

JOHN G. SAWYER ~ BIOGRAPHY

Veteran motorsports journalist John G. Sawyer is the son of Dr. and Mrs. Warren C. Sawyer. Born July 19, 1937 in Cleveland, Ohio, he is a former professional baseball and football player – who also rates as an automobile racing lifer.

His first experience at competition driving was gained over his parents' objections and under legal age while astride the zany, definitely free-for-all sports car circuits of Southern California. From there, he moved into midgets, modifieds and occasional sprint cars. However, unlike baseball and football, he never viewed the driving of racecars as anything more than a hobby.

John credits older associates Harold "Monk" McCurdy and George W. DeWolfe with his actual introduction to the exciting, glamorous, but often bloodthirsty world of big-time auto racing.

"They were Indy car and sprint car guys and I was about eight or nine when they started me out. To this very moment, those Indy 500's of the 1950's and 1960's are the most exciting and emotional happenings that I have encountered. I would describe each of them as practically heart-stopping," he says.

On November 19, 1964, Mr. and Mrs. John Sawyer were blessed by the birth of their only child: Lisa.

Two months prior to that event, John had sold his very first article devoted to motorsport ... the subject being the bizarre accident that claimed the life of his boyhood hero, Rex Mays. The buyer was the Los Angeles Times, the fact of which, according to John, should be credited to the influence of the legendary J.C. Agajanian.

By 1971, the Sawyers were living in Sarasota, Florida, a move necessitated by health issues in the family. At that point, John became better acquainted with storied motorsport journalist Vern "Flip" Fritch, a former Michigander then living in Riverview, Florida. The crusty Fritch saw some of John's theretofore unpublished writings, liked them, and sent them to his magazine affiliate, the Cavalcade of Auto Racing. Several years worth of Sawyer-penned feature articles were the direct result of Flip Fritch's keen judge of talent.

Offered as a sidelight of interest, John was a professional educator at that point. Another full-time educator and part-time journalist was likewise writing for the Cavalcade: Dr. Dick Berggren. For the next 20 years, the names Berggren and Sawyer would be aligned, one way or another, in a joint quest to achieve excellence in motorsport journalism.

By the mid-1970's, Berggren had become executive editor for the popular Stock Car Racing magazine, and he began purchasing Sawyer-crafted articles on open-wheeled racing subjects.

"It was a controversial direction to go in a publication about stock cars, but Dick had a lot of guts. He also had a deep passion for open-wheelers, sprint cars in particular," John testifies.

Berggren's audacity ultimately resulted in the creation of Open Wheel magazine in 1980, an offering that John considers to be the finest (ever) American auto-racing magazine.

“Indeed,” he says. “We covered it all ... from the brutal speed corridors of Indy to the lowliest bullrings of nowhere. Past and present were treated just about equally and gorgeous photography and original art were consistently featured.”

John Sawyer served as Open Wheel’s Senior Editor from 1980 through 1991, when he abruptly resigned from his editorial position.

“I was flat burned to the ground,” he says. “20-plus years of frenetic feature writing had done me in. I just needed to be doing something else for a time.”

All the same, Sawyer articles were back in Open Wheel by 1996. His comeback rendering was a highly acclaimed feature on the life of driving icon Ted Horn. When Open Wheel magazine finally fell victim to corporate tomfoolery in the summer of 2001, he was yet free-lancing articles to his beloved magazine.

John Sawyer began his first book in the summer of 1974. Under the catchy title “Dusty Heroes” and published by Carl Hungress, it was released circa Labor Day, 1978. To say the least, the book had a huge impact. Today, 26 years after its launching point, “Dusty Heroes” is generally described as a “classic” and collectors vigorously pursue it, despite rather lofty prices for early editions in good condition.

John’s second book, “Dialed In” ... went public in July of 1981. Rating as absolutely the only authorized biography of the fabled Jan Opperman ever written, it traveled the byways of auto racing with a degree of popularity comparable to “Dusty Heroes.” Making the book especially unique was the personal touch it possessed. Opperman and Sawyer were very close friends.

Ironically, 15 years would pass before another Sawyer motorsport book made the scene. In a business-as-usual course of things, it was published by Carl Hungress and bore the title “No Time For Yesterday.” The subject: the life and racing career of enigmatic Rich Vogler. The project, a 4-year-endeavor, is remembered by John as being two truckloads beyond strenuous.

“Robert Daniels of Fairfield, Iowa hired me to write the book in 1992,” he says. “I think I refused his offer four or five times, before accepting it. That I changed my mind had to do with only one thing: My supreme admiration of Rich’s racing talent and competitive spirit.

“And not just that, I might add. Rich had always declined to say much about himself. As of 1990, he never would. He was dead. Therefore, I took on the challenge of sorting through the ambiguity and attempted to finally introduce the man. I am satisfied that I did.

“Of all the writing projects I have completed, I am proudest of that book,” John is quick to point out.

Today, John Sawyer is still free-lancing articles into various magazines, the majority of which are devoted to automobile racing. He admits that his interest in contemporary motorsport is less than he wished it were.

“I just miss the wonderful and outrageous characters that auto racing used to both attract and welcome. Not only that, but I equally miss the gorgeous hand-built racecars that graced the speedways for years. They were more than racecars, they were literal works of art,” he says.

Meanwhile, he is presently thrashing through another book project. As usual, the adversity presented by such an endeavor, boggles his mind.

PUBLISHER'S COMMENT

VelocePress is proud to add John's publications to our selection of Classic Automobile Titles. Our reprint of *Dialed In ~ The Jan Opperman Story* was met with great enthusiasm by sprint car fans throughout the US and is also available from the Gift Shop at the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum whenever you pay them a visit.

Long out of print, and fetching astronomical prices on the secondary market for an original Carl Hungness edition, the VelocePress reprint of *Dialed In* has brought this title back within reach of the average Joe's pocketbook. We would like to extend our thanks to John for allowing us the privilege to reprint, in our opinion, some of the best books ever written on open-wheel racing.

Dave McClure & Lynn Getz ~ VelocePress