

GRADY WADE

Some race fans might not know the name Grady Wade, but they should

Sprint Car & Midget Magazine
September 2020
By Patrick Sullivan



Let's face it, racers are a rare breed. No matter how much we allow our minds to wander, and let fantasy grab hold, in time, most of us have to confront a central truth. When it comes to actually mixing it up in a race car, most of us are not hardwired to get the job done. Some even give it a shot, and stick with it for years, and finally must look reality square in the eye. To get to the top takes the right mixture of bravery, desire, and talent. Only a select few hit the trifecta.

In his time, Grady Wade had what we now call the "it" factor. He did enough in his first days behind the wheel to pique the interest of some of the top owners in his region. Then, to the joy of those in the grandstands, and to the occasional distress of his bosses, everybody strapped in to watch. Wade might not always win, but by the time everyone headed for home, he had made an indelible impression.

Wade was born in Mulberry, Arkansas in late October, 1936, but moved to Wichita, Kansas as a boy. In a succinct, and matter-of-fact manner, he says his childhood was far from ideal. Nonetheless, he graduated from Wichita East High School and would soon rub shoulders with people who would become central figures in his life.

He had crossed paths with a man named Bill Farmer, who owned a 1934 Ford jalopy. One day Farmer made a simple proposition, and it turned out to have a profound impact on Wade's life. If Grady was willing to clean up his car on Monday, Farmer would let his young charge take the wheel and turn a few laps. What made the offer even more inviting is that Wade knew just where to go. Within a stone's throw of his house, was a machine shop operated by LaVern Nance.

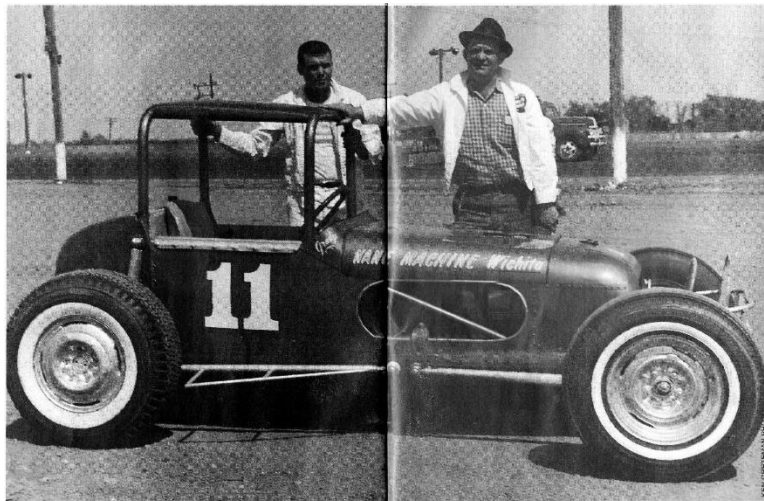
Thinking back to Farmer's offer, Wade says, "Well, that was like handing me a steak. I would wash and clean that old car up and there was like a 1/8th-mile track behind Nance's shop. I would go over there

and just run the wheels off it and make the neighbors mad because of the dirt flying.” It was enough to get him started.

By the late 1950s he was doing some jalopy racing of his own, starting at Wichita’s CeJay Stadium. He remembers little of his first race, but recalls that he didn’t set the world on fire. His car was a ‘34 Ford and, given his experience with a similar mount behind Nance’s shop, that provided a measure of comfort.

However, familiarity did not translate into results. He learned right then that you can have all the talent in the world but you had to have the right equipment to go fast. “I couldn’t steer it,” he says. “The car also had a ‘34 Ford steering gear, and that was probably rusted shut.”

It was frustrating, but he persevered and he finally got a taste of glory. “I got my first win in 1960 at Arkansas City, Kansas. I was in a little old Hudson coupe with a three-by-five engine in it. It was a B-Feature and it paid 30 dollars. I’ll tell you,” he recalls with a hearty laugh, “I was walking on tall cotton.” He had proven to others that he could win, and from there he began picking up rides here and there.



Wade and LaVern Nance (right) at 81 Speedway around 1950.

