

Tom Reffner

In His Own Words

- Born November 21, 1940 in Peoria, Illinois
- Known as "The Blue Knight," personable Wisconsin-based Tom Reffner became one of the nation's most prodigious all-time winners in super late models. He scored an unofficial total of 391 wins, including a stunning 67 in 1975 alone.



As told to **Lew Boyd**

It wasn't unusual that a farm boy like me would become a racer. What was different was that Dick Trickle, Marv Marzofka, and I all grew up within six miles of each other in Rudolph, Wisconsin, were close friends from Scout Camp—and we all became racers.

I was working at Marv's dad's farm just out of high school. We heard about racing, and Marv got a Studebaker with a V-8. We built it up—kind of, and off we went to a little dirt track over in Stratford. Marv promptly won a race for \$45. He had been making \$40 a week in the Studebaker garage. We agreed we should all start doing that.

Dick was next. In 1958 he got into a pretty hopeless four-door Dodge. The owner shook his head and said, "You gotta drive that faster." Dick didn't think so, but he obeyed—and flipped.

I started the next year on the Stratford dirt, but it was like driving in a blizzard. I could only see one car ahead, and I didn't win even one heat race.

Fortunately, in the 1960s, asphalt tracks like Griffin Park, Golden Sands, and Madison popped up. A promoter named Sam Bartus had a lot to do with that. After the races he'd fill that trunk of his Caddy with dollar bills, but we were young and complained he was not paying us enough. Actually, he was doing us a favor by investing in better tracks.

We all hung around Leonard Trickle's blacksmith shop. He was Dick's uncle. He was a big help to all of us, and he welded a straight axle with a transverse spring into a '49 Oldsmobile for me. I didn't even know about caster back then, and you can't believe how that car would wander. But Jimmy Back, another Rudolph guy, offered me a ride in his car when he moved up a division. He taught me so much. I won my first four features in 1966 and was second to Jimmy in points at Madison in 1969.

I also married in the 1960s, and Delores and I would begin a family with sons Baird and Bryan. Meanwhile, I became a pipefitter, something I stuck with over the years,

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and it worked out well. I was a serious employee and I found that that was appreciated, especially on construction sites. As we went into the '70s and the racing circuits really ramped up, by working on construction, I would just take a few months off. Then I could come back if there was work. There usually was. The paper mills kept us pretty busy. That was good during the off-season.

Marv, Dick, Jimmy, and I all began winning races and championships, and we stuck together. We worked on each other's cars and shared everything we knew. Then Mike Miller came to town and joined right in. We even had a dyno together in the '70s.

Larry Detjens, a little younger, also started running with us. He was one of the most fair guys I ever knew. Dick, Jim, Marv, and I looked out for one another going from track to track. But Larry took it a step further. We'd all take advantage of each other if we came up on a lapped car. That was legal. We all did it. When someone would get up beside him to pass and be blocked by a lapped car, Larry would wait and let us get right back up there. He did that to each of us guys. So, we started to do that, too. We thought about it long and hard. Some of the guys who ran at other tracks wouldn't return the favor, so we wouldn't give them that favor either. Thinking back on it, I'm not aware of a relationship like this between drivers anywhere else in the country.

1975 was just incredible. Just as Dick had won 67 features in 1972, I did in '75. Dick never tried to hold me back. I also had fast time in 81 of the 116 events.

When I looked back at my notes when Father Grubba was doing his book *67—Trickle and Reffner*, I couldn't believe what we had done. We'd go the 100 miles to Madison, then over to Michigan, up into Canada, back to Michigan, over to Ohio, and back to Michigan—all in one week. Never mind keeping my AMC Javelin going—keep in mind trucks and trailers have their problems, too!

I bought out all of Bobby Allison's AMC stuff in 1976 and had another good year. By the 1980s, the 9:1 motors were coming on.

So were Bryan and Baird, getting started in racing. I began to cut down somewhat on all the traveling, but kept on going with the championships into the 1990s.

It was pretty much always super late models for me. I was just too busy to try anything like open-wheel cars. I did talk with Dick a couple times about why he didn't move down South and run the NASCAR Sportsman Series, and he said he could make more money around here.

I did have a couple of bad incidents. In 1972 over at I-70, I had a ball joint fail and hit the wall—with my homemade seat. I broke or cracked eight ribs and was out for a week or so. But the worst part was when I got back to the garage to do some welding. Dick had all the wires on the welder hot, and none grounded. I got quite the shock and almost passed out.

Later in 1979 at Elko I wrecked again and did pass out. I woke up in the hospital and would not believe what had happened. It took me a year to recover from that head injury. All that year and in 1980 I raced with a bent spindle and was too out of it to realize it. It was 1982, back with Jim, that I could feel a car again.

My final wins came at Marshfield in 1999. I felt I still had it, but Delores and I talked things over. Baird and Bryan had already raced a lot and did good, and now the family's eyes were on Baird's son Colin and his go-kart. I began helping him. Now he has a super late model and is running strong. But realistically he can only go about seven to eight times a year unless someone steps up to pay the bills.

In 2018 I did try a vintage race at La Crosse in a very fast replica of my Javelin. Those straightaways sure had gotten shorter by then! And I simply couldn't deal with that containment seat and all the apparatus. I was used to seeing everything around me so I could stay out of trouble! But I did get a third.

I'm retired now but am still on the board of the Central Wisconsin Racing Association. Delores and I still go to all the local races. Not so much the distant ones. We can't be falling asleep at church. ☞