

## JAN "O" REMEMBERED

JAN'S UNFULFILLED DREAM

by: Pike Green

Ask any dozen people who were acquainted with him, what their impressions were of Jan Opperman and you'd probably get a dozen different answers. But even the skeptics among them would agree to his aura of mystique. The Jan Opperman I knew was quiet, sincere, compassionate, tough, a congenial house guest and the most charismatic person I'll ever hope to know. My first encounter with Jan came at the 1975 Skagit Speedway Super Dirt Cup. I'd been searching for a worthwhile race-related charity for the fledgling Golden Wheels Fraternity to support, and felt that a ~~worthwhile~~ <sup>WORTHY</sup> cause set up within the racing community would be to everyone's benefit. While making my way around the pits, I happened to catch a few words from Jan over the P.A. system attempting to gain some crowd support for his new USCRY ranch located at Noxon, Montana. Although I wasn't crazy about the idea of becoming involved with the pot smokin' hippy I'd heard of, my curiosity was piqued and I approached Jan when he returned to the infield. Despite the demands on his time at a major race, I was quick to notice he was more than willing to explain to a stranger, the purpose of his ranch and what he hoped to achieve. During our brief conversation, he told me he had renounced his old ways and was anxious to help youngsters who had fallen into the trap of alcohol/drug addiction, thus naming the ranch US Concerned Racers for Youth. He jotted down where he could be reached and I left with a slightly altered opinion of him. Concerned Racers for Youth had a nice ring to it and I contacted Jan in August after verifying the tax exempt charity status of USCRY. When he learned what I had in mind, he enthusiastically endorsed any support the Golden Wheels Fraternity could offer and agreed to attend the

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JAN"S: (lap 2 of 5)

Golden Wheels' first annual awards banquet in Seattle on February 28, 1976. Jan arrived in town the day before the banquet in plenty of time to attend a ~~surprise~~ press conference, ~~slated for him to attend~~, along with another well known celebrity: Johnny Rutherford. During a few early hours while getting acquainted with Jan, I was struck by the sincere simplicity of this man who appeared to be least impressed with his own celebrity status. He seemed to regard his racing only as a means to achieve his goal of seeing his ranch become self-sufficient with many of his charges rehabilitated. When the conversation turned to the afternoon's press conference, he was bashful about going until he learned that Rutherford would be there to share the spotlight. I had withheld what I considered a surprise for everyone. Allen Heath, a friend of long standing, and still very much a local hero, had called several days earlier saying he was in town for the banquet. He accepted my offer to pick him <sup>UP</sup> ~~us~~ and go together to the press conference. When I arrived with Jan to pick up Allen, thinking I'd introduce them, the surprise was on me. They greeted each other like long-lost brothers. It seems Allen had befriended Jan years earlier when Jan was still an unknown who turned up at an Ascot midget event with a foul handling Ford 60 and a couple of hippy pals for crew. Allen recognized Jan's raw talent in hot laps, but could see the hippy crew was making the car's handling worse. Allen set the car up and Jan went on to make the feature against a field of Offys. In any case, the press conference was like a homecoming, since Rutherford was unaware Opperman would be there and nobody expected to see Allen Heath. Johnny Rutherford was in town as the star attraction at an auto show held on Friday and Saturday at an exhibition hall on the Seattle Center grounds,

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while the Saturday night Golden Wheels awards banquet was conveniently situated across the street. The auto show promoter expressed a keen interest in having Opperman appear with Rutherford at his Friday night program where they would both be available for autograph sessions. Sensing I was onto something here, I bargained for Jan to receive a substantial fee for his time on Friday, then trade Opperman for Rutherford on Saturday, where the auto show would have Jan for an hour while Johnny crossed the street as our guest at the banquet. Jan seemed truly mystified at his own popularity when he entered the banquet hall filled to capacity with near five hundred enthusiastic race fans. The awards banquet was a success beyond all expectations, finally winding down around 4 AM. During the next few months our friendship blossomed into a comfortable relationship and I was sold on the sincerity of his Beliefs, although the differences in our approach were seldom discussed. Out on the trail, Jan kept me posted with accounts of his various events, culminating with a surprise call after qualifying for the 1976 Indy 500. Not realizing I'd watched the electrifying 11th hour attempt on television, he was ecstatic<sup>IN</sup> giving credit to the Lord rather than to his right foot. Since Jan's USCRY ranch was mainly financed and maintained through his personal savings and racing income, his devastating crash later that summer caused concern for the ranch's survival. Situated in a Western Montana setting surrounded by towering mountains, (I believe it was 156 acres) it gave one the impression of standing in the bottom of a gigantic teacup. The traditional old ranch house with barns and other out-buildings were quite durable and perhaps a half dozen youngsters were in

JAN'S: (lap 4 of 5)

residence at the time. Jan's first new and much needed dormitory was then under construction, but with doubtful finance for its completion, an alarm was raised and Golden Wheels responded. A volunteer crew of about 20, led by Bob Cochran who donated some trucks and equipment from his electrical contracting business, formed a caravan to converge on Noxon from Seattle. Jan's father, Jim "Grizz" Opperman was there to meet us, having arranged for accommodations, and we lived "off the land" for a couple of days. The ranch's huge kitchen wood<sup>BURNING</sup>vrange was put to overtime use keeping us well fed with whatever came from the ranch. Working from dawn to dusk, the crew brought in electricity and had the dormitory finished within two days. While he was still convalescing at Noxon, I met Jan again in Spokane for a fund raiser. He was anxious to race again and I suspected he was more concerned about the future of USCRY than for his own well being. February 1977 saw him in Seattle at the Golden Wheels awards once more, and again shortly after to a midget race in the Kingdome. Although it has been reported otherwise, I believe this was his first comeback try. In any case, it became obvious that Jan needed more time to recover from his injuries. With his ranch at stake, who could blame him for trying? By June of '77 he was back at Skagit's Dirt Cup where I'd first found him. He was driving a sprinter I think provided him by Fred Brownfield. It hurt to see him struggling now, where he'd won the prestigious Dirt Cup in flamboyant Opperman style just two years earlier. The resumption of his nomadic ways made contact difficult from then on, but we kept in touch occasionally until the crash that eventually took his life.

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JAN'S: (lap 5 of 5)

On the way through Sacramento in 1984, I stopped at ~~Jean~~<sup>JUNE</sup> and Jim Opperman's suburban ~~house~~<sup>HOME</sup> where Jan was living. Jan was in extensive therapy then and I left encouraged that he might eventually recover, but it was not to be. Golden Wheels Fraternity was dedicated to the support of the USCRY ranch and it is ironic that only a few of us were in favor of transferring that support to Jan himself when he and his parents needed it most. I would like to think that whoever is living on Jan's Montana ranch now, will sometimes look at the night stars and see Jan smiling down on them.

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