Not straying too far from home, Wade was also hanging out with LaVern Nance. Nance had grown up in Oklahoma, but as a very young man hitchhiked to Wichita and found work in the aircraft industry, initially with Beech. By 1950 he had established his own shop, but his primary source of income was building parts for Boeing, and he may have secured a government contract or two. Racing, at the time, really wasn’t on his radar.

Things began to change, according to Wade, when a new employee just happened to own a race car. As Wade remembers the sequence of events, he says, “That kid bought a car from Missouri or somewhere, and we tinkered with it. The problem was that it was heavier than a locomotive. Nance said he would sponsor him and bought oil and gas for it. We worked on it in a vacant building that Nance had south of his shop. Then LaVern got more involved, and he started going and watching us. Finally, he said he could make that car go faster, so here we go. Pretty soon we started upgrading and building cars we called T-buckets.”

When Nance got involved, Wade’s racing fortunes changed as well. Armed with a new car, he was prepared to do battle with the heavy-hitters in the supermodified world at the nearby 81 Speedway.

It really didn’t take long to show he belonged. In 1963 Wade finished second in points to Wichita native Forrest Coleman. Coleman, a truck driver by trade, had picked up the track title in 1962 as well. In addition, in 1960 he topped the field at the Hutchinson Nationals, the crown-jewel of supermodified racing in the plains.

As decorated former driver Jerry Stone notes, few knew how good Coleman was outside the region because he largely raced close to home. For that reason, Stone deems Coleman to be vastly underrated. Yet, to those in the know, Wade’s runner-up finish was nothing to sneeze at, and put him firmly in the mix with a host of very talented drivers who lived in, and around, Wichita.

That same year Wade also raised eyebrows when he was the fast qualifier at the Hutchinson Nationals. Unfortunately, during the finale on Sunday afternoon, Wade suffered mechanical woes, and had to watch Roy Bryant snuggle with trophy girl Clarissa Sell. Grady was redeemed, at least in part, by taking the checkered flag from starter Al Alexander, to win on the same ground in September.

Any doubts about Wade's ability were forever erased when he carried Pete Forshee's car to victory in the 1964 Jayhawk Nationals at the Mid-America Fairgrounds at Topeka, Kansas. He had clearly shown that he could handle a supermodified. He also realized that he and LaVern Nance had done well together, but when he listened to his heart, he knew he wanted to go sprint car racing.

To get a ride in a sprint car, he didn't need to look very far. Pius Selenke was born mere weeks before Wade in Grainfield, Kansas. He would eventually matriculate to Wichita, where he was well known as the owner of Parker Oil Company. He also had a thing for race cars, a habit his son and grandson would also acquire.

It was a confusing time to be an open-wheel car owner in the Kansas plains. Sprint car racing was not an unusual commodity, but supermodified racing was still wildly popular and remained the main attraction. As Wade tells it, Selenke had the right solution. "Pius had a sprint and a modified made into one car," Wade says. "it looked like an Indy roadster.

"The deal was, the frame had to be 30 inches inside. He got a sprint car body, cut it in half, and took it to the fiberglass place and had it molded. It had a V8 engine. We set it up just like any other car." As for his owner, Wade says, "He had a bad temper, and I had a bad temper, so we got along really well. He had three kids and they were all great."

The partnership between Selenke and Wade began at the end of the 1964 season, and things went well enough that the two men decided to join forces again in 1965. Even by now, Wade knew exactly what made him tick. So many Kansas towns had big ovals at the local fairgrounds, and large tracks allowed one to stretch their legs a little. As far as Grady was concerned, the faster the track the better. When Selenke and Wade decided to take on the Big Car Racing Association (BCRA), the tracks that filled the schedule were right in his wheelhouse.

Oddly, the BCRA was an offshoot of the famed Pikes Peak Hill Climb. Some would obtain cars to compete in the open-wheel division and then had little choice but to put the car in mothballs until the following year. In September, 1957 a meeting was held in Littleton, Colorado and the BCRA was born. Art Myers who would become the first president, went on to a long career as a USAC official, and spent over 50 years at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

The series started off modestly, but by 1965 the club was to have one of its biggest years. In a giant step for the organization, dates were secured at the Belleville (KS) High Banks and the fairgrounds at Oklahoma City. Bobby and Al Unser had already made appearances with the BCRA, but in 1965 the man to beat was Jack Hahn.

