

Elmer George

At the time of his death, Elmer George was a member of open wheel racing's royal family, however, the road he traveled to the top was decidedly not glittered with gold. Like many of the elite racers of his generation, George's path to the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame was accomplished through hard work, perspiration, and a burning desire to escape a hardscrabble existence. Born in Hackerville, Oklahoma, on July 5, 1928, Elmer joined the ranks of former "Dust Bowl" residents who sought a new life, and new opportunities in California.

History reports that the west coast midget ranks became an important proving ground for future stars at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in the period following World War II. Indeed, George spent time in the midget car ranks, and raced sprint cars with Charlie Curryer's American Racing Association (ARA) before heading east. Yet, Elmer first made his mark in the rough and tumble roadsters that prowled throughout northern California and beyond. While this racing discipline may remain under appreciated by some, the fact remains that these modified machines launched the careers of some of the all-time greats in open wheel racing. Hot shoes like Jack McGrath, Ed Elisian, and Bob Sweikert cut their racing teeth in the roadsters, and before long Elmer George saw these cars as a means to escape toiling in the hot sun while working in the lettuce fields around Salinas. Racing with the Northern California Roadster Racing Association and the upstart Roadster Racing Incorporated, George braved the 62-degree banking at the famed Oakland Speedway, and developed the resolve necessary to face the legendary "hills of death" of the Midwest.

By 1954 George had followed Sweikert and Elisian to the American Automobile Association (AAA) sprint car ranks, and in his first partial campaign he finished 17th in season points on the strength of 12 feature starts. More success came in the midget ranks, where Elmer finished tenth in the final points, bagging two wins at the Cincinnati Race Bowl. Improvement was obvious in 1955 when he jumped nine spots in the final standings, made 13 of the 14 scheduled events, and scored again with a midget at Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In 1956 the United States Auto Club (USAC) filled the void left by the departure of the AAA from the world of racing, and this season would prove to be a breakout year for George. His most significant move came off the track when he secured a ride in Mari Hulman's HOW Special. Mari was not just the daughter of Indianapolis Motor Speedway owner Tony Hulman, she was a racer to her core. Accordingly, results were expected. Elmer delivered quickly by claiming his first USAC sprint race on May 13 on the dirt at Atlanta's notorious one-mile Lakewood Speedway, and backed it up one week later on the treacherous high banks of Winchester, Indiana. Entering the October 7 finale at Ohio's New Bremen Speedway, George, Eddie Sachs and Pat O'Connor had a shot at the title. The popular O'Connor took the 50-lap main and the first USAC Midwest title, second would fall to Sachs, with George rounding out the podium.

1957 would prove to be a pivotal year in Elmer George's life. By the end of May, George had married his car owner, qualified for the Indianapolis 500, and had already snared two sprint car wins. Andy Linden, who had a splendid year, won the season opener at Dayton in late March, but George rebounded by taking the next two races on the card at Lakewood Speedway on April 14, and at Indiana's Salem Speedway two weeks later. In a nip-and-tuck year, George would win again at Salem on July 14, and then took a crucial

round at Winchester on September 21 in a do-or-die situation. The season would close with the 100-lap Joe James Memorial at Salem Speedway on October 13 with Linden atop the standings. Jim McWithey became the first man to qualify under 19 seconds at the imposing half-mile, but the race would be controlled by O'Connor. Meanwhile George moved into the second position at the flag, while Linden could do no better than fifth. When the final points were tallied, Elmer George had claimed the USAC Midwest title by just 14 points. Adding to the luster of his 1957 campaign, Elmer would take the sole Championship win of his career when he beat Pat O'Connor and Johnny Thomson to the line at Syracuse, New York, on September 7.

The 1958 season began in fine fashion as George won the Midwest opener at Dayton on March 23, but he did not win again in the heartland until August 10 at Salem. In the end, Elmer would fall to third in Midwestern points behind the irrepressible Eddie Sachs and a talented young driver named A.J. Foyt. However, George was also active on the Eastern circuit, and picked up an additional win at Pennsylvania's Williams Grove Speedway on July 27 and finished ninth in points.



Bob Mays Collection

Adapting well to the racing in the Keystone state, George won the Eastern opener at Reading on April 5, 1959, after passing six cars in the consolation race to qualify for the main. However, this season would quickly turn sour. He qualified for the outside of the front row of the Championship race at Langhorne on June 14, and by lap 29 he was in the lead. As the abrasive surface wreaked havoc on his tires, George pressed on. However, when officials deemed his driving too erratic due to the condition of his rubber, they displayed the black flag. When George, who had ignored the consultation flag, came in for relief on the seventy-fourth circuit he became embroiled in an argument with USAC chief steward Tommy Nicholson. The altercation led to a punch, and resulted in George being suspended from USAC racing until after the 1960 Indianapolis 500.

Reduced to a limited schedule in 1960, George would take his final USAC win on September 2, 1961, at the one-mile dirt oval at DuQuoin, Illinois - but it too was an adventure. As the race wound down, George would tangle with Don Branson bringing out the red flag and sending the latter to the crash house. Meanwhile, Parnelli Jones squirted free to the line, and felt he was the victor. However, it was deemed that the finishing order would revert to the last completed lap, and despite the protestations of the Fike Plumbing team, George had claimed his final USAC sprint car win.



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Elmer George, Continued

George would compete in the 1963 Indianapolis 500 and retire from racing. He would serve as a vice-president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and also help manage the family dude ranch in Wyoming before his death in 1976. Elmer and Mari would have four children, Nancy, Josie, Kathi and Tony. Their son would go on to lead the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Corporation, Hulman & Company and the Indy Racing League (IRL). Know this. In the time that Elmer George was a leading figure in the USAC sprint car wars, legends of the sport filled the roster, and future National Sprint Car Hall of Famers moved easily between Indianapolis and the Terre Haute Action Track. It was an age where a driver's uniform consisted of a simple tee shirt, and a black market existed for tranquilizers needed to help quell the nerves before facing the high banks of Dayton, Winchester, and Salem. Indeed, in this "Golden Age", Elmer George was as brave, and as good, as they came.