

Johnny Hannon

by Donald Davidson

He wasn't around for very long, but diminutive, hard-charging Johnny Hannon of Norristown, Pennsylvania, certainly made a lasting impression. He won 17 features in just two seasons on the American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern dirt track circuit (1933 and '34) and he came within a handful of points of winning the championship in both years. He won an 18th race at the start of the 1935 season and was leading in points when he lost his life in an accident at Indianapolis.

Exclusively at the wheel of mounts fielded by the famed Gus Strupp, it seemed it was either win the main event, blow the car up, or crash it while trying. In both of those seasons, his firsts outranked his seconds, and his seconds outranked his thirds. In 1933, he won eight times, was runner-up five times, and was third in four events. In 1934, he had nine firsts, five seconds and three thirds for a combined two-season total of 17 wins, 10 seconds and seven thirds. During that entire period, his finishes of either fourth or fifth amounted to exactly one of each.

Only 26 when he died, he led an interesting life. He was born in the United States to German parents, but they had decided to return to the old country when he was only two. They remained in Germany throughout World War I, and it is unclear as to whether or not Johnny could even speak English when they returned to America sometime around 1919. The family was musically inclined and his brother grew up to be a professional violinist in several orchestras. Johnny played clarinet, but seemed more drawn toward things mechanical. He became an auto mechanic and body man, worked at several automobile-manufacturing plants and even boxed professionally for a short time, reportedly winning 13 out of 14 bouts.

While living in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, he started driving in dirt track events at the New Market Speedway in Dunellen, New Jersey, in 1931. Late in '32, Hannon switched to AAA just in time for the busy state and county fair events. He burst on the scene with a fifth and two fourth-place finishes on three consecutive days at different tracks. After only two weeks, had registered a second (at Woodbridge, New Jersey), a third, three fourths, a fifth and a sixth.

His first AAA win came at Woodbridge on May 14, 1933, and he quickly followed with three more there, plus two at Langhorne and one each at Altamont, New York, and Rhinebeck, New York. For reasons unknown, Strupp and he elected not to travel south for

several late-season events and Bob Sall took over the point lead. They did show up for the finale at Richmond, Virginia, and while Johnny did place third after Sall blew up, he came up short for the title, 1074-1036 points, respectfully. Third-placed Billy Winn was far behind with only 672 points.

Hannon and Strupp made a blazing start to 1934 by winning the first three races in succession. The opener, a 100-miler at Langhorne, gave them an immediate point lead they never lost. Other wins came at Middletown, New York; Stafford Springs, Connecticut; Spartanburg, South Carolina; and Trenton, plus two each at Pottstown, Pennsylvania and Reading, Pennsylvania.

They posted a win at Langhorne on May 12, 1935, and then headed for the Midwest where they appeared at the Milwaukee one-mile dirt track on May 19.

Johnny crashed during a heat and ended up on the infield, the car hanging over a drainage ditch. Uninjured, he headed for Indianapolis, where he had been nominated to drive a Studebaker-powered car for Ray Brady. It had already been withdrawn by the time he got there, but Hannon's reputation was such that he was quickly hired to join Tony Gulotta on Leon Duray's Bowes Seal Fast team.

The makeup of the sport was very different in those days and, in spite of Hannon's great success, the mile tracks at Langhorne and Milwaukee were the largest on which he had competed and he had never before raced on a surface other than dirt. There was a newcomers' test, of sorts, in place for drivers whose skill had not been generally established. Hannon was not required to take it. On Tuesday, May 21, 1935, Duray and Gulotta went to great lengths to coach him on the intricacies of the brick surface, with Gulotta driving several laps with Hannon in the riding mechanic's seat.

The car was then turned over to Hannon, with Duray and Gulotta still cautioning him to build to speed gradually. He famously never completed a lap. He powered down the backstretch, barreled into turn three and got sideways. He tried to save it but crashed into the outside wall, tail first, and took out a triangular-shaped chunk of concrete as he sailed completely over the top. Oscar "Shorty" Reeves, his riding mechanic, was substantially injured but survived to tell the story.

Hannon, married and the father of a three-year-old daughter, did not. His brief career had been quite remarkable and he did leave a lasting legacy in the sport. The following year, the test at Indianapolis became mandatory for ALL drivers, world champions included.



I.M.S. Photo

