



START YOUR ENGINES

NEBRASKA STOCK CAR RACING PHOTOGRAPHS
BY THE HAROLD MAUCK STUDIO

BY BOB MAYS

Start Your Engines at Nebraska History Museum

This article is adapted from an exhibit of the same name at the Nebraska History Museum, 131 Centennial Mall North, Lincoln, Nebraska. The exhibit runs August 25, 2018 – August 31, 2019. Curated by Karen Keehr of History Nebraska and Bob Mays of the Speedway Motors Museum of American Speed, *Start Your Engines* features additional photographs and objects beyond what are shown here. history.nebraska.gov/museum



Harold Mauck lived life in the fast lane. The professional photographer, race car driver, and pilot was born on the Mauck family farm west of Plainview in Pierce County in 1921. After serving in the Army Air Force during WWII, he returned to Plainview and opened in a photography studio in his aunt's home. The business thrived.

Luckily for us, Harold took his work home while he explored his hobbies. On weekends, Harold raced stock cars, flew airplanes, and pursued adventure.

His passion for racing and love of photography blended to create a collection of photographs unlike anything in the Midwest. Harold operated Mauck Studio with his wife, Tina, for thirty-nine years, retiring in 1986 (they are pictured on the front cover). The collection came to History Nebraska shortly after Harold's death in 2010. Since then History Nebraska has digitized the collection of more than a thousand prints and negatives, searchable via the Collections tab at history.nebraska.gov.

Necessity is the mother of invention. Here a local racer is using flex-hose for exhaust tubing on his stock car. While not as sturdy or long-lasting as exhaust tubing, flex hose is easy to work with and replace. This driver seems proud of the result. Crofton, NE, June 11, 1965. RG5705-20-7-2



1a



1b



1c

Cars

The US auto industry stopped building private vehicles during World War II, but wartime technological advances transformed the postwar auto industry. The new automobiles made prewar cars seem hopelessly out of date, no matter their condition. By the 1950s, prewar autos were being sent to junkyards by the millions. These cars fueled the new sport of stock car racing.

1a: The types of cars drafted into competition were as varied as the people who built them. Sometimes it was simply a matter of what was available at the local junkyard. Everything from Model T Fords, Chevy 6-cylinders, Plymouths, Hudsons, and 1940 Fords with Flathead V8 engines were represented. It made for an eclectic group. 1968 photo.

1b: Passenger autos of the 1930s were not designed with racing in mind, and did not handle especially well when pushed to their limits. This racing was a contact sport. Car owners cut away fenders to keep them from folding in on the tires, and added large bumpers to protect the radiator and other vital organs. Circa 1954.

1c: Graphics were most often created with a gallon of leftover barn paint. Cash sponsorships were rare. Most of the time the local gas station would provide some free fuel, or a business would buy a tire or two. For that they would get their name splashed across the side of a car. A local racer who could do professional lettering on his own car could then create a new business by lettering many of the cars he was racing against (see back cover for a classy paint job from 1953). But once the race started, it didn't matter how nice the paint job was or how tidy the fit and finish. All that mattered was the auto's mechanical fitness and the driver's experience.

Crews

The driver may have received most of the credit for what happens on the track, but each car needed a team of people in order to perform at its best. A good mechanic and a dedicated helper with a strong back were just about mandatory.

2a: Cars needed regular service during the week. In stock car racing's heyday, just about every service station had a race car to maintain. Brakes, front spindles, axle shafts, and the engine took up most of the mechanic's time. A few dents might get pounded out if there was time to spare. Most mechanics had all the basic tools they

1a, RG5705-7-87; 1b, RG5705-7-30;
1c, RG-5707-7-103



2a

needed, especially if the car was housed at a service station. Here, jack stands were needed for customer cars, so this race car was left with an old stump for support during maintenance. Possibly Holmes Garage in Plainview, circa 1951.

2b: The pits at most local tracks were nothing more than open areas where crews could work on cars between races. Most competitors came from a twenty-mile radius of the track, so many cars were towed to the race behind the owner's pickup. Some more well-heeled teams had trailers for the race car. Creighton, NE, August 6, 1954.

2c: The pit area was a beehive of activity on race day. First, the race car needed to be unloaded along with support equipment and tools. Then came the rehashing of the previous week's action. There was great camaraderie between competitors; after all, the bottom line was to have fun. Yankton, SD, 1952.

2d: A top stock car team running the state fair circuit wore matching uniforms and pored over their 1966 Dodge Coronet R/T before the day began. Some teams received money or parts from auto manufacturers. Dodge, Ford, Chevrolet, and other Detroit manufacturers believed in the motto: "Win on Sunday, Sell on Monday."

Tracks

3a: The pomp and pageantry of stock car racing! The cars were often lined up in the front of the crowd as the drivers were introduced to the fans. Drivers were designated as heroes and villains at each track. Rivalries sometimes reached a fever pitch. 1965 photo.

3b: Track conditions were not always optimum. Many tracks lacked the budget to put up lights for night racing, and hot summers baked the



2b



2c



2d

2a, RG5705-29-18; 2b, RG5705-17-10;
2c, RG5705-29-19; 2d, RG5705-6-29



3a



3b

3a, RG5705-7-37; 3b,
RG5705-9-12; 3d, RG5705-
7-29; 3c, RG5705-6-25



3d



3c

race tracks. The dusty conditions did not deter the competition and may have enhanced it. Depending on the direction of the breeze, many fans wore the race track home with them. Yankton, SD, circa 1951.

