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national sprint car hall of fame



Gus Linder

by David Arndt

August J. "Gus" Linder came into this world in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on December 18, 1928, the son of August and De Sales Linder. Gus had eight siblings: Frances, James, John, Richard, Jane, Virginia, Alice and Donald.

Gus served in the U.S. Army. Returning home in 1949, Gus discovered his brother Richard, or Dick, was racing jalopies at local tracks. It wasn't until Gus found work at a local car dealership, Haller's Ford in Mount Lebanon, that he was bitten by the racing bug.

Nearby Heidelberg Raceway featured Central States Racing Association (CSRA) midget cars. Gus Linder took the Haller's Ford truck over to push off the midgets. Not long after that, in August of 1950, Gus found himself joining his brother Dick as a behind-the-wheel competitor at local speedways.

The 1950's found Gus racing stock cars, and winning, in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio against drivers such as Dick Linder, Dick Bailey, Mike Klapak, Roscoe "Pappy" Hough, Mike Little, Herb Scott, Jim Irvine, William "Blackie" Watt, Joe Mihalic, Norm Benning and Steve Ungar. Gus won the prestigious 148-lap Tri-State Championship race at Heidelberg on September 27, 1959, for stock car owner Joe Vilsack, over Herb Scott and Don Dahle, respectively.

He also raced in national championship events at Langhorne and Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania; Trenton, N.J.; and Daytona Beach, Florida. The races were open-competition, or they were sanctioned by National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), United States Auto Club (USAC), Midwest Association for Race Cars (MARC) or the Pittsburgh Racing Association (PRA).

In 1960, Gus first got into a super-modified in a special event for the new division at the Heidelberg Speedway. He passed sixteen cars in four laps, but his engine failed. Early in the following season ('61), however, Gus Linder jumped into the super-modifieds and sprint cars with both feet (in a former Sam Traylor/Ed Lowther machine), though he still raced modified stock cars on occasion at Daytona Beach; Langhorne, Indiana and Latrobe, Pennsylvania; and Rochester, N.Y.

Gus Linder soon teamed up with car owner Mickey Banas, with whom fellow new super-modified racer Herb Scott had started the season. Both Gus and Herb, and fellow convert Joe Mihalic, struggled a little in May and June to keep up with the likes of Jim Seese, Lou Blaney, Larry Dickson, Dean Mast, Bobbie Adamson and former Gus Linder mechanic Dave Lundy.

It didn't take long for the open-wheel feature wins to start coming, though, as he won his first on July 20, 1961. He also started traveling more to the bigger-paying super-modified races.

By 1963, Linder was driving a Ford-powered Floyd Trevis-built machine for Banas. At season's end, Linder had captured the Greater Pittsburgh Speedway championship over Lou Blaney and Dave Lundy, as well as the Blanket Hill Speedway championship.

With a Ford Cobra under the hood of his 1964 sprinter, Gus became nearly unbeatable, earning 22 feature victories. He would set the Tri-City Speedway record in for consecutive feature wins in a single season with seven, a feat that remained on the record book for nearly 30 years in Franklin, Pennsylvania. Along with the record came Tri-City's season championship. Through October of 1965, Linder had steered the 289-cubic-inch Ford-powered Banas Special to more than 50 feature victories at various western Pennsylvania, southeastern Ohio and West Virginia dirt bullrings. On October 3, 1965, Gus held off Larry Dickson to win the United Racing Club (URC) sanctioned Bobby Marshman Memorial at Williams Grove Speedway.

Looking to move beyond local success, in February of 1966, Banas removed the roll cage from his sprint car and he and Linder towed to Tampa, Florida, for their debut at the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) Winter Nationals. In the second race of the series, Gus Linder and reigning IMCA champion Jerry Richert, Sr., staged a long, wheel-to-wheel battle. Richert eked out the victory, but it was the charging Linder who became the darling of 7,972 screaming fans at

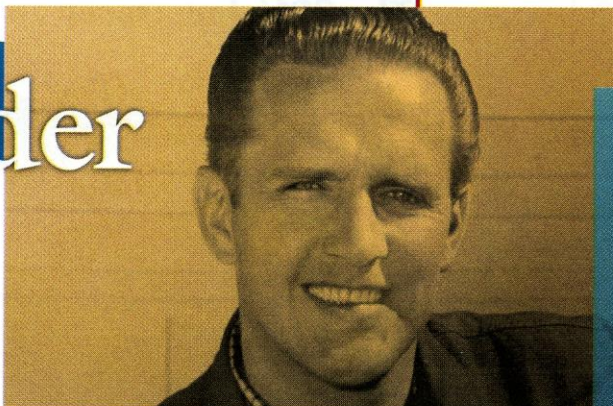


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Plant Field. Richert would win four of the five races and the championship. Even though Gus missed the first race, he finished well enough to garner fifth place in the overall point standings.

Throughout that summer of '66, Linder picked up 20 wins locally, but he failed to make the field at either the Reading, Pennsylvania, or Cumberland, Maryland, United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car races. Though disappointed, he and Banas noticed a late summer change: the central Pennsylvania tracks now featured super-modifieds (later renamed "super sprints"). In August of 1966, Gus wheeled one of the first real sprint cars to challenge the tough competitors of Williams Grove, Selinsgrove, Port Royal, Lincoln and Susquehanna speedways. On September 11, he became the first invader to enter victory lane on the tough circuit, rolling to a convincing 35-lap victory over fellow western Pennsylvania star Bobbie Adamson.

On October 8, 1966, Gus Linder won the 150-lap super-modified championship at Heidelberg Raceway, besting 121 others, of which forty started the feature and twenty-two finished, from thirteen states.

