

National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

BOBBY UNSER

Robert William Unser was born February 20, 1934, the third son of Jerry and Mary Unser. Bobby's older brothers were Jerry (Jr.) and Louie, with Al being his younger sibling. The famous racing Unser family began their association with cars around the turn of the century. Then, Louis Unser, Bobby's grandfather, began to make his living as a mechanic in Colorado Springs (Colo.). Louis' three sons, Louis Jr., Jerry and Joe, made a name for themselves by riding two motorcycles and a sidecar to the top of Pike's Peak in the 1920's. Jerry moved his family from Colorado Springs to Albuquerque (N.M.) in 1936 and opened a garage and filling station on Route 66.

All four Unser boys quickly graduated from riding wild burros to Model A Fords, in fact, Bobby was driving one by age eight. Unfortunately, the boys didn't all graduate from high school because of that old Unser 'racing bug'.

In 1949, Bobby started racing at Roswell (N.M.) Speedway. One year later, he raced at Speedway Park in Albuquerque and won Southwestern Modified Stock Car Championship. In '51, he had his second super-modified, 1931 Pontiac, with which he won the Southwestern title again. He also raced a Jaguar in the 2,000-mile Pan-American (Mexican) Road Race with his Daddy, although they would change seats while moving since Bobby was not old enough to compete legally.

He raced the Mexican Road Race the following year, too, and he was also on the wrestling team in high school. He had his third super-modified and he began racing and winning in midgets and sprints, too.

In 1953 through '55, Bobby served in the United States Air Force in Albuquerque and he continued running the midgets, super-modified and sprints. In 1955, he drove the Foutz Brothers Golden Rocket Special super-modified, and he took its body off and made the "Ugly Duckling" car for his first run up the Pike's Peak mountain in Colorado, which was also known as "Unser's Playground". He finished fifth his inaugural year in their championship car division.

Bobby captured his first win at Pike's Peak on July 4th, 1956, in his father's Jaguar-powered car with a time of 14:27 minutes for the 12.42-mile hill climb. Also, Jerry Unser won the stock car division. According to Bobby, "That race was a storybook affair. That was the turnaround in my career. I became a famous person overnight."

In 1957, Bobby was third to the Peak, which was the same year that Jerry Unser won the United States Auto Club (USAC) stock car division championship. And between Bobby and brother Al that year, they won every race in Albuquerque. Bobby also branched out and started four USAC Stock Car Division events and finished 30th in points.

Bobby won his second Pike's Peak title in '58, this time smashing the 14-minute barrier and winning \$5,250 in the process. He made five USAC stock car starts and he ran the United States Grand Prix for Sports Cars on the road course in Riverside (Calif.). In 1958, Jerry was also the first Unser to make it to the Indy 500.

Bobby owned his first race car in 1959, having bought it from Jack Zink. He piloted the Denny Moore-built, Grandview Motel-sponsored car to his third Pike's Peak title in record-breaking time. He also ran one USAC national midget event. Sadly, Jerry Unser was badly burned on the first day of practice at Indy and died seventeen days later of pneumonia and kidney failure. In 1960, Bobby again ran the Zink car at Pike's Peak and won the champ car division title, with brother Al in second place.

Bobby Unser Cont.

Bobby's career accomplishments through his "official retirement" from behind the wheel in 1982 are incredible. He won the Indianapolis 500 three times, in 1968 for Bob Wilke in Dan Gurney's turbocharged Eagle, in '75 in another one of Gurney's Eagles and in '81 for Roger Penske in the Norton Spirit. He won the Indy car national driving titles in 1968 and 1974, and won the prestigious Martini & Rossi "Driver of the Year" title in '74. He started 229 championship car races and won 35 times, including eight 500-mile races. Said the 1971 inductee into the Hoosier Auto

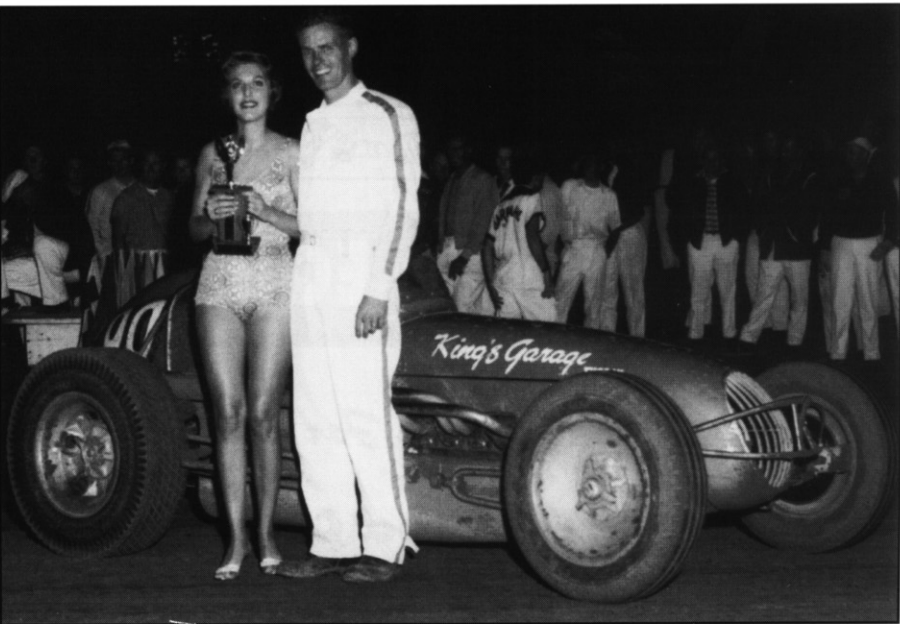
Bobby Unser smashed the 13-minute barrier in '61, claiming his fifth win in six starts at the Peak. He also won the Tucson (Ariz.) California Racing Association (CRA) 25-lapper on September 30th in the Les King Chevrolet sprinter.

