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## Remember When: Mark Cassella the “West Virginia Wild Thing”

Mark Cassella earned the nickname “West Virginia Wild Thing” at the local speedways for his driving style. A quote from an April 26, 1994 article by Mike Dutko, the former announcer at Lernerville, describes Cassella very well. “Wild Thing, You Make That Car Sing” “Mark Cassella has been billed as the West Virginia Invader, but I like to call him The West Virginia Wild Thing. The man is absolutely the most exciting driver in this area, bar none! Lernerville has a tendency to get slick and the fast line for sprints is to plant the right rear on the cushion, and flat foot it around the track. Cassella has found a new line going way up above the cushion, and ripping his way through the heavy stuff above the cushion. The speed he generates is awesome!”

Mark makes his home in Weirton, West Virginia where he is employed as a black jack dealer at Wheeling Downs Racetrack and Casino. A career in gambling is very appropriate since his racing career involved taking chances. A second generation driver, his father Pete and brother Billy were both successful open wheel competitors. Billy is a former USAC champion. Mark said the reason he got involved in racing was because of his father and brother. “It is all I ever wanted to do.”

Mark drove for twenty four years before retiring after a serious racing accident caused him to lose sight in his right eye. The accident occurred at Terre Haute, Indiana when he flipped his car during a USAC race. He felt the best part of racing was winning, meeting a lot of nice people, and making friends. He traveled all over the country racing at a variety of different speedways.

He found success at several of the following speedways: Attica, Bloomington, Buckeye, Challenger, Eldora, Hickory, IRP, Jennerstown, Kokomo, Lawrenceburg, Lernerville, Mansfield, Ohio, Manzanita, Mercer, Motordrome, Phoenix International Speedway, Pittsburgh, Port

Royal, Raceway 7, Salem, Selinsgrove, Sharon, Sportsman's Speedway, Tri-City, Winchester, and Williams Grove.

Mark had many memorable moments in racing. Some of them included his first sprint car victory at Pittsburgh's Pennsylvania Motor Speedway, his first USAC victory over Jack Hewitt, and winning the Lernerville Track Championship driving for Tim Guzzo. He had an embarrassing situation one night at Knox Speedway when he flipped his car after hitting a lapped car while leading the race. He came back without a wing and managed to finish fourth.

In 1995 Mark was running USAC with some big name drivers. On April 1, 1995 at Eldora for the Don Branson/Jud Larson Memorial he competed with Dave Darland, Jack Hewitt, and Tony Stewart and managed a top ten finish. The following day he went to Winchester to compete with Stewart and Kenny Irwin. Salem and Terre Haute were next for the busy April schedule. Doug Kalitta, Mike Bliss, Jimmy Sills, Ron Shuman and Johnny Parsons provided some tough competition for Mark but he was always up for the task. Mark scored three times in his short career in USAC wins. His brother Billy had 14 wins. Mark would like to be compared to his brother Bill because he was a great driver and a winner. He regrets not having the opportunity to race against his brother and hopefully beat him.

During his career he scored several championships, two at Lernerville, four at Sportsman Speedway, and the USAC Rookie of the Year Title. His car owners included Pete Casella, Tim Guzzo, John Toth, Hoffman Racing, Powell Brothers Racing, Stapp Racing, Pete Smith, and Boone Covell. Mark had an opportunity to drive for Covell after his injury winning the feature at Tri City Speedway. Mark said, "It felt like my first ever feature win. I know for a fact, if my vision was good I definitely would be racing. I had so much fun and excitement during my career I wish I could go back and do it all over again." People assume that Mark is finished with racing but his heart is still in it. If he had the opportunity, he would like to prove that he can still do it.

Mark's crew included Lou Gagliard, Frank, Dick, and Dave Brennman, Scott Cochran, Johnny Toth, and Bruce Lamp. The two drivers that he most enjoyed racing against were Jack Hewitt and Tony Stewart.

Mark was a very talented driver that had his career cut short due to a serious racing accident. One can only wonder what he could have accomplished if he had not been hurt.