

Sox & Martin

Ronnie Sox, Buddy Martin and Jake King: three men who started their racing careers with strictly individual endeavors and then drifted together to finally form one of the most successful teams in drag racing

by Bud Lang

Drag fans! Remember the batch of Friendly Chevrolets that used to be campaigned by Ronnie Sox and Buddy Martin down in Burlington, North Carolina? Then there was that hard-chargin' '64 Brinsfield Comet, the one with which they captured the '64 NHRA Factory Stock Eliminator title. Those were the good old days. But what a lot of guys don't realize is that there were a few years before those days that this pair of amicable guys were doing a lot of hard racing on their own, before making their name on the national scene. No one turns hero overnight. Just ask the "heroes." Sure, they are now into their fourth year of racing for Plymouth Division of Chrysler Corporation, and have become a smashing success both on the drag strip and with the Plymouth Super Car Clinics, but how did they make it to the "big time"? That's the question they are most frequently asked. Just how does a guy get factory backing?

Well, after talking to a lot of guys, scanning back issues of drag papers and an assortment of magazines, things began to unfold something like this. Ronnie got his start at a small airfield near Burlington when the local police department sanctioned some drag racing. This was around 1954. Ronnie, only 13 then, made a few runs in his dad's car. Those Southern farm boys start driving early. But it wasn't until 1957, when he was 16, that he started racing in earnest. Working on his '57 Ford at his dad's Sinclair service station, he made all the local strips on the weekends. Though many of them were just graded dirt surfaces, his twin four-barreled 312-incher ran pretty good. In '58 he tried his hand with a 348-inch Chevy with tri-power, took trophies 32 weeks in a row, and ended the "season" as local champion. A '59 Chevy was campaigned the following year, again under the Sox Sinclair Service banner.

Then Ronnie entered into a partnership with a hometown buddy, Jack Strader, and they ran a '60 Pontiac. As one can see, this lad was after a mount that would do the trick for him. They ran the Poncho for a year and a half, whipping everybody in the area. The local fans and racers nicknamed the Pontiac the "Untouchable" because it was beaten but once during all this time. That was on a final run against another farmer, Arnie Beswick, in another Pontiac, for the bucks down in Daytona. This car was so hot and such a drawing card that it was one of the first stockers in Sox's area to get tow money.

During the middle of '61, when Chevy came out with the 409 engine, Ronnie started off on his own again. Still working out of his dad's station, he finally overcame minor troubles with his new engine and began to win again. There wasn't any factory backing for him in

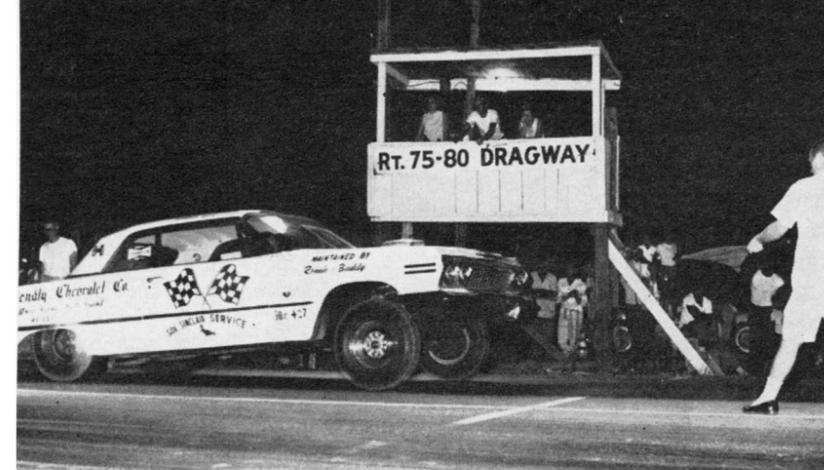
those days. He bought his own cars, went through them by himself, and was his own pit boss. Once he got the 409 squared away, "... I beat Beswick and some of those guys with it." It was also about this time that he started to earn some bucks from drag racing. "A lot of the strips were paying five, three, and two (hundred, that is) — pretty good for those days; still pretty good money. You could race Friday and Saturday nights and on Sunday, and if you had a good weekend, you could pick up fourteen to fifteen hundred dollars."

Jake King, another local boy, had gotten off to a start about this time with a '61 Ford, racing against Ronnie and everyone else in the area. In '62 Jake brought out another Ford, while Ronnie began to campaign no less than three 409 Chevys. This is where Buddy Martin entered the drag scene, too, as he began to compete against Buddy and Jake with his own '62 Chevy. The following year saw Jake in another new Ford, with Ronnie picking up a pair of Z-11 Chevys (first cousins to the Z/28 Camaros?).