Pike's Peak suffered another 1-2 knockout by brothers Bobby and Al Unser in 1962. Bobby also won many races that year aboard the Ron McGowen-owned Eloy (Ariz.) Cotton Chemical Company sprinter, including the prestigious 50-lap International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) "Missouri Futurity" at the state fairgrounds oval in Sedalia. He also made his first career USAC sprint car start in the car, and he won the September 8th CRA-sanctioned event at the legendary Ascot Park in Gardena (Calif.). Commented Bobby, years later, about driving the famous ECCA sprinter, "It was a big step in my career."

1963 brought another victory in the J.C. Agajanian-promoted Pike's Peak Hill Climb in the Sproul Homes Chevy Special. He ran two USAC sprint car events, and eleven USAC midget events which produced wins at Ascot and Albuquerque. Bobby also passed his rookie test at Indianapolis, finished last, yet made a total of four USAC championship car starts.

Bobby continued to diversify his USAC schedule in 1964, placing second in the "Race to the Clouds" to brother Al in the champ car class, yet winning the sports car division for the Arciero Brothers. He also won the night before at Colorado Springs in one of six USAC midget starts and ran two USAC stock car events that year. In USAC sprints, Bobby ran seven times, winning the Ascot Park season finale in Jack Colvin's K.E.Y. Chevrolet. As for the champ cars, he made 12 of the 13 starts, finished 32nd at Indy and finished 14th in points.

In 1965, Bobby was the only driver to make all 18 USAC Championship starts and he finished seventh at Indy. In USAC Sprint Car Division competition, he finished third in the national point standings behind Johnny Rutherford and Greg Weld. Bobby made 20 starts in 26 races and he won three-in-a-row at Ft. Wayne (Ind.), Reading (Penna.) and Salem (Ind.) the K.E.Y. Special out of Anderson (Ind.). He also finished second at Pike's Peak in the Sproul Homes Chevy champ car behind none other than brother Al.



Bobby Unser

(Gene Pace Photo)

(Bobby Unser Bio Continued Below)

Racing Fans (HARF) Hall of Fame, "To win at Indy is a function of not making any mistakes all day long. You need a good game plan and good thinking - you have to be at a peak in your performance."

He continued winning USAC Stock Car Division races, giving him a career total of six, and he raced competitively with the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) at Daytona Beach (Fla.), Charlotte (N.C.) and Riverside. Further proving his talent and versatility, Bobby Unser captured the 1975 International Race of Champions (IROC)

title, set a new land speed record at the Bonneville (Utah) Salt Flats in '93, and won the televised Fastmasters Invite at Indianapolis Raceway Park that same year for drivers age fifty-plus. In 1994, Bobby Unser, who started a successful television broadcasting career with ABC-TV in 1987, was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame.

And he added more Pike's Peak trophies to his collection in 1968 and '69, in 1983 as winning owner/manager for his nephew Al Unser (Jr.), and in 1986 aboard an Audi Quattro. According to the 13-time Pike's Peak titlist and 1997 Pike's Peak Hall of Fame inductee, "The Unser brothers raced at Pike's Peak to beat each other and most of all to beat Uncle Louis. That was what got me into racing - not to win the Indianapolis 500 three times, but to beat Uncle Louis."

Bobby's marriages over the years have continued the Unser name, with Bobby (Jr.) born in 1955 and daughter Cindy in '58. Son Robby was born in 1968, and he also followed his cousin Al (Jr.) and his brother Bobby (Jr.) into sprint cars, where he was named the inaugural National Sprint Car Poll "Rookie of the Year" in 1985 (with Ohio's Todd Kane). Bobby's daughter Jeri was born in 1969. In 1975 his mother Mary passed away. As for the entire Unser family, Bobby understates, "We were born to be racers. It runs in our blood."



Bobby Unser

(Bruce Craig Photo)