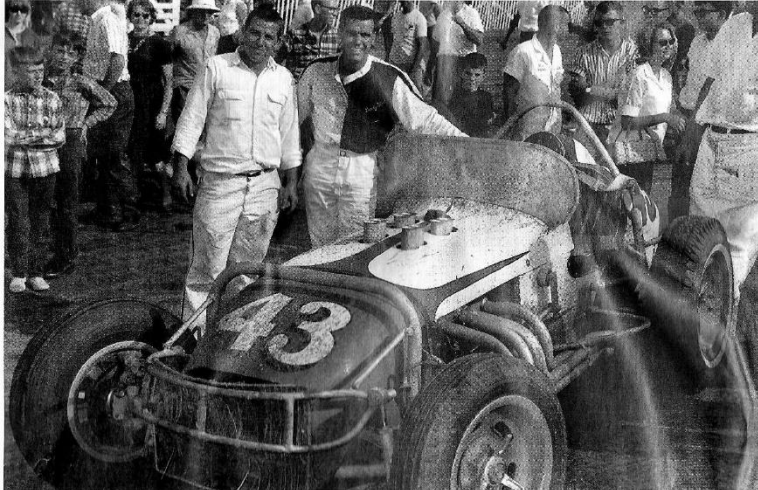
Hahn, who was living in Cheyenne, Wyoming was, in many ways, the prototypical BCRA racer. A talented fabricator, Hahn had once constructed a V-12 Lincoln powered sprint car and by the dawn of the BCRA, had already competed in the Pikes Peak Hill Climb. In 1965, Hahn was gunning for his third series title. He did not go down without a fight, and kept his championship hopes alive by winning twice over Labor Day weekend at Bethany, Missouri.

The BCRA offered a compact schedule, but for a man like Wade, who held down a nine-to-five job, it was still a challenge. "We would go to a place like WaKeeney (KS) and it was 200 miles out there. Dale Reed and I would go out there together, and it would be midnight when we left. He had to be at work at 5 a.m. and I had to go to work, too."

One of the pivotal points in the campaign proved to be memorable in many ways. Three dates were inked at Belleville for the 1965 season. Then, as now, this was a track that demanded total attention. 'While many could turn a bit green at the gills at the prospect of taking on the High Banks, Wade loved it ... but doesn't deny that it could be foreboding.

"When the track was wet, if you were at the top and dropped down to an idle you could slide all the way to the bottom," Wade remembers. "There were guys who went over that fence and never came back."

This was a reality that was made clear to him on his first trip to the North Central Kansas Fairgrounds. "I went there the first time with Pete Forshee," he says. "And at one point he said to come with him. So, we went to the backstretch and looked over the fence. He said, 'So you thought those were bushes? Well, those are the tops of trees. I don't want you to go over the damn fence.' I said, 'Don't worry about it, I don't want to go over it either.' That might have made me a little bit shy at first."



Wade poses with Pius Selenke (left) and his mount at the Belleville High Banks in 1965.

Nothing in his 1965 performances at Belleville suggested that he was in any way intimidated. Harvey Shane picked up the lion's share of BCRA cash on Memorial Day, with Wade right behind him. On the 4th of July Wade competed with the Jayhawk Racing Association Supermodifieds and ran second to Harold Leep.

Three big dates were slated at the High Banks at the end of August. The supermodifieds took the track on the 27th, where Grady finished fifth, and that led to two more days of BCRA sprint cars. Wade had another strong

outing when he ran second to Roy Bryant on the 28th. Now he was down to one more chance to conquer the track before the season came to an end. The record shows he was able to beat Lloyd Beckman to the line, but the back story is equally, if not more, interesting.