Looking back on things now, Ronnie says, "That '62 Chevy, for what it had, was one of the best little cars I had." Evidently, he meant the model he owned, as there were three of them. With these cars he beat the likes of "... Nicholson, Strickler, Royal Pontiac, and all those guys. They had them all down here. They tore the car down, it was proven legal. Jenkins and Nicholson tore it down and if they can't find a Chevrolet illegal, I guess it's pretty legal. I was going 12.40's back in those days with 6-inch tires, 116 mph."

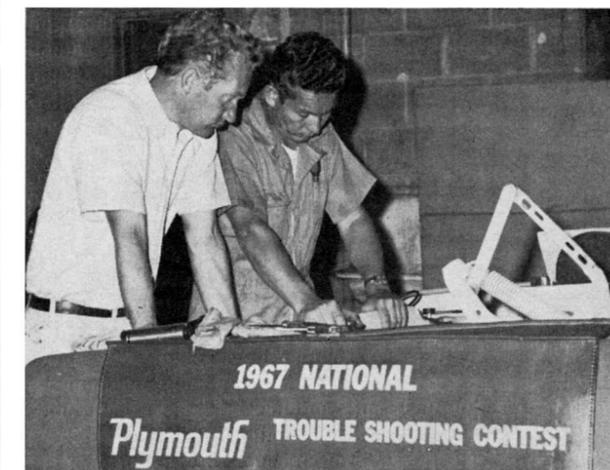
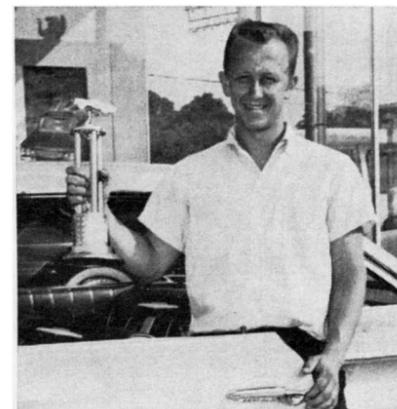
Buddy was racing another Chevy for '62, also; then toward mid-year, he and Ronnie got together. And so it was that the Sox & Martin Racing Team was formed, and Pop Sox would have his service station to himself as the boys rented a garage to keep their race cars in. Buddy furnished the Chevy; Ronnie did all the work on it and handled the wheel. They continued their winning ways, then made the biggest decision of their lives up to that point; they decided to invade North country, where the likes of Hayden Proffitt, Malcolm Durham, Arnie Beswick, Dave Strickler, and Bill Jenkins were big names. Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia were their targets.

Sox and Martin had begun using rosin on some Southern tracks, and then they used it up North, pulling the front wheels of their stock-bodied, unaltered wheelbase Chevys; the fans went wild. But their 427 Chevys weren't designed to just pull wheelies; they were built to win, and win they did. Running 90-some match races during 1963, they lost only one race. Running under the Friendly Chevrolet banner now, they were beginning to expand
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"The Boss" storms away from the tree, above, in one of team's Plymouth GTX's. Quite a contrast to the Sox & Martin Chevy at the top of the page, seen during one of their invasions into Maryland. This Chevy, and their winning ways, was a key

to their success as a team. That's Ronnie at left, 8 years ago, holding one of the trophies he took with the 1960 Pontiac he campaigned. All smiles, he was a real tiger in those days. Though he's a "name" racer today, he works as hard as ever. Directly below are Buddy Martin and Jake King, contemplating a tuning problem of some nature. Each fellow is possessed with plenty of talent in his own right, and most likely could make it on his own. But they enjoy working as a team, making them a triple threat. It is hoped other factories will field stockers during 1969.





their territory. Touring drag strips in other states was now "part of the game."

It was about this time that Buddy heard a rumor that Mercury was planning to field a few factory teams during '64, so being the promoter of the team, he packed up their clippings and headed for Dearborn. Like all successful press agents, Martin returned with a contract for the '64 season. They received first a coupe, and then a wagon, adorned with the Brinsfield Lincoln-Mercury banner. Sox and Martin had a most successful drag racing season with their 427 Comet, and with it captured the '64 NHRA Factory Stock Eliminator title at the Winternationals. All the while, Jake King was campaigning a '64 Ford on his own, winning his share of races. As the '64 season came to a close, Sox and Martin made another major decision, prompted in part by indecision on the part of Mercury Division personnel, and they signed a contract with Plymouth. It was at this point that Jake signed on with his friends. Jake would handle the engine and chassis work, Ronnie would give up most of the mechanical work and concentrate on driving, and Buddy would continue handling the business end of the operation. Each guy was a specialist.

