



Photo: John Mahoney



Brian Tyler driving for Vance in 2002.

BORN ON OCTOBER 5, 1937, to John and Harriet Lowrey Vance, John C. Vance II followed in the footsteps of a man who was successful in every life activity – including racing. As a car owner, the elder Vance provided rides for Hall of Fame talents such as Bob Carey, Wilbur Shaw, Mauri Rose, and Travis “Spider” Webb. He was active with the Central States Racing Association and the American Automobile Association often in leadership roles. His deep involvement in the sport resulted in enshrinement in the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1992.

Settled comfortably in Dayton, Ohio, John purchased the Standard Venetian Blind Company and promptly renamed the firm Aristocrat Products. He drew a firm line between his vocation and avocation – and it was a lesson he made sure to pass on to his eager son. Johnny was equally bitten by the racing bug, and as one could imagine, he too would daydream of feeling the wind in his face and standing before an appreciative crowd in victory lane. It was not to be. In the halcyon days of Spider Webb, Johnny would sometimes get the rare privilege of warming up his dad’s race car. As exciting as this was, as the younger Vance noted, the opportunity was extended with a stern caveat, “Every time I would be out there and squirt it a little bit, my dad would say ‘you might as well take it easy, because you’re not going to be a race driver.’”

Johnny was resigned to his fate but staying totally out of racing was never an option. However, when family friend Russ Clendenen, a noted AAA and later USAC staffer, suggested to Vance Sr. that his son might make a good official, the lad thought everyone had lost their mind. A little coaxing was all it took and, by the early 1960s, he was a USAC

technical chairman and later a steward at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Like everything he did in life, from running a business or race team, playing tennis, or caring for his beloved dogs, he took his role seriously. He admits that he dreamed of one day becoming the Chief Steward at IMS but a series of events led to a dramatic change in direction.

Vance already had plenty on his plate. By 1963, he was at the helm of Aristocrat Products and was settled in his role as an official. Then something dramatic happened. In 1980, hot shoe Rich Vogler had captured the USAC sprint car championship for owner Don Siebert. Sadly, just before the 1981 season was launched, Siebert suffered a fatal heart attack, leaving the defending king without a ride. Clendenen suggested to Vance that he take over the squad. Perhaps there was a desire to continue his father’s racing legacy. Whatever the motivation soon thereafter, Vance was the owner of a sprint car and Silver Crown operation. Vogler scored Vance’s first Silver Crown win at Knoxville in June, and as a sprint car owner at Eldora in July.

From the 1981 season on, Johnny Vance was a steady presence on the USAC scene for over three decades. The drivers who sat in a Vance prepared car, are truly a who’s who of the eras short track stars, and includes Jim Mahoney, Gene Lee Gibson, Joe Saldana, Tracy Hines, Steve Butler, Dave Steele, Steve Kinser, Jack Hewitt, Kenny Irwin Jr., Cole Whitt, Tony Elliott, Jimmy McCune, Brian

Tyler, Jac Haudenschild, Tyler Walker, Ryan Newman, and Damion Gardner. Sprint car titles came in 1990 with Steve Butler, and in 1998 Vance and Jeff Walker teamed up to help Tony Elliott win his first of two USAC titles. All told, Vance-owned cars won 44 USAC sprint car races and eight in the Silver Crown series. He is already a member of the USAC Hall of Fame.

One of Vance’s enduring contributions occurred while he served as a USAC official. He felt USAC needed to have a premier event at Eldora Speedway. Working with Earl Baltes, the 4-Crown Nationals was born. In a great irony, in the inaugural event Vance was on the precipice of a Silver Crown entrant’s championship but lacked a driver. He turned to a young and promising second generation hand from the outlaw ranks named Steve Kinser. Steve won the sprint car portion of the event and then topped the field in big ground pounders securing the title for his owner. Today, those who compete at the 4-Crown Nationals are fighting to add their name to the Johnny Vance Trophy.

Johnny Vance took pride in his racing operations and his business. It showed. He was guided by a quest for excellence, and in that quest, he succeeded far more than he failed. He was the epitome of class. At his passing on June 22, 2017, Vance left his wife of 30 years and four children. ■

JOHNNY VANCE - OWNER

By Patrick Sullivan