According to Hall of Fame historian and writer Bob Mays, a salesman had arrived at Belleville and had sold Lloyd Beckman a yellow-tinted shield for his helmet, proclaiming it was perfect for day races. Beckman has a nice lead, looks up, sees Ted Bentz throw the white flag, but suddenly slows down on the backstretch. His owner, Speedy Bill Smith, has never won a sprint car feature to this point in his career and is giddy with anticipation. Joy soon turned to pure anguish. Convinced there has been a mechanical failure, he is hopping mad and yelling at anyone within shouting distance.

When Beckman offered an explanation and Smith saw the yellow visor, he knew what happened. The white flag, from Beckman's perspective, was yellow. What follows is a full-throated melt down by both men, and an incensed Smith tells his driver that he can figure out how to get home to Lincoln, Nebraska on his own.

Meanwhile, Wade and Selenke are delighted with the win, and the ensuing spectacle. After all, it helped propel them to the BCRA title over Jack Hahn. In the end, there was one more important aspect to the day. When Bill Smith got back to his Speedway Motors, he spied Beckman climbing into his own car. Somehow, somehow, Lloyd had beat him home.

While Wade may have been a beneficiary of a little luck, he had impressed everyone all year. In fact, it moved legendary *National Speed Sport News* reporter Les Ward to add a little flare to his race report. By this point in history Ward had already seen plenty of drivers test their mettle on the Banks. That said, something caught the veteran scribe's attention, for he felt compelled to mention that Wade appeared to possess an abundance of guts.

It was a golden age of racing in Wichita, and by now Grady Wade's name was mentioned alongside other well-established stars. While the men behind the wheel were in the spotlight, behind the scenes were a host of innovative constructors who plied their trade in the Air Capital. One of those men was Chet Wilson.

Wilson was born in Lincoln, Nebraska in the middle of World War I. Even as a young man he showed a propensity to tinker, and it was a habit he never shook. By the time he relocated to Wichita, he had already been bitten by the midget craze, but he also needed to settle down and make a living.

He found work at the Kansas Rebabbiting Company. Over time he developed his own machine shop, and by 1960, Chet Wilson Engine Service became his fulltime job. In the mid-1950s Chet did something revolutionary. He developed a small block Chevrolet for use in a sprint car and competed in the United Motor Contest Association.

With Walt McWhorter at the controls, the team easily took the 1956 UMCA crown. Perhaps even more noteworthy, in August, 1956 McWhorter and Wilson were the best at Belleville, this time under the IMCA banner. It was the first win for a Chevy-powered sprint car with a National sanctioning body. McWhorter crashed at the final race of the year, and the car, which already had been mended and massaged aplenty was finally spent.

While he had some work ahead of him, Wilson was clearly on to something, and he was prepared to do his part to revolutionize sprint car racing. Chet started building a new car, and this time it would be powered by a 283 cubic inch Chevy. It was a time where craftsmanship reigned supreme, and Wilson put his agile mind to work creating a car that was both powerful and aesthetically pleasing.

Within the tight Wichita racing fraternity, everybody knew what was happening, and anyone who had been paying attention wanted a piece of it. In the end, Harold Leep got the call, and he made the most of it.

In 1957 and '58 Leep dominated Ray Duckworth's United Speedways circuit, racing further east in Iowa, Illinois and Missouri. Dipping a toe in IMCA competition, Harold scored a win at Oklahoma City and finished just outside of the top 10 in the 1958 standings. He was just warming up. In 1959 Harold finished third with the IMCA, notching six wins, and the team would also race with other circuits in a manner that fit Chet Wilson's schedule. Harold would start seeking other opportunities and, accordingly, Wilson would find other capable shoes to take the wheel.

It was a time when some race cars were nearly as celebrated as the drivers. While Hector Honore's Black Deuce was by far the most famous car in the heartland, Chet Wilson's Offy Killer had garnered its share of attention as well. Consider Grady Wade's position. You graduated to sprint cars, won a title, and have convinced everyone that you aren't afraid to go fast. Furthermore, your owner is a successful businessman who has been deeply invested in racing. Then you get an irresistible offer.

"Chet called and asked me to go to lunch," Grady recalls. "And then he asks if I would like to drive Big Red. I said 'Hell yes!' That was the fastest car around. In Pius' car, if you came off a turn and ran through a hard spot, it would get loose. Chet's car just kept digging. It was also a little higher off the ground, and we ran a narrow wheelbase which gave it better side bite. It was just a terrific car."

