

# National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

## TOM BIGELOW

Thomas Alan Bigelow was born October 31, 1939 in Elkhorn (WI), the son of Clarence and Catherine Bigelow. Tom was one of nine children: June, Clarence ("Junior"), Bonnie, Carol Ann, Susan, Tom, Donna, Charles and Ellie. It was a large dairy-farming family and the kids attended Whitewater (WI) High School. Tom's cousin Russ Bigelow at the time was associated with the Mississippi Valley Racing Association.

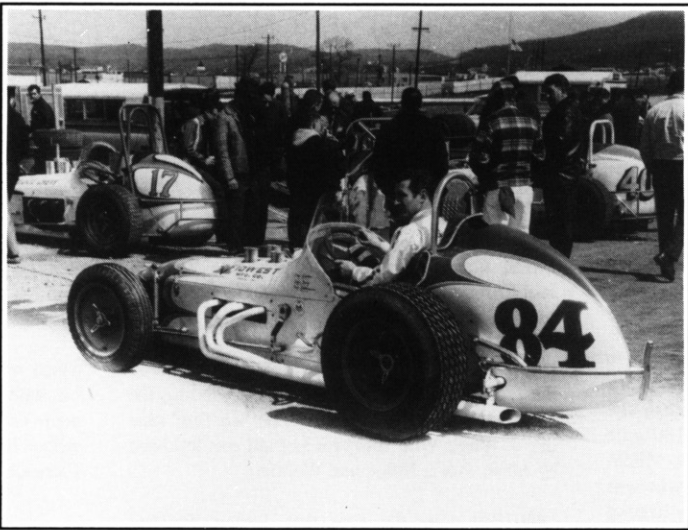
Tom began his racing career driving jalopy stock cars in 1956 at nearby Jefferson Speedway. According to Tom himself, "I hold a record that still stands. I started fourteen races and I flipped sixteen times."

From stocks, Bigelow played with motorcycles and speedboats, but wound up really enjoying midget car racing at Rockford (IL) and Sun Prairie (WI) with the Badger Midget Auto Racing Association (BMARA) in the late 1950s. In 1961, he had his first ride in a sprint car and he won the Ionia (MI) feature in the Kirby Brothers car out of Des Moines (IA). "Big" or ("Biggie") won the Sun Prairie championship in 1964 driving for "Bud" Doty of Davenport (IA) and finished second in BMARA points. That same year he raced International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) midgets, also known as compact sprints, and was fifth in IMCA midget points.

However, he really started creating attention for himself in 1965 by running the Merle Heath sprinter on 25 occasions with IMCA and starting four United States Auto Club (USAC) features. With IMCA that year he finished fourth in points as "co-rookie of the year" (with friend Bill Puterbaugh) behind champion Jerry Richert, Jim Moughan and Gordon Woolley. He also finished third in IMCA midget points that year.

Tom continued to run for Heath in 1966, finishing 16th in IMCA sprint car points and 10th in midget points. He also ran Knoxville (IA) Raceway on a regular basis in Mel Moffitt's Don Edmunds-built car, winning twice and finishing third in track points behind champion Jerry Blundy and runner-up Bill Utz. He continued splitting his time between IMCA and USAC in 1967, although he ran more regularly with the Indianapolis-based club where he placed 27th in points in just nine starts. The following season he moved up to 19th in USAC points with just 17 starts. He also scored three USAC midget wins in 1968. He also ran his first-ever championship dirt car race at DuQuoin (IL) for owner Carl Gehlhausen and mechanic Eddie Baue. According to Tom, "USAC treated me very well. That's when Russ Clendenen was the Sprint and Championship Dirt Supervisor. He was very straight when I first met him. If you want to run USAC, run USAC; if you don't, leave. There was no favoritism."

And in 1969, Tom Bigelow copped his initial USAC sprint car victory at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway in Rossburg (OH) aboard the Gehlhausen-owned Midwest Manufacturing Special. Bigelow went on to claim a ninth place position in points behind champion Gary Bettenhausen, Larry Dickson, Bill Puterbaugh, Sam Sessions, Greg Weld, Cy Fairchild, Todd Gibson and Bruce Walkup. It was also in March of '69 that Bigelow was declared the overall winner of the Houston (TX) Astrodome USAC Midget Grand Prix, besting such drivers as Gary Bettenhausen, Bill Vukovich, Al Unser (Sr.), Mario Andretti, Lloyd Ruby, Lee Kunzman, Bob Wente and A. J. Foyt aboard Marv Edwards' Hollywood Spring & Axle Special. Again, according to Bigelow, "That was one of the big stepping stones in my career. It got some national recognition and got people looking at me."



Tom Bigelow

(Bruce Craig Collection)

Bigelow went winless in 1970 and '71, yet finished 12th in points both years. He did win twice in USAC midget competition in 1970. It was during July of '71 that Bigelow switched spint car rides from the Gehlhausen team to the Ray & Sissy Smith Speed Shop team with crew member Lee Skinner.

