

Dan Was The Man

While watching recent NASCAR road races (my favorite has always been the battles at Watkins Glen), I can't help but notice how much better today's stock car drivers are at road racing than the pros who raced back in the 1960s. Witness current young guns Kyle Larson or Chase Elliott, each of whom began their racing careers in karts and have taken to road courses like they were born on one.

I doubt that drivers Curtis Turner, Fred Lorenzen or Ned Jarrett had any karting experience and certainly no simulators to learn a circuit, but the stars who came to NASCAR from sports car or formula car racing, like A.J. Foyt and Mario Andretti, used their road course experience often to great advantage.

Perhaps there was no better example in those days than that of one Dan Gurney, who was busy racing in Formula 1, at Indianapolis and in sports cars, he getting the racing bug at a young age at Freeport Stadium on New York's Long Island.

Gurney's first race in a stock car took place in the late 1950s at Meadowdale, Illinois. Gurney was offered Jerry Unser's Ford by car owners Bob Rose and Lou Sipolz when Unser had to attend a wedding, racer Troy Ruttman suggesting Dan as the fill-in driver. His competitors came from both NASCAR and USAC, but the car had been run on a dirt mile oval and needed lots of prep before Meadowdale.

Having qualified 28th out of 32, Gurney worked his way up to 2nd and got alongside leader Fred Lorenzen, who ran him off the track. About the time he caught Fast Freddie again, the clutch let loose and that was that. But Gurney was hooked.

He gained a lot of press attention when he bought a '61 409 Chevy and shipped it to Silverstone in the UK to race against the Jaguar sedans of the day. He was leading the



AAR ARCHIVES

field with one lap to go when a rear wheel failed, but the Brits wouldn't let him race it again, even though the fans loved it. Jaguar and its racing manager, Lofty England, wanted no competition in those races, so the 409 Chevy was sadly banned.

Of course, Gurney's record in stock cars at Riverside Raceway is legendary, with him winning the Motor Trend 500 four years in a row from 1963 to 1966, and again in 1968, racing Fords for the Wood Brothers team. When Ford politics moved him over to Mercury in 1967, he drove for Bud Moore in a Comet, which he said was a barn door compared to the Fords of the Wood Brothers.

Gurney is also remembered for coming out of retirement in 1980 after 10 years away from the wheel to race a Rod Osterman Chevy at Riverside. His teammate was Dale Earnhardt Sr.

He told me in 1995, that "coming out of retirement was a feeling of curiosity more than anything, and I had no intention of doing anything more than that one shot." He was running 2nd when the input shaft on the clutch failed.

However, while he was out there, his fans were screaming their heads off, cheering Dan on. In 10 years away from the driver's seat, he'd lost nothing.

In the 1995 stock car book I authored, *Flat Out Racing*, Dan signed it, "Thanks for including me."

How could I not? 🙏

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