JAN OPPERMAN

Jan Opperman was a racecar folk hero back in the 1960s and ‘70s, one of sprint car racing’s original “outlaws.”

Wearing his hair long as befitted the hippie style of the times, Opperman spent his early racing career running “outlaw” events, rather than sticking to one sanctioning body. He won dozens of races each year traveling around the country in pursuit of the highest purses.

At age 32, Opperman won the 1971 Knoxville Nationals, the premier event in sprint car racing. In 1976, he won the Hulman Classic at Terre Haute, Ind., which featured most of the top sprint car drivers in America and had several drivers in the field who would start the Indianapolis 500 later that month.

Opperman’s success in sprint cars caught the attention of Parnelli Jones, a sprint car veteran himself who won the 1963 Indianapolis 500. Jones awarded Jan a spot in the 1974 Indy 500. Opperman recorded the second fastest lap in the 1974 Indy, won by Johnny Rutherford. He returned to the Indy in 1976, finishing 17th. Jones would later tell Car and Driver Magazine that Jan Opperman was one of the greatest drivers he’d ever seen.

Opperman died in 1997, 16 years after suffering critical injuries from a crash during a race in Jennerstown, Pennsylvania. He was 58. He is an inaugural member of the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame (elected in 1990), as well as an inductee in the International Motor Sports Hall of Fame.

Living in Castro Valley, Opperman began racing motorcycles while just a junior at Hayward High in the mid-1950s, before Castro Valley High was built.

Opperman was just hitting his stride in the elite United States Auto Club’s sprint, midget and dirt car divisions when he suffered critical head injuries while battling for the lead in the Hoosier Hundred at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in September 1976.

The injuries kept him out of racing for more than a year. He returned to the outlaw circuit in 1978, but never again attained the success he had before that crash.

Ultimately, it was another crash that ended Opperman’s racing career, this one on the half-mile sprint car track in Jennerstown in 1981. His injuries left him mentally and physically impaired for the rest of his days.

Opperman, part of the 1960s drug culture, turned to religion after his younger brother, Jay – also a racecar driver – was killed during a race in Knoxville, Tenn., in 1970. Jan’s Bible-quoting ways earned him the nickname “The Preacher” around the racetrack.