He more than made up for it in 1972, though, as he won on three separate occasions: first, at the Indianapolis (IN) Raceway Park driving for the Smith's, then at New Bremen (OH) for Willard Coil, and finally at the famed Winchester (IN) Speedway for Paul Leffler in the Dunseth Drive-In Pharmacy Special. He finished eighth in points behind champion Sammy Sessions, Rollie Beale, Kunzman, Dickson, Larry "Boom Boom" Cannon, Johnny Parsons (Jr.) and Don Nordhorn, "Biggie" also claimed his first USAC Championship Dirt division win that year aboard the Smith Speed Shop Special at the DuQuoin (IL) Fairgrounds. And he won seven times in 25 USAC midget starts that year to finish fourth in points.

1973 brought four more USAC sprint car wins. Again, he utilized a couple of different cars including the Walter Knepper/Bob Elder Cadillac entry

at Marion Robinson's Knoxville (IA) Raceway, the Minnesota State Fairgrounds in St. Paul, and Salem (IN), and the Willard Coil car at Winchester. The Salem win was in the prestigious annual "Joe James-Pat O'Connor Memorial" race. The Whitewater native finished seventh in points behind champion Beale, Kunzman, Nordhorn, Walkup, Sessions and Duane "Pancho" Carter (Jr.). Tom also passed his Indianapolis 500 driver's test in '73.

Bigelow captured five wins the next year aboard the Knepper number 55 machine and a resulting runner-up position to series point champion "Pancho" Carter. Bigelow's 1974 win sites included Cincinnati (OH), Indianapolis Raceway Park, Toledo (OH), and twin 75-lappers on the pavement of St. Paul. Rounding out the top five in points were George Snider, Bruce Walkup, and Bill Puterbaugh. Tom also competed in his first Indy 500, finishing 12th in the Bryany Heating & Cooling Special.

The mid-1970's just kept rolling along as Tom Bigelow captured another four USAC sprint car wins in '75, this time at Eldora in the Lloyd Weaver Excavating Special, and at St. Paul, Don Smith's Terre Haute (IN) Action Track and the Birmingham (AL) International Raceway in the familiar Elder Cadillac colors. Tom was fifth in points, following champion Dickson, Beale, Billy Cassella and Carter. Tom also excelled in '75 in the Championship Dirt Car division aboard the A.J. Watson-led Leader Cards-Lodestar machine, claiming wins at DuQuoin, St. Paul, and in the prestigious "Hoosier Hundred" at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis. He finished second in that series' points (to Mario Andretti) for the third year in a row. Tom finished 18th at Indy, again aboard the Bryant machine.

1976 brought the fan favorite five more sprint wins in the Knepper 55: Terre Haute, twice at Eldora, Illiana Speedway in Schererville (IN), and J.C. Agajanian's San Jose (CA) Speedway. It also meant a series runner-up position to champion Duane "Pancho" Carter (Jr.), who had twelve wins in the Steve Stapp/Dobbins Chevrolet sprinter. Rounding out the top five drivers that year were Sheldon Kinser, Dickson and Cassella. Tom also finished 14th in the Indy 500 for the Leader Cards team and won the dirt champ car race at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield.

1977 will go down as one of Tom's most successful ever on the sprint trail, yet he still could not claim the elusive title of National Champion. Bigelow won a record 14 features in 42 starts: Winchester twice, Eldora twice, Indianapolis Raceway Park, Earl Baltes' Millstream Motor Speedway in Findlay (OH), Indiana State Fairgrounds (4), Salem twice, Illiana and Toledo. All of his wins were aboard Sherman Armstrong's pair of jet-black Paul Leffler-built Armstrong Mould number 43 dirt and pavement sprinters, just

### ( Tom Bigelow Bio Continued Below )

as champion Sheldon Kinser's seven wins came aboard Dick Hammonds' pair of Grant King-built Genesee Beer/Gohr Distributing number 56 wagons.

However, Sheldon's year-long consistency and Tom's qualifying misfortune at the series' final round at J.C. Agajanian's Ascot Park in Gardena (CA) sealed Bigelow's fate. Tom's only hope to topple Sheldon was to buy his way into the feature field, but instead the consummate gentleman simply shrugged his shoulders and went over to offer a heartfelt 'congratulations' to the new king. The two shook hands firmly, exchanged a few words of friendship, then Bigelow walked to the stands to watch the race. Following Kinser and Bigelow in the standings were Carter, Cassella, and Norman "Bubby" Jones. Of his frustration at not winning the title, the versatile veteran would only say, "It really had me talking to myself."