3c: Tracks were watered vigorously to hold down dust. This was done partly for the comfort of spectators, and partly for better speed. Flying mud was often part of the show. Cars became caked with sticky mud, creating visibility problems for the driver and cooling problems for the engine. Drivers replaced windshields and radiator grilles with wire mesh screens. Sometimes cars went home with hundreds of pounds of dirt pasted to their flanks.

3d: The Nebraska State Fair was the climax of the racing season. Thousands of fans flocked to see professional racing in both the New Model Stock Car and Sprint Car divisions. It was the county fair times ten, both in excitement and prestige. The New Model Stock Cars featured the latest production models, souped up to hit speeds few thought passenger cars could reach. Here, legendary driver Ernie Derr wins the checkered flag driving for Anderson Pontiac, circa 1964.

Crashes

4a: Stock car racing was a contact sport. Crashes were inevitable. As many as four or five cars could go tumbling during an evening. As in any sport, emotions sometimes overruled common sense.



4a



4b



4c



4d

This only intensified rivalries and kept crowds coming back for more. Still, the mostly friendly competition meant that rival crews sometimes helped get a stricken race car back in service before the next event. Crofton, NE, circa 1954.

4b: Serious injuries were rare, since most pre-World War II cars were built like tanks. Often, a car could be rolled back onto its wheels, fired up, and finish the night's racing with only a few dents and dings to show for the spectacle. Yankton, SD, August 30, 1951.

4c: Guard rails built from two-by-sixes and railroad ties were no match for a 3,000-pound stock car. The results were always spectacular and

messy, sometimes dangerous. Often when county maintenance crews replaced steel highway guard rails, the old rails found their way to race track, making a better alternative to wood. Circa 1954.

4d: The gals wanted in on the fun too! Many tracks featured "Powder Puff" races for ladies only (typically the wife of a car's owner or driver), a special event held multiple times during the season. Here, two women crashed into the weeds outside the track, obviously without injury. But as they gained experience, many women challenged the speed and daring of their male counterparts. Crofton, NE, June 11, 1965.

4a, RG5705-29-26; 4c, RG5705-10-13; 4b, RG5705-10-13; 4d, RG5705-20-13-2



5a



5b



5c



5d

Excitement

5a: Stock car racing was a personal experience for most fans. Building a stock car for local competition became a community event as family and friends followed the progress of the racing team. People sat in the same seats each week, building small communities within the stands as they cheered for their favorite drivers and talked about happenings of the week previous. Adults discussed the weather, the local sports team, or corn prices. Teenagers talked about the latest fashion trends and school happenings. Little ones played in the dirt. It was the Nebraska hometown at its best and most basic. 1952 photo.

5b: Large crowds followed stock car races wherever they went. Most tracks located on county fairgrounds had covered grandstands. While not luxurious, they were comfortable during hot summer evenings. Circa 1955.

5c: Point standings were often kept for each racing season. The top cars and their crews were honored at the last race of the year. Trophies or plaques (and maybe even a little money) were

handed out to the champion and top challengers, making all the work, sweat, and grime well worth the effort. 1953 photo.

A regular racing program consisted of a series of preliminary races called “heats,” in which the field was split into groups of eight to ten cars each. A heat race qualified cars for the main events, called “features.” Slower cars raced in the B Feature, and faster cars in the A Feature, which was usually the evening’s big finale.

5d: One other race was run after the heats but before the features. The “Trophy Dash” featured the fastest four to six cars in short race, with the winner receiving a trophy and a kiss from a local lady for his efforts. When races were run during the county fair, the County Fair Queen might serve as the Trophy Girl. This sometimes made for an odd photo op. Shown here, a grimy race driver is paired with Miss Crofton 1965, Dortha Swift, in her tiara and sash. While the feature races awarded cash prizes, often the Trophy Dash was the most coveted victory. Showing your friends and family a check for \$50 or \$60 never had the prestige of a golden obelisk on your mantle.

5a, RG5705-7-82; **5b,** RG5705-11-4; **5c,** RG5705-15-6; **5d,** RG5705-20-3-2



6a



6b

6a, RG5705-5-33;
6b, RG5705-8-35

Sprint Cars

6a: Unlike the slam-bang stock car competition at the local Saturday night track, professional sprint car racing had few crashes. Because these were open-cockpit cars, a tip-over could have serious ramifications. Here Chuck Portello is a rare victim of someone else's mistake at the State Fairgrounds in 1968. Luckily he escapes with only a few cuts and bruises.

6b: Sprint car teams made sure their trailers held everything needed for race day. Fuel, tires, tools, and sponsors' names each had a place. 1965 photo.

6c: Winning the feature race at the Nebraska State Fair boosted a driver's stock in the eyes of other car owners. Here, Bill Puterbaugh of Roxanna, Illinois, accepts the trophy following his

feature victory in 1966. Puterbaugh went on to a career which featured three appearances in the Indianapolis 500. He finished seventh in 1975.

For Further Reading

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6c, RG5705-3-67

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