

National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

JOHNNY THOMSON

John A. Thomson was born on April 9, 1922, in Lowell (MA) to William and Marion Ross Thomson. Against their wishes, Johnny's first race was in 1938 at a track which was just across the street from their home in Lowell. In fact, Johnny never missed seeing a midget race there during the 1937 and '38 seasons. From his start in his home-built V-8-powered car in 1938 until '52, Thomson was a midget standout following in the footsteps of seven-time American Race Drivers Club (ARDC) midget champion "Bronco Bill" Schindler.

A graduate of the Lowell High School and the New England Aircraft School in Boston, Thomson was a U.S. Air Force crew chief aboard a B-25 Bomber and saw combat duty in Italy and Corsica from 1942 to '45. He was decorated with five battle stars and the Distinguished Air Force Medal for bravery beyond the call of duty.

Following World War II, he resumed racing with the Bay State Racing Association (BSRA) behind the wheel of the Carrol V-8. He scored his first feature win in 1946 at Seekonk (MA) and he claimed seven more wins on the circuit the following season. In 1948 he drove the McLeod Offy in the United Car Owners Association and claimed 32 feature wins and the New England midget championship. He again won the New England title in '49 and he even ventured off to race with the ARDC organization. During the next two years he placed fifth and second, respectively, with the ARDC.

In 1951, Johnny Thomson met Evelyn Peterson and they married. The following season he was named the American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern midget champion, the same year that Johnnie Tolan claimed the Midwest and National midget honors. And he had won two career midget wins at the "Ascot of the East"...Roy Richwine's historic Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg (PA).

At the suggestion of friend and fellow driver Joe Sostilio, Thomson graduated to the sprint car ranks on September 6, 1952, at the Vermont State Fairgrounds in Rutland. He jumped in the Mike Caruso Offy, a car make famous by Schindler. Sadly, two weeks from that day, Schindler lost his life in a racing accident at the Allentown (PA) Fairgrounds.

In 1953, Johnny Thomson started driving the immaculate Offenhauser-powered sprint cars of Samuel W. Traylor III of Allentown. It was a for-

midable combination on the AAA circuit in the East, winning at Altamont (NY) on July 4th and finishing the season in ninth place (with Sostilio the new Eastern Division champion). "The Flying Scot" also passed his rookie test at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in Dr. Raymond Sabourin's Offy-powered Frank Del Roy-built car, although he was only able to finish the 500-mile race in 32nd position. However, he did relieve driver Travis "Spider" Webb in the Lubri-Loy Special and finish with that car in 19th place at the start of the 'Indy roadster' era.

The following year Thomson finished the Indy 500 in 24th aboard the H.A. Chapman Nichols-engineered car, yet his biggest accomplishment was in clinching the AAA Eastern Division 'big car' championship for owner Traylor. On his way to the title, the quiet little blond guy claimed eight features and set AAA track records at both



Johnny Thomson

(Bruce Craig Collection)

Reading (PA) and Williams Grove. Following Thomson in points that year were Tommy Hinnershitz, Al Herman, "Buster" Warke and Charlie Musselman.

Johnny had a career-best finish at Indy in 1955 in the Peter Schmidt Special, replacing the fatally-injured Manny Ayulo and winding up fourth after starting dead last. He also claimed the \$5,400-to-win Wisconsin State Fair Park "Rex Mays Memorial" championship car event in Milwaukee in '55 and he went on to place third in the final standings. But not before he suffered severe injuries at Langhorne (PA) on June 19, when his race-leading Schmidt Special went end-for-end after hitting Jerry Hoyt's car. Johnny wound up with five broken ribs, a jammed vertebra in his neck and a shoulder broken in eight places.

Although he returned late in the season, his title hopes were dead in both the Eastern sprint car and national Championship divisions. Close friend Tommy Hinnershitz, "The Flying Dutchman", subbed for "The Flying Scot" in Schmidt's champ car after the 'Horne' incident. Tommy also won the Eastern Division title again, while Thomson dropped to ninth place in the final tally.

In 1956, the soft-spoken Thomson scored three wins on the newly-formed United States Auto Club (USAC) Eastern sprint car circuit at the Williams Grove Speedway, the Sam Nunis-promoted New Jersey State Fairgrounds in Trenton and the Reading Fairgrounds Speedway (new track record). The pilot of the Sam Traylor sprinter finished the Eastern season as runner-up to Tommy Hinnershitz of Oley (PA). At Indianapolis in May, he again recorded a disappointing 32nd place finish in the Schmidt entry, later switching to the Racing Associates/D-A Lubricants Special and winding up the year tenth in points. By this time he had also moved from the Springfield (MA) area to a five-acre farm in Boyertown (PA), where he built his own ranch-style home and a horse barn.