In addition to the altered-wheelbase, injected hemi built to race for the factory, they also built up another altered machine on their own, allowing them to compete in two weight divisions at the same meet. With their factory car, they were the first team to break into the "nines" on gasoline with a stock-bodied machine. It was also running 148 mph toward the end of the year, no simple feat in itself. Such racers as Phil Bonner, Don Nicholson, Bill Lawton, Ed Schartman, and Dickie Harrell all felt the bite of the Sox and Martin "paper tigers" in those days. They ended the '65 season rated by one poll as the number two team in the nation, right behind Nicholson. Of 12 meetings with Nicholson during the same year,

they came out on top seven times. But who believes in polls anyway?

In an effort to keep up with the competition machinerywise, they fielded a fiberglass-bodied Barracuda funny car, injected hemi-type, in '66. A fuel-burner, this newest funny kept them busy all year, making the rounds of the strips, winning a few, losing a few. It was about this time, however, that the Plymouth executives began to have their doubts as to how helpful the fuel funnies were in creating sales in the new-car marketplace. After all, they weren't involved in drag racing just for kicks; they wanted to sell machinery. The seed of doubt planted in their minds was this: Were the young guys, the guys eager to buy new cars, relating to those funny cars in such a way that they were prompted to go out and buy one (a stocker)? They thought not, so...

Come 1967 and Sox and Martin make the drag scene with a pair of new Plymouth GTX's, one equipped with the 440 cubic inch wedge, the other a 426-inch hemi. Among other wins was the big one at the '67 NHRA Springnationals at Bristol, '67 NASCAR Heads-Up and Handicap Eliminator, and a runner-up berth at the Super Stock Magazine meet. When not racing, they filled the void, as they had the previous year, answering questions at dozens of Plymouth Super Car Clinics.

And how does it feel to drive a Super Stocker again after a couple of years behind the wheel of a funny car? Ronnie thinks it's just great, and so does the factory. Now those customers buying GTX's, Road Runners, and Barracudas can actually race against these guys with the odds being equal. After all, their cars did come off the same assembly line. Or did they? That's a question frequently asked at the clinics, and in the pits. "How can we win when you guys get first crack at the parts, or at least get stuff we can't?" Not true, states Ronnie. "The fact is, we frequently experiment and evaluate parts for the factory through actual drag testing. If something merits release to the public, we tell them. If not, same story. So if we get something from the factory first, it's for evaluation purposes only, not to give us an edge on the other Plymouth owners. In fact, this is why we hold clinics around the country, to give car owners who can't make it to the big meets a chance to discuss their own problems and perhaps learn something firsthand from our experiences."

The most recent drag season, 1968, was probably the biggest yet for the team of Sox and Martin relative to major victories. They were runner-up at the NHRA Winternationals (with Jim McFarland of *Hot Rod* at the wheel), took the Super Stock crown at the NHRA Springnationals with their '67 street hemi-powered GTX, won Super

Stock/D class at the NHRA Nationals, and took the Super Stock title at both AHRA Spring and Winter meets. The NASCAR winter meet saw them take the runner-up title, and they topped the field at the Olympics of Drag Racing held at Union Grove, Wisconsin, Super Stock Magazine's SS meet, Drag World's championship at Wichita, Kansas, and finally the AHRA championship at Bristol. Not too bad for a group of farm boys. And for all you guys wondering how you can get factory backing, it's like this. You have to win, win, win, and win some more. Then do an encore. Just having the machinery isn't everything. You have to have the know-how to put it together right, make it stay together, and finish first. Things like setting low e.t. at every race entered this past year, and running undefeated in "heads-up" match racing against all comers are other factors that have encouraged Plymouth people to hang onto these young men.

Plans for '69 include a pair of 440-equipped Road Runners and two hemi-'Cudas. A lot more Super Car Clinics are being scheduled, too, so Sox and Martin will be extra busy this year. They have just finished construction of a new plant in Burlington that will house their race cars and serve as an outlet for MoPar parts for racers on the East Coast. This facility will feature equipment of every nature required to construct complete race cars and engines for themselves and customers. A mighty big jump from the days of working at Sox Sinclair Service, but it also took about 10 years of hard work to get there. Of course all this progress means more time spent on the road, perhaps the worst part of being a professional drag racer.

Ronnie and his wife, Pat, have a couple of children, while Buddy and Carolyn have one. When queried about their wives' feeling on their being gone so much, Ronnie answered for both of them, laughingly, something like this, "Well, that was pretty much in the deal when we got married, to tell the truth. She goes along with it pretty good. I don't mind being away for a while, but we try to get home as often as possible, even if we have to fly home for a weekend. Sometimes during the summer racing season, when we get home, it appears that the kids have grown a couple of inches."

And that's how it is in the racing game. You spend a lot of time and a lot of bucks proving you're a winner; then you keep spending it to stay up there. But the main reason they keep at it is that they "... enjoy drag racing. It's not as much fun as it used to be because it's a job now, but we still enjoy doing it." Now, you can't ask for more than that from anyone, not even Sox and Martin. ■ ■