With a quality ride at his disposal, it was time to get to work. The team set their sights on the IMCA. One thing that impacted their racing life was that both men still had to earn a living. "Chet had the machine shop," Wade says. "So, he couldn't stay out all the time. That worked out well for me, because I had a good job as a superintendent for a construction company. So, we would leave on Friday and race on Saturday and Sunday and then come home. For example, we would leave Des Moines at midnight and head for Wichita."

This arrangement allowed Wade to keep his regular gig, but if he wanted to race a supermodified or a local show, Wilson had no objections. It was a good relationship. "Chet could be moody," Grady says. "But he was a good guy. He would tell you the truth. We would come in and he would say, 'What do you think?' And I would say, 'Well, maybe a little more right rear or a little more left front.' Then he would say, 'Well, let's just adjust the monkey.' Of course, that was me. He was one terrific mechanic."

In 1966, the monkey more than held his own on the IMCA trail. The duo would only make 10 starts on the circuit, but they made an impression once they were there. He scored for the first time at Des Moines in August, and had been a consistent threat all year long.

The season would wind down with a show in early October at Granite City, Illinois. It was a long way from home, but when IMCA officials called and dangled some appearance money for both owner and driver, the decision was made. By now there was an unquestioned rivalry between the Offy Killer and the Black Deuce, perhaps even more so given that Wilson had done his part to force Honore to finally part ways with his beloved Offenhauser engine.

The Deuce was driven by Roxanna, Illinois driver Bill Puterbaugh. Bill had matriculated from the St. Louis Auto Racing Association midget ranks and had shared 1965 IMCA Rookie of the Year honors with Tom Bigelow.

It proved to be a memorable night. Playing right to the script, Puterbaugh and Wade had the fans on their feet. "We had a hell of a race," Grady remembers. "I was racing with Puterbaugh, and I'm catching him, and kept running him up the hill. We were going full bore. I finally got him coming off the hill out of turn four, but he was still there, Jay Woodside was there, and so was Jerry Blundy. We were all dinging each other. It was a great race."

The final tally showed that in 10 starts the team had two wins, seven top-fives, and were the fast qualifiers on five occasions. Still heaving with excitement from a thrilling event, Wade was asked to report to the frontstretch. When he got there, IMCA's Gene Van Winkle and starter Woody Brinkman were there to present him with the Rookie of the Year trophy. It's the only trophy he has ever kept.

In spite of what might have appeared to be a fierce rivalry, Wade remembers Hector Honore as an exceedingly polite man. Everyone knew Bill Puterbaugh was determined to make it with USAC, so someone was going to get a chance in the Black Deuce. There was one obvious choice.

Recalling the conclusion of the 1966 season, Wade says, "After I beat Puterbaugh at Granite City, Hector wrote me a nice letter saying he wanted me to drive his car and he would like me to make every race. I had to tell him that was impossible for me."

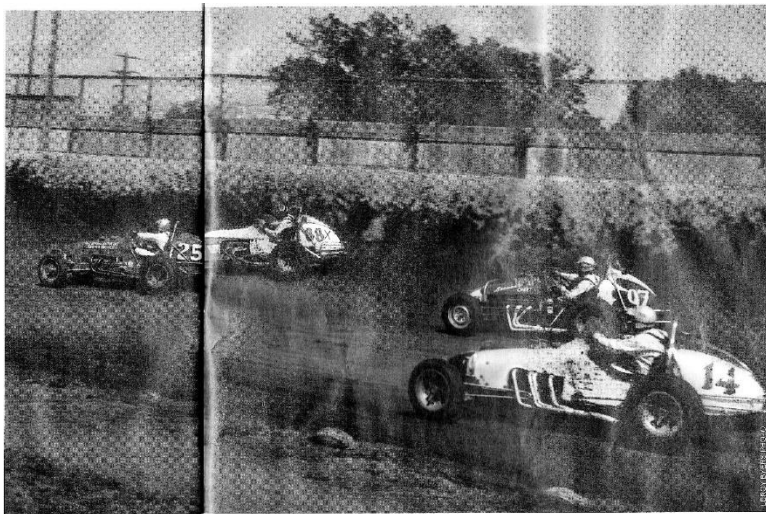
One could imagine that Wade and Wilson couldn't wait for 1967 to roll around. Making the long tow to the IMCA openers in Tampa, things could not have gone worse. Wade was body slammed on his first lap, and the car was completely destroyed. With plenty of business at hand, and needing to pay the bills, Wilson was done for the year. Not surprisingly, Wade had no difficulty finding rides.

