



Dodge: Then & Now

Contact: Dave Elshoff, 248-512-2690
Molly Morter, 312-729-4355

Sam McQuagg Used First Spoiler for Dodge Win

By Bill Hamilton

HOMESTEAD, Fla., Nov. 7, 2001 – For a driver with only one NASCAR Grand National Series win, Sam McQuagg had a lot of firsts in his career. He used the first spoiler in NASCAR Grand National history to win the Firecracker 400 at Daytona International Speedway driving a fastback Dodge Charger in 1966. Rookie-of-the-Year Award winner in 1965, McQuagg was the first driver to bring a motorhome into the garage area at Daytona, and he was the first – and maybe only – driver to retire from racing and make a living as a commercial pilot, a skill he learned as a race car driver.

He is one of several Dodge drivers who won only one NASCAR Grand National Series race during their careers. The others are John Soares (5/30/54, Gardena, Calif.), Royce Haggerty (8/26/56, Portland, Ore.), and Jim Cook (9/11/60, Sacramento, Calif.). Haggerty and Cook also won a pole award each – 9/23/56, Portland, Ore., and 9/10/60, Sacramento, Calif., respectively.

McQuagg's career was perhaps the most noteworthy among that group because of his Rookie-of-the-Year Award and a crash with Cale Yarborough at Darlington in which Yarborough's car went over the guard rail, flipped a half-dozen times and ended up against a light pole at the edge of the parking lot. The spectacular crash was included in the ABC Wide World of Sports highlight reel for many years.

The wreck started when Yarborough tried to force his way past McQuagg, who had led the previous 31 laps. "Cale went down on the apron to try to get around me and his car came up the track and squeezed mine into the guardrail," he said. "I had been leading the Southern 500 a long time when that happened."

McQuagg got his start on the short tracks of South Georgia and north Florida. He had some success there and a woman by the name of Betty Lilly told him if he ever wanted to move up to the NASCAR Grand National Series, she would like to participate. Like most young drivers, McQuagg jumped at the opportunity and Mrs. Lilly sponsored him to

the tune of about \$45,000 – a princely sum in those days. McQuagg bought a car, painted “Lilly” on the trunk lid and started running the major races.

The first event for the No. 24 Betty Lilly Ford was the 1965 Daytona 500. McQuagg placed fifth in the second 100-mile qualifying race so he started 10th on the grid. He finished two laps behind the leader in eighth place, his first of five top-10 finishes that season. McQuagg also earned two top-five finishes in his 15 starts that year, beating many of the factory Fords in the process. His performance as an independent caught the eye of the factory supported Dodge teams and McQuagg was signed to drive the No. 98 Nichols Engineering Dodge Charger in 1966.

McQuagg finished 15th in the NASCAR Grand National Series championship standings that year with 16 starts, one win, four top-fives and seven top-10s. His winnings totaled \$29,529.09. The highlight, of course, was winning the Firecracker 400 on July 4 at Daytona International Speedway.

In the early part of the season, Dodge drivers found that their aerodynamic fastback Chargers were very slippery but tended to “lift” at high speeds. “You would spin the tires at 180 mph going down the backstretch,” said McQuagg. The solution was a small strip of metal along the trunk lid – the first spoiler in a NASCAR Grand National Series race.

“We tested spoilers at Daytona for about 30 days in June,” said McQuagg. “When I won the race at Daytona in July, that was the first race that was ever run in NASCAR with a spoiler on the car. It was a little spoiler that was probably about an inch-and-a-half high and it was contoured, you know, to give it a little sweeping effect. It really worked, too. It made a lot of difference in that car; it kept the car from flying. That little spoiler disturbed the air enough that it kept it down.”

McQuagg’s Firecracker 400 win came in his 31st Grand National Series start. The Columbus, Ga., native was 29 years old at the time.

In 1967, McQuagg switched to the Dodges of Cotton Owens and ran 14 races. He scored three top-five finishes but unfortunately, the most notable aspect of the season was another spectacular crash at Darlington. During the 81st lap, McQuagg banged fenders with Dick Hutcherson, sending McQuagg’s car into the concrete pit wall. The car flipped end-over-end and side-over-side about eight times before coming to a stop. A groggy McQuagg climbed out of the car, walked away and then collapsed. He was treated and released from a local hospital.

