



## KEN HAMILTON - DRIVER

Photos & Text By David Sink

**KEN HAMILTON** was born on May 23, 1941, in Concord, California, as the oldest of two children to parents Lenard and Maxine Hamilton. Hamilton is the father of longtime IndyCar Series competitor Davey Hamilton and daughter Debbie Hamilton Allen. He is also the grandfather of King of the Wing and Southern Sprint Car Shootout Series champion Davey Hamilton Jr.

Hamilton became interested in auto racing at the suggestion of a farm hand who worked for his father. "When I was five years old, while living in California, there was a racetrack called Pacheco Speedway about three miles from where we lived," explained Hamilton. "My dad's hired hand took me to the races over there. Back then they were just running midgets. The first time I saw them, I told myself if I ever had the opportunity, I sure would like to race cars when I got older. Of course, my dad hated cars. If they didn't have four legs like a horse or cow, he didn't want anything to do with it. My father raised quarter horses and cattle".

The family eventually moved to Palmer, Idaho, and Ken started attending races regularly at the nearby Meridian Speedway.

"I traded a 650 Triumph motorcycle for my first race car. A guy from Nampa,

Idaho, had bought the car and took it out one time. He spun it out and it had scared him. I heard he had parked it. I went over and talked to him and said I'd be interested in trading him my motorcycle for it. He was glad to take the trade."

Hamilton made his racing debut at Meridian Speedway in 1964 at the age of 23 in the B-Class. The B-Class was an entry level open wheel class utilizing inline 6-cylinder engines in modifieds. Hamilton took to the cars instantly and garnered Rookie of the Year honors that first season.

By late 1966, Hamilton caught the attention of Ontario, Oregon's Art Sugia. Hamilton had already driven for a couple of other guys and had traveled around the Pacific Northwest competing in select CAMRA events. Sugia offered Hamilton a ride in his car for the 1967 racing season. The duo began winning races immediately including the Meridian Speedway A-Class title in 1967.

Sugia purchased a brand-new Grant King sprint car prior to the 1968 racing season. The car was painted pink, as was customary for all Sugia's cars, and affectionately dubbed "The Pink Lady". The longer 90-inch wheelbase car was fast right out of the box. The car was 4-inches longer than any sprint car

Hamilton had competed in prior to the new Grant King car. Hamilton won the first night out with the new car and won a whopping 17 non-wing sprint car feature events in 1968.

The car became a regular participant of Pacific Northwest sprint car activity for over 50 years with Hamilton behind the wheel much of its career. Hamilton purchased the car from Sugia in 1978.

Hamilton never chased any series for points due to his job commitments as a newspaper press operator despite running several CAMRA and NSRA events over the years. But he did secure a championship points accumulation between Meridian Speedway and the Ontario Fairgrounds Speedway. He also claimed a sprint car track championship at the Firebird Super Oval in Emmett, Idaho, before the track was shuttered after the 1983 season.

Despite limited traveling during Hamilton's career, he won many of the most prestigious pavement sprint car races in the Northwest. He captured the 1971 Copper Cup Classic at the Salt Lake City Fairgrounds and again a few years later at Bonneville Raceway.

Hamilton made his Copper World Classic debut in 1978. At the time, the Copper World Classic was the richest and

most prestigious pavement sprint car race on the entire west coast. The "Pink Lady" felt right at home on the one-mile Phoenix oval. In 10 Copper World Classic starts, Hamilton finished outside of the top 10 only three times. He was victorious in 1980 and 1984. Hamilton finished second in 1987.

In 1976, he was invited to compete in non-winged sprint car events in South Africa along with three other Americans. He won at every track he competed and was awarded real silver trophies after each of his wins.

Closer to home, he dominated the competition at Meridian Speedway. He was the winged sprint car champion at the track in 1984, 1989, 1995, 2001-06, and 2008. A chance to try his hand at promotion saw Hamilton promote Meridian Speedway from 1989-2008. During his years as the speedway promoter, he debuted an entry level, cost effective, non-winged sprint car class using 602 crate engines that still exists today.

From 1981-82, Hamilton attempted Indy Car racing on his own dime. After two failed attempts to crack the Indy 500 starting lineup due to an abundance of



entrants, Hamilton bowed out of Indy Car competition due to the cost to compete. He also competed in a significant amount of super-modified events during his career. He was crowned the 1986 United States Auto Club (USAC) Supermodified champion.

Hamilton lists his Copper World Classic wins and the development of his son Davey's career as his proudest accomplishments. Hamilton was previously inducted into the Western Idaho Racing Association Hall of Fame in 1987. ■

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