Tom also won the DuQuoin dirt champ car round in '77 and finished an impressive sixth in the Indianapolis 500 with the A.J. Watson-prepared Thermo-King/Leader Card team. For his many accomplishments in 1977, "the mouse" was named Hoosier Auto Racing Fans (HARF) "Driver of the Year."

Tom Bigelow realized his goal of a number one ranking in sprint car racing in 1978, once again teamed with owner Sherman Armstrong and builder-mechanic Paul Leffler. Five wins in 38 starts went their way at Salem, Cincinnati, Flemington (NJ) Fair Speedway, Sharon (OH) and at their beloved Winchester Speedway. The success wasn't limited to feature wins, either, as "Biggie" set fast time a record 13 times, with six of those efforts resulting in track records. His five wins, for a career total 41, also moved him closer to Larry Dickson's all-time USAC sprint car feature win mark of 43 victories. Following Tom in the national sprint car points were Chuck Gurney, Dana Carter, Cassella and Rich Vogler. Bigelow also campaigned in 1978 in USAC's dirt car, stock car and midget divisions and he ran 21st at the Indy 500 for Armstrong Mould.

The 1979 season was a memorable one for Tom and the Armstrong number one team. He won five more features in 31 starts to pass Larry Dickson's career USAC sprint car win tally. The wins came

at the Indy mile, Dayton (OH), Salem twice, and again Winchester. Although he missed seven features due to other racing commitments, he still managed a fifth in sprint car points after champion Greg Leffler, Jones, Larry Rice and Sheldon Kinser. He also finished third in USAC's seven-race National Championship Series behind champion A.J. Foyt and Billy Vukovich. Bigelow scored second place finishes at College Station (TX) and Milwaukee (WI) in the Armstrong Mould Indy Car. He also placed 14th at Indy and grabbed one more USAC midget win.

Four more wins came his way in 1980, including his first USAC sprint car win in Canada at the Cayuga Speedway in Ontario and shows at Hartford (MI) and Winchester (twice). Bigelow's four wins in 22 starts came in the Genesee Beer Wagons owned by Dick Hammond's Gohr Distributing Company. He finished third in the season standings behind champion Vogler and runner-up Steve Chassey, and ahead of Rice and Bettenhausen. He also finished eighth in the Indy 500 in the Armstrong Mould-Lola-Cosworth.

Third place in the USAC sprint car division was again Bigelow's the next year, along with victories number 51 and 52 at Kokomo (IN) and Beaver Dam (WI), respectively, in the Gohr 56 machine in just 15 starts, Sheldon Kinser was the champ in '81, followed by Vogler, Bigelow, 'rookie of the year' Johnny Coogan and Red Bledsoe. Tom continued to campaign in USAC's Gold Crown, Silver Crown and midget divisions, too. It was also the year when he went through a divorce and moved to Winchester (IN).

Tom made just five USAC sprint car starts in 1982, finishing 23rd in points. He did finish third, though, in USAC's 1981/82 Gold Crown National Championship Series behind George "Ziggy" Snider and Geoff Brabham, and ahead of A.J. Foyt and Gordon Johncock. 1982 marked his ninth and final Indy 500. He was the Indianapolis Speedrome regional midget champion, too.

He did make a comeback in USAC sprint car racing in '83 in a variety of vehicles, ranking fifth at the end of the year behind champion Ken Schrader, Larry Rice, Sheldon Kinser and Danny Milburn. He also ranked second in USAC's

national midget series to champion Vogler and was named the recipient of the 1983 Valvoline-sponsored Jimmy Caruthers Memorial Award for spirit and determination.

Tom Bigelow concentrated his 1984 efforts on the USAC National Midget Series and came away with the championship after a hard-fought campaign in which he scored four feature wins in the Carl and Carol Sandy Starcraft VW. He was also fifth in the Silver Crown Championship Series behind champion Dave Blaney, Gary Bettenhausen, Chuck Gurney and Steve Chassey.

In the mid- to late-1980's, "Biggie" continued racing midgets, sprints and dirt championship cars. In midgets, he finished fourth in points in 1985 and third in '86. In 1991, he hooked a rut at Kokomo (IN) and broke his back, possibly for the sixth time.

He is married to wife Judi and has three children from his first marriage; Don, Alan and Becky. Tom and Judi reside in Winchester and since 1986 he has campaigned an Automobile Racing Club of America (ARCA) stock car on a specials-only basis. In 1980, Tom was inducted into the HARF Hall of Fame.

According to the 1996 United States Auto Club media guide, Tom Bigelow continues to lead the all-time USAC sprint car feature winners list with 52 career victories, followed by Larry Dickson (45), "Pancho" Carter (42), Gary Bettenhausen (40), Jack Hewitt (38), Sheldon Kinser (37) Rich Vogler (35), Rollie Beale (32), Don Branson and A.J. Foyt (28)), Parnelli Jones and Steve Butler (25), and Roger McCluskey (23).