McQuagg continued to race for a time after the second big wreck at Darlington but found the sport getting too political for his taste. He scaled back to local short track racing and ultimately gave that up, too, when his new career as a pilot began to conflict with his racing schedule.

McQuagg had learned to fly as a stock car driver. He wanted to move quickly from race track to race track, so he decided to get a pilot's license. "We used to run in Jacksonville, Fla., on Sunday afternoons," explained McQuagg. "They always had an afternoon race on Sunday, like at 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon. When that race would be over, like at 3:30 or 4, we'd get in the car and try to get to Atlanta, Ga. in time to run a Peach Bowl Sunday night, which was starting like at 7:30 or 8. This would have been 1958 or 1959, along there.

"So I told my wife, 'I'm going to learn to fly an airplane, buy me an airplane, then I won't have to fool with these cars all the time.' I did that and started flying, and some of the drivers started traveling with me. Some drivers had airplanes earlier, but at that time I was about the only person that had one that was racing. We would even go up to run in the northeast and I had a lot of the drivers that always rode in the airplane with me. It worked out real good and turned out to be a very good job after I retired from the racing."

McQuagg eventually ran the corporate flight department for the W.C. Bradley Co. of Columbus, Ga. The company had four airplanes and about a dozen pilots and mechanics. McQuagg retired only a few years ago.

Another innovation credited to McQuagg is the use of a motorhome at the track. He was the first driver to bring a motorhome into the paddock area at Daytona International Speedway. At first, there was resistance from NASCAR officials. McQuagg overcame that by having a talk with "Big Bill," NASCAR founder and Chairman Bill France Sr.

"I talked to Mr. France and told him what the deal was, that it was a place for the drivers, and my wife made sandwiches for everybody and everything. So he said we could, 'go tell Norris (competition director Freel) I said it was all right.' I don't remember if it was the 500 or the 400. I'm almost certain it would have been 1967, maybe 1968, right along there, but we brought it in and it worked out real well. And after that, you know what's happened since. The only difference is we had cheap Winnebagos and they got these luxury motorhomes. A lot of difference in the money."

McQuagg still watches the races on television and is happy to see the Dodges back in the thick of the battle.

"That brings back old memories," said McQuagg. "I was real happy to see them run up front again; I certainly was." He also admits to having a favorite among today's Dodge drivers. "I really like Ward Burton a lot. He is my kind of person. He just kinda tells you what he thinks about stuff and he's very honest about it. I think a lot of a fellow that does that, rather than the people that talk about their sponsors and, you know, how great their crew is. Ward kinda tells what he thinks about stuff and I respect that in a man."

McQuagg also admires the work of Ray Evernham. "He is, to me, kind of a soft-spoken hero," he explained. "Anybody that would shoulder the responsibility that he has and make it work as well as he has, has all the admiration in the world from me, I'll tell you.

He's obviously a genius, a mechanical genius, to do the things he's done with the race cars, but the job that he took over is still the biggest one of all."

This coming Sunday, McQuagg will be watching the race at Homestead-Miami Speedway on television and celebrating his 65th birthday.

This week in Dodge history:

- **11/9/69** – Bobby Allison and his Mario Rossi Dodge took the lead with 12 laps to go and won the Georgia 500 at Middle Georgia Raceway in Macon. The win was Allison's fifth of the season.
- **11/12/72** – Buddy Baker and the K&K Insurance Dodge passed Richard Petty on the 229th lap and held on to win the Texas 500 at Texas World Speedway, College Station, Texas. It was Baker's first win since taking over the K&K Insurance Dodge team two months earlier. It was also his sixth career Winston Cup win.
- **11/7/76** – Dave Marcis and the K&K Insurance Dodge won their third race of the season at Atlanta International Raceway in Hampton, Ga. Marcis led the Dixie 500 seven times that day and took over the front spot for good on lap 294.

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