog-leg which rocketed the Indy cars onto unbanked turns three and four. Oddball!

Two explanations were set forth for PIR's confusing configuration: 1) Richard Hogue had discovered a water main buried underneath turn one and had had to build a banking to cover everything up again; 2) PIR's tricky dog-leg was necessary because otherwise PIR would have run into the adjoining Astrasias mountain range.

The first Bobby Ball Memorial , a 100-mile sprint, was persecuted by raw and cold desert winds gusting in at 30 mph. Braving them were seven thousand hardy spectators, who watched Parnelli Jones in an upright dirt car start from pole but get defeated by the roadsters of A.J. Foyt and Roger McCluskey.

It had been a good race. Financially, though, it had been a disaster. Far more non-paying cheapskates had been sitting in the cactus-covered, rattlesnake-infested Astrasias foothills than were sitting in the grandstands, and PIR's horseback-mounted posse had had to ride down on them. Aggressively, leading the posse, a big hog leg holstered on his hip, rode Richard Hogue.

Shortly afterward Hogue lost his hog leg, horse, and PIR, after his wife Nancy, a Scottsdale socialite who'd had all the money in the family, divorced him to marry Bob Goldwater, brother of the presidential candidate. No fan of racing, Nancy began renting PIR out to weekend speakers whose topics included the American Indian Movement, Gay Liberation, Americans for Peace, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, National Organization for Repeal on Marijuana Laws, the United Farm Workers – something for everyone.

And then - totally unexpectedly - PIR was sold, and the buyer was as oddball as itself. It was the Bricklin Vehicle Corporation of Canada, marketers of a gull-wing sports car with a vacuum-formed Plexiglass body.

Bricklin's plans for PIR seemed as ambitious as Richard Hogue's earlier ones. The corporation was going to upgrade the restrooms and concession facilities, modernize the press box, revamp the racing pits, add 2,000 seats, and book more and bigger races.

But Bricklin, which collapsed into bankruptcy in 1975, never put on a race. Nobody at Bricklin had been able to imagine a disaster like a flood, and especially not a flood on the floor of a desert. This was because nobody had warned Bricklin that PIR's front doorstep of 115th Avenue sat at the confluence of the Salt and Gila rivers.

The Arizona spring of 1973 came in abnormally wet, and none of the four big check dams only 90 miles away from PIR were able to hold the Salt, which came crashing down on PIR with a vengeance. Among those taken by surprise was A.J. Foyt who, ignoring reports of high water along 115th,had tried forcing his big transport across anyway; became trapped; then waited several hours to be rescued by horseback, truck, and human operations.

In the meantime, with its main entrance in flood,, PIR's spring race was cancelled.

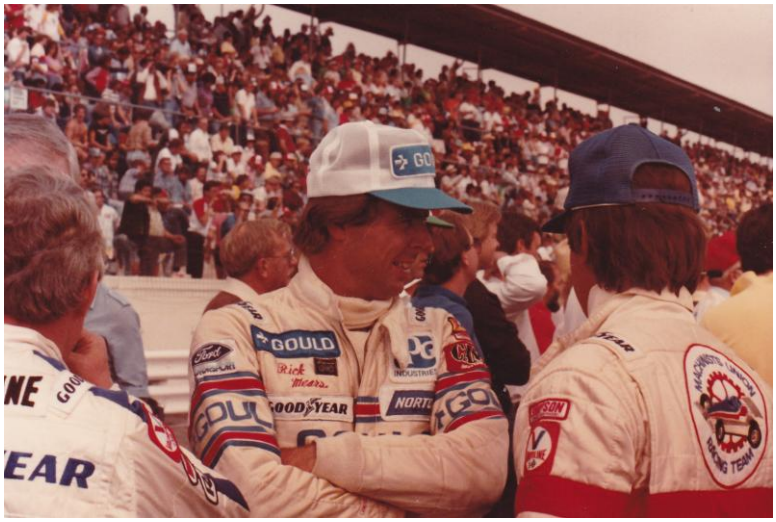
Lean seasons followed. Deserted and shut down most of the time, forlorn PIR absorbed the abuses of the blistering desert sun. With the property into its third mortgage, reports circulated that the plant was about to be torn down. Two new saviors, however, arrived. One of them was a newspaper reporter and publicity man named Dennis Wood, who had no money, and the other was a Phoenix businessman named Robert Fletcher, who had lots.. The pair renovated PIR with new guardrails, a scoring tower, and at last the uncovered grandstands got a roof.

Exactly like Bricklin Wood and Fletcher were ruined by a flood. This one occurred at PIR's Indy car spring meet of 1978, which was marked by engineers of the Salt River Project informing Wood and Fletcher on the morning of the race that thousands of gallons of water were to be released at noon, guaranteeing that 115th Avenue would be completely underwater by six o'clock p.m.

The race ran as scheduled, but the Salt River arrived promptly at six, just as PIR's parking lots were emptying . The most expensive victim was a silver Ferrari which stalled, drowned out, and had to be abandoned when water passed the window level and entered the cockpit. Two more floods had to occur before Arizona's road department gave PIR a safe emergency entrance and exit. And then along came along another set of PIR owners, Buddy Jobe and Patrick Johnson, a pair of farmers and real estate developers.

Seen in the 1982 autumn, PIR pretty much looked the same as it had when it opened 18 seasons earlier, back in spring 1964: the rocky Astrasias still rose behind PIR and it still was surrounded, mostly, by uninhabited desert. Of course this was a good thing. After all, it was the encroachment of civilization which had put a shopping center over Langhorne, helped take down Trenton, and wiped out other cornerstone tracks of Indy car racing. Just because it was in the middle of nowhere, PIR seemed guaranteed a few decades of grace.

Having earlier been lapped at 150.747 mph, PIR was fastest of all Indy car racing's venues, and, because of its oddball shape, perhaps no track was more difficult to negotiate.



Sure enough, at the start of the autumn 150 miler Rick Mears in his Penske and Mario Andretti and Gordon Johncock in their Wildcats were all over each other fighting for first. Then they caught two lapped cars and tried going five abreast. Two members of the quartet hit, and Johncock's Wildcat went twirling across PIR and into the wall.

Now it had appeared that Mears and Andretti would fight it out until Tom Sneva, the old school teacher, arrived from out of nowhere to pass and put the screws to both of them. And Sneva looked just as dominant at PIR as Kinser had at Manzy and Thompson at Ascot Park.

PIR, in the seasons that followed cleaned up its act by changing its configuration and name to Phoenix Raceway. Now a part of the NASCAR family of copycat racing tracks, who present racing at night, the new PIR has become so respectable that founder Richard Hogue, were he still with us, would not recognize it.