1957 brought more diversity and more triumphs for the rim-rider. He raced in the Midwest region on one occasion with the USAC midget division and twice with the USAC sprint car division, including a second place finish there aboard Sam Traylor's number 2 Offy. But it was on the East Coast where Thomson again enjoyed his most success on the half-miles driving for Traylor, winning in March (over Don Branson) and June (in the Mike Nazaruk 100-lap Memorial) at Reading and in September at the old Allentown Fairgrounds. He finished third in Eastern Championship points that year behind Bill Randall of North Reading (MA) and Traylor teammate Dale Van Johnson of Anaheim (CA).

In USAC National Championship competition that year, Thomson was 12th at Indy and then won on June 2nd at Langhorne in the Racing Associates/D-A Lubricant Special. He also had two fast time awards in '57 and he placed seventh in points behind champion Jimmy Bryan, Jim Rathmann, George Amick, Pat O'Connor, Jud Larson and Andy Linden. However, his October 20th crash through the fence at the California State Fairgrounds in Sacramento was a definite low point in his year, as he suffered various internal injuries and external cuts.

For the second year in a row, the modest Thomson opened up the Eastern circuit's 1958 season with a

(Johnny Thompson Bio Continued Below)

win, this time at Williams Grove aboard Sam's Fair Grounds Hotel Special number 3 machine. He went on to claim a total of four of the seven main events that he ran in the East, winning at Reading twice and Allentown once more. Thomson claimed the '58 Eastern Championship, followed by Johnson, Fred "Jiggs" Peters, '58 Midwest champion Eddie Sachs and Chevrolet-powered Joe Barzda.

Thomson also competed quite successfully in 1958 on the tough National Championship circuit, placing third in points to Tony Bettenhausen and George Amick. Thomson proudly showed wins that season in the Racing Associates/D-A Lubricants Special at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield, the DuQuoin (IL) State Fairgrounds, the Ira Vail-promoted New York Fairgrounds in Syracuse and the J.C. Agajanian-promoted Sacramento mile track. He also claimed two fast time awards and nine 'top five' finishes in 13 starts. Johnny competed in the 1958 '500 Miglia di Monza' race in Italy in late June, finishing 14th overall against the best in the world. For all of these accomplishments, Thomson was named the 1958 Hoosier Auto Racing Fans (HARF) "Driver of the Year".

"Gentleman Johnny" backed off the sprint car circuit in 1959, racing only once in the East with a third place finish and a resulting 14th place in the final standings. He again focused on the National Championship title in the Racing Associates of Indianapolis entry and finished third in points

behind Rodger Ward and Tony Bettenhausen, although he only competed in eight races to their totals of 12 and 13, respectively. Indeed, he was second in points to Ward after the September Syracuse event. However, the very next day Thomson flipped the ex-Traylor, Ken Hickey sprinter in a Williams Grove heat race after contacting the inside guard rail and the seat belt broke, throwing him onto the track. The non-life-threatening injuries (broken bones) sidelined him for the rest of the '59 season, while Jim Hurtubise took over the Racing Associates champ car ride. Johnny had three fast times, one win in June at Milwaukee and four 'top five' finishes in 1959. His accomplishments at the Brickyard that May were incredible; the pole position with a four-lap average speed of 145.908 miles per hour, and a third placed finish behind Rodger Ward in A.J. Watson's Leader Card Special and Jim Rathmann in the Simoniz Special Watson car.

In 1960, the 5'7", 150-pound veteran again concentrated on the USAC National Championship trail, scoring 'top ten' finishes at Indianapolis (5th), Springfield, DuQuoin, Syracuse and at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. He competed that year in both the Racing Associates/Adams Quarter Horse Special and the Hoover Motor Express Special.

He also ran three times with the USAC sprinters in the Midwest (including New Bremen, Ohio), but it was all to end tragically on the day before the

Trenton National Championship event in September. Thomson was killed during the Great Allentown Fair on September 24th on the first lap of a scheduled 25-lapper on a rutty, dry and dusty half-mile dirt oval. His USAC sprint car bounced out of control going down the backstretch, ripped through 30 feet of an inside board fence and then flipped into the infield. Thomson was thrown from the car, then pinned underneath the wreckage. He was helped out from under the car by mechanic Clint Brawner, who noted that Johnny's left leg was almost completely severed. Thomson was immediately taken to Allentown General Hospital and he died on the operating table several hours later. After the crash, seven-time sprint car champion Tommy Hinnershitz announced his retirement from active participation in the sport. A standing room only crowd at Allentown that day saw the 1954-58 champion lost forever, the seven-time champion redirect his efforts, and a race won by Jim Packard.

He was survived by his wife Evelyn Thomson and four sons: Dale John, Dana Scot, David Ross and Darryl Boyd. John also had four sisters.

According to friend Tommy Hinnershitz, "He was a great, great driver, but most of all Johnny was the finest gentleman in the sport. I never knew another like him."