One opportunity seemed particularly ideal. Nebraska's Speedy Bill Smith was in need of a driver for his car, and it seems he had a pet project. "He had a 427 aluminum engine in his car, that Mickey Thompson gave him," Wade says. "And it wouldn't come off the corner. It just wouldn't wind quick. We were at Granite City and I said, 'I will race at Lincoln tomorrow if you take that thing out and put a good 350 in there.'"

It was a beautiful car, but mechanic Marty Bassett and the rest of the team had also grown weary of the experiment. According to Bob Mays, the squad could never get the throttle linkage right. So, the swap was made.

That didn't go well either.

"Somebody left one of the blades in the injectors loose," Grady says. "So when I opened the car up in warmups, the throttle stuck and I stuffed it in the wall. It was the first time I was knocked out in a race car. I woke up and Joe Saldana was holding my hands up. He said he didn't want me to get burned. I said, 'Is there a fire?' He said, 'No, there isn't a fire. But when you wake up from being knocked out you want to know things.'"



Grady Wade in Chet Wilson's No. 25 leads Jan Opperman (88X), Thad Dasher (97) and Benny Rapp (14) on his way to sweeping the weekend at Topeka in 1968.

Suffice it to say, when Wilson was ready to saddle up again in 1968, Wade was more than ready. Following their set routine, they only signed in for 11 IMCA dates, but they made the most of their trips from home. Wade held off Dick Sutcliffe at the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia on August 17, and the following day he beat Bill Utz in Des Moines. Heading back to familiar turf in mid-September, Grady swept both days at Topeka. While Big Red couldn't be there every race, when it was, it was one of the favorites to win.

Wilson was beginning to slow down his racing activities, while Wade

was also dabbling in supermodifieds on the local scene.

In 1969 Grady climbed the top step during the Winter Nationals at Enid, Oklahoma, a major stop for supermodifieds. The following year he hooked up with Oklahoma City owner Pat Suchy, and Enid became his personal ATM machine. While the late Suchy may not have received nationwide acclaim as a car owner, he fielded top-flight cars for years and helped Shane Carson take the 1986 National Championship Racing Association (NCRA) title.

While Enid Speedway may have been very good to Wade, it also produced a harrowing moment in his career. "Roy Bryant was taking a vacation," Wade says. "And his owner wanted me to drive his car. We were at Enid and I had won every race that night, but then my throttle stuck wide open and I drilled the wall. My safety belt broke and my right foot slipped up to the motor. On top of that, the motor is on fire. I can't get my foot out and I'm bleeding like a stuck hog. Pete Forshee came over and said, 'You idiots, his foot is on the motor, lift the car up!'

"So the fireman drug me out, and put me on the race track face down. Then they put me in the ambulance. It was just me and the driver and he didn't lock the gurney down or nothing. He is going through an underpass about 70 miles per hour, right there in town, and I flew up and hit the ceiling. So, I reached over the seat and grabbed him by the shoulder and said, 'Slow this thing down or I'm going to punch you out, and we are both going to die.'"

While one could find sprint car racing in the region, supermodifieds were still the king. The discipline was soon to get another shot in the arm. In February, 1971 nine track operators assembled with the idea of forming a new racing organization. The NCRA was formed, with Amarillo Speed Bowl's G.W. Elkins elected as club president.

Teaming up with Junction City, Kansas entrepreneur John Schippert, Wade had a stout year. In mid-July he dominated the action at Oklahoma City, a race that provided the best pay day of his career. Emmett Hahn would win the inaugural NCRA championship, followed by Dale Reed. Wade, who did not run the entire slate of events, tied with Harold Leep for the third position in points but held the tie breaker.

