



ED SANGER

In His Own Words

- *Born December 3, 1940, in Monona, Iowa*
- *One of the country's finest dirt late model competitors, fiercely independent, and one of the first road warriors. More than 500 wins, including the 1974 World 100, the Boone Grand Nationals, and the Hibbing Iron Man Invitational, both three times. Constructor of hundreds of Sanger Chassis cars.*

As told to Lew Boyd

Even though I had gone to a few races near our farm in Cedar Rapids, I had no intention of being a race car driver.

But, when the money ran out after two years of college, I moved to Waterloo with my brother and went to work in a Pontiac garage. In 1964, a bunch of us went to the races and thought, "Let's build one."

The boss let us take a '57 Pontiac that one of the salesmen would drive. I rushed to cut out the fenders so he wouldn't change his mind.

At the end of the season, the boss had had enough and said he would sell me the car. He was so eager he went to the bank and co-signed the loan. Before long I was driving it myself.

Right away I had a different approach. I raced to make money—always. I know that's not a romantic goal, but it was me. I did everything on the cheap. Meanwhile, the money at nearby Tunis Speedway was good. I sold that car at the end of the year and could afford to build a better one.

I believe the racing apprenticeship is about three years. That's when you start hitting, and that was true for me. The driving part came naturally. Before kindergarten my father had me steering the tractor while he was picking corn. At 12, I was on the tractor haying and logging on the hills. Snaking down the timber you learn to control things. My dad taught us how to use the throttle and the brakes. That's what racing is—the skills I needed.

By the third year I reached out to places like Monticello, then even over to Rockford for their championship event with my dirt car. But I was being very careful. The fourth year I had a basic 427 that won 17 features without the valve covers ever off.

A turning point came in 1970. Racing was occupying my thoughts and energy, and I wasn't giving work my fullest. I quit, knowing I could support my family. We had four kids and I never shorted them a

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The one thing I didn't do was seek sponsorships. As soon as someone comes along and starts helping pay the bills, he'll start telling you what to do. I chose to race for purse money. Sure, people approached me, but I thought I had a better plan.

dollar. We all went together, and our son Steven became a great fabricator. He still is today, but no longer in racing because he's unwilling to sacrifice weekends. That's not surprising. By the early 1970s it was five nights a week, local tracks to Florida and Canada, 95 to 120 times a year.

Always seeking more income, we built our Sanger Chassis for others. I had a good crew of guys during the summertime, and this way I could keep them busy during the winter. It was about 20 cars each year back then.

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By 1973, the World 100 [at Eldora] was already huge, and we went there with a Chevelle. The track surprised us, and we did not qualify on that slick, dusty surface. The next year we were ready.

Although we had that strong 427 and later found out how to make 454s last with proper clearance, for 1974 we did something different: a lightweight, short-wheel-base Camaro with a small block we really twisted. That car was a sight when we arrived. We'd wrecked right before, and numbers were taped on the doors. But we qualified well, second row. Off we went, and the two guys on the front row took off like rabbits. Then the sun started going down, there was more moisture in the track, and my rpm went up 1,000. I

eased up on the throttle and let them go. They dropped out, and we won. Some said we lucked into it, but we left with \$8,800. That went right into the down payment on another farm.

The next year we went back to Rossburg, Ohio, with another new car, and this time we got more accolades, even though we were second. We had come from deep in the pack.

The rest of the '70s and early '80s were a lot of highway miles. In 1976 we had 43 wins, apparently best in the nation.

I was always true to my ways. I remember a fun weekend. Over in Lernerville, Pennsylvania, at a big show, everyone there had big blocks with all the fancy parts and huge 15-inch tires. We had 11-inch tires and a small block with those stock orange valve covers. The other guys couldn't believe it. "Is that the engine to start your generator?" they teased. Come feature time they changed their tune. They beat me on the straights. I scooted around them when the heavy momentum slid them up in the turns. We led, but faded to fourth with a fried motor.

Soon, though, times were changing. In 1979 we actually built 43 cars, and I was just plain burned out. On top of that, in the early '80s Iowa had a farm crisis. Corn [price] was down and, in Iowa, corn is king. No one had money. Racing purses were down; no one was buying cars. So, I kept the farms, but I took a job in the Cup world and moved to Asheville, North Carolina. Steven and our three daughters were on their own by then.

I joined Leo Jackson's shop working for Cup teams. I built 32 engines for Dave Marcis alone in one year. It was stressful, but, even more, it turned out to be a political experience, based purely on money rather than ability. The whole thing was a mistake, just not my scene.

In 1990 I moved back to Iowa. The years away had put me out of touch. No longer building cars, I bought a GRT. I continued working the farms we'd purchased, but in 1997 I wasn't feeling well. We sold the farm machinery and rented out the land.



Question of the Month

QUESTION:

“Should I run a sway bar or not on a 3/8-mile slightly banked clay oval? (Camaro/Trans Am) I ran last weekend on stock front springs and it handled as expected—not great. I’m putting some rated springs in and setting up caster/camber before the next race weekend, and thinking about ditching the sway bar.”

— Joel Cinnamon



ANSWER:

“I have experience with that, because when I first started racing, I had a pure stock. We tested back and forth a lot with hooking and unhooking the front sway bar. With our rules, you couldn’t do any tricks preloading it one way or another.

With the sway bar the car would always get tight. The sway bar is an anti-roll bar. Taking it off helps when tracks get slick and slow, because removing it promotes weight transfer. Harder tires or hard, slow, slick racetracks tend to need weight transfer to get grip—otherwise the car gets into a four-wheel slide. Having body roll promotes weight transfer, camber gain, and pulling on the sidewall of the tire to make grip.

If the rules let you do some playing around with preload, you can change the length of the links from the swaybar to the lower A-frame. But I was always better off without it.”

— Dan Ebert, Fox Shocks

Every month Speedway Illustrated will take one question from the Street Stock Help Source Facebook page and have it answered by an industry expert. To ask a question, like the page and make a post.

I’m proud of my record, even if it’s behind me. Someone told me I did more with less than anyone. That made me feel so good.

In 2009 I had my last good run, even though it came to nothing. We went over to Knoxville for the Jamboree with an aluminum 427. Was it ever fast and fun to drive! But, fueling up, I smelled a certain sweetness. Forgetting that Knoxville is sprint car territory, our crew guy had filled the jug with alcohol by mistake. We couldn’t get it all out and were unable to run the main.

The next season, the car was the same, but I was not. I was seventy, and I realized that I just couldn’t do it any longer.

I’m still active today. We have our farms. I’m also completely rebuilding our house in Dubuque, and we’re having a good time going to all the races we can.

I’m proud of my record, even if it’s behind me. Someone told me I did more with less than anyone. That made me feel so good.

I am not captain of this game, but it comes down to this: The motor needs to be in the right place, and so do the wheels. Mark Donohue once said, “The pieces all need to be happy with each other.” My preparation was the best, not the appearance. Making all the parts work together is what gave me satisfaction.

As driving goes, when you’re sliding, you’re not gaining. The rear wheels need to be following the front. I tried to roll through the turns.

Aggression came naturally to me. You need that. Early on I raced against guys tough as nails. But some of them got to fighting and banging. That doesn’t make money. I never ran over anyone on purpose. If I did bump someone, I meant it—and he knew it. You must take control to gain respect.

And, for God’s sake, don’t let anyone think you worry about dents in your car. 🍷