In 1967, Linder and Banas decided to hit the Pennsylvania Turnpike and make the central region of the state their weekend destination.

Although Linder was not the only invader, he was determined to make the biggest splash. After an uneven start culminated in a blown engine at Susquehanna, the team made the all-day drive to Pittsburgh and back for a new engine. That evening, with the motor change completed during the heat races at Selinsgrove, Gus breezed to the consolation race victory. From his 16th place starting slot in the feature, Linder ripped through the field. He sat second by lap four, and three laps later he was out front to stay.

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Over the next eight weeks, Linder was "Mr. Excitement" on the circuit. He won six more features, including four at Williams Grove, and, when not besieged by mechanical problems, he finished in the top four consistently. Gus capped that with an impressive showing at the Reading USAC show. Despite two spins, he charged through the field to a seventh place finish. However, a week later, his throttle stuck at Selinsgrove, sending him over the fence. Four weeks passed until he drove to another victory, this time at Port Royal. His season ended with a solid performance at the Allentown IMCA races and a sixth place at the fall USAC Reading show. Nine victories on the tough circuit in 1967 was a good start.

Linder started '68 with a hot hand at the IMCA Winter Nationals. Four top-five finishes placed him fourth in the final standings. It was a harbinger of things to come. Gus would put together a season of 14 victories and 45 top-five finishes, all the while slinging clay most nights with extraordinary chauffeurs like Ray Tilley and Bobbie Adamson amongst others. On Saturday nights, it was a battle for the Lincoln Speedway championship. Gus took Kenny Weld to the final night of racing, only to have it end in smoke with a blown engine in Linder's black number 69 machine.

The 1969 season began with headlines -- of the wrong type. To avoid a wreck at Hagerstown, he took a hard left into the infield, only to hit a ridge. It suddenly sent his sprint car tumbling and then rising nose-first high into the air. Gus was uninjured, but several days later, he discovered a photo series of his four-wheel pirouette now graced newspapers from coast-to-coast, including *The Stars and Stripes*.

By June, Gus had recovered and was in the midst of a four-race win streak when he celebrated the summer solstice at Lincoln Speedway by flipping on the second lap in

spectacular fashion. Banas checked on his driver and his car, and at Linder's prodding, he proceeded to tear off what remained of the front and top wings. Catching the back of the field in time for the restart, Gus started a desperate run to the front. By lap fifteen, the topless number 69 had moved into fourth place. On the final lap, he made a bid for third position, but instead he tagged the back-straight fence. Linder limped home to a sixteenth place finish, but the crowd loved it. Later it was revealed that Gus had driven 38 laps with a broken collarbone, keeping him out of the cockpit for another three weeks.

At the season-ending Williams Grove National Open in 1969, Gus had another memorable ride. Given the opportunity to substitute for the injured Ray Tilley in Roy "Bud" Grimm's potent Ford-powered number 88 machine, Linder moved in behind the leader on lap 49, but he was unable to overtake him. At the lap 75 mandatory pit stop, Gus sat just three car lengths back. While looking for a good restart, Gus spun out instead and was sent to the rear of the field. Once again, Linder put on a charge, and by lap 115 he was back behind the leader. While battling for second place, Gus got involved in an accident that once more sent him to the tail of the pack. Although he finished a disappointing tenth place, Linder had confirmed the descriptors "hard-charging" and "always exciting," which frequently preceded his name in the local central Pennsylvania newspapers.

1970 was another impressive season: eleven wins and 32 top-five finishes, highlighted by URC victories at Lincoln and Flemington, New Jersey. However, by 1972, car owner Mickey Banas began to experience health problems and the traveling ended. A return to his western Pennsylvania stomping grounds rejuvenated Linder and he stormed to twelve feature victories, including seven in a row at the Jennerstown Speedway, which clinched the track championship. Unfortunately, the joy would be short-lived. By June of 1973, Banas had succumbed to cancer. Gus purchased the car from his widow and he became both owner and driver.

For the remainder of his career, Gus raced almost exclusively in western Pennsylvania. There would be more exciting drives from the back row, but the victories became fewer. He remained competitive in his black number 69 Kimes Chevrolet-sponsored machine until his final race in July of 1985.

Some of the tracks where Gus Linder competed include, but are not limited to, Ace High, Arden Downs, Blanket Hill, Butler, Canfield, Claridge, Clearfield, Clinton, Daytona, Greater Pittsburgh, Green Valley, Heidelberg, Jennerstown, Langhorne, Lernerville, Lincoln, Mercer, Mon-Duke, Morgantown, Motordrome, Port Royal, Selinsgrove, Sharon, South Park, Tri-City, Uniontown, and Williams Grove.

Never a full-time racer, 'The Man in Black' owned and operated his Gus Linder Tire Sales in Whitehall for 30 years. Even in retirement, he was still behind the wheel, as he kept active as a delivery truck driver for a tire distributor. He was also a crossing guard for the Bethel Park School District and began a new generation of competitive Linders by helping his grandson's go-kart racing efforts.

To honor his many racing accomplishments, including 119 sprint car feature victories from 1961 through '79, Gus was inducted into the Western Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame. Other Hall of Fame honors include those of Tri-City Speedway, Pittsburgh Circle Track Club, Twin-State Auto Racing Club, and York County Racing Club.

August J. "Gus" Linder died of natural causes on April 29, 2015. He is survived by his wife of 62 years, Joan Gelzhiser Linder, of Bethel Park; daughter Patty Linder Boyer, sons John Linder and Richard Linder; grandchildren John (Amanda) Linder, Clint Linder and Heather (Justin) Barrera; great-grandchildren Sara, Brock, Dylan and Isaac; and sisters Virginia Martin and Alice Land of California. He was predeceased by six brothers and sisters.

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