In 1972 Wade was back with the Wilson family. Racing for Chet's son Jerry, Wade had a great year at nearby 81 Speedway, finishing second in points to Dale Reed. He also climbed in Chet's sprint car again at Oklahoma City in September and claimed his owner's 31st IMCA victory. Maybe it was just the time to reunite with old friends. In 1973, he raced a sprint car for LaVern Nance on the BCRA circuit, but failed to find victory lane.

Just when it looked like his career was winding down, in 1974 Wade put another strong year on his resume. Back with Schippert, he showed plenty of muscle in the supermodifieds. He beat promising

youngster James McElreath to capture an NCRA date at 81 Speedway in August, and on Jack Merrick's circuit, comprised of Dodge City, Hutchinson, and Fairgrounds Speedway at Liberal, Kansas, he won six times, including a stretch of four in a row.

In 1974 John Schippert had suffered a serious heart attack, but when Grady visited him in the hospital, his owner made it crystal clear he expected his car to be at the race track. Following orders, Wade would win twice at Dodge City to start the season, but after a fifth-place run at the 1975 Hutchinson Nationals he called it a career.

It was time to take his life in a different direction. That same year, with a partner in Kansas City he opened a business materials store in Little Rock, Arkansas. It went so well that the pair opened another store in Shreveport, Louisiana. Yes, it was hard to stay away. What made matters worse, he was offered rides the moment he arrived in Little Rock.

To kick the habit, he avoided the race track altogether. He knew he had to concentrate on his business. Then one night he was heading to Shreveport and he was lured back to familiar territory. "I saw Johnny Suggs on the interstate and pulled into the race track.

"Well, that did that. I ended up staying there until one in the morning. Johnny and I ran every race we had ever been in that night."

Gradly Wade became a central figure in an area that produced a host of terrific racers. In so many ways, he can be credited with dragging LaVern Nance into the game. Future star Jerry Stone was just moving up from karts and he saw all of this unfold. "LaVern was building a lot of parts," he says, "but it was really later that he began building cars. When we got our first car, it was a kit. You got some bent tubing, the main frame rails, and a blueprint showing you what it should be like. About every day of the week, my dad and I would go to Anthony's, a restaurant on Broadway in Wichita, and we would drink coffee until about nine or 10 o'clock at night, asking questions and listening to the stories from the guys who were racing at that time. Then my dad and I would go home and work on the race car until midnight or the early morning. Grady was right in the middle of that."

Wade retired in 1988, after undergoing open heart surgery. In his homespun style, he proclaims, "They opened me up like a banana box and started pulling parts out."

It appears his doctors were effective. Living in Florida, he plays golf three times a week and will head to the race track when Shane Carson comes by and gets him. In retrospect, he says, "I was lucky. It seems like most of the guys I drove for, or worked with or for, were pretty darn nice guys."

Like many who have long since hung up the helmet, he figures no one really remembers him. On that count, he's dead wrong.

Watching Wade attack a dirt track was akin to your first experience watching a fierce thunderstorm rumble unimpeded through the plains. Recalling Wade, Jerry Stone says, "He was good, and I would call him hairy. I wouldn't say he was wild, but he would stand on the gas. He didn't tear up a lot of stuff, but you can bet your ass he was going fast when he did. He told me that when he retired, he put three race track carpenters out of work." There is no better endorsement for a racer to be both exciting *and* a winner.

LaVern Nance and Chet Wilson are in the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. The same can be said for Harold Leep, a man whose career may actually be underappreciated nationally. Yet, this story is also the tale of so many others who have flown under the radar for far too long.

The NCRA went from the supermodified to the championship dirt car, to a standard sprint car. Alas, the classic plains supermodified just faded away. It makes it easy to forget those brave souls who were churning the dirt in days gone by. However, if you were a firsthand witness, or just listened to those who could be trusted, no one has to convince you how great Frankie Lies, Dale Reed, Roy Bryant, Walt McWhorter, Forrest Coleman ... and Grady Wade really were.

Patrick Sullivan would like to acknowledge the contributions of historians Ray Cunningham and Bob Mays to this article.