

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

PETE FOLSE

Born in 1925 in New Orleans (La.). He began his racing career in 1946 driving motorcycles on the California circuit, but made the switch to speedway cars in 1948 when he moved to Tampa (Fla.) and competed at that city's Plant Field and Speedway Park ovals against the likes of Harry King, "Pancho" Alvarez, Al "Speed" Funderburk, Jim Mays, Frank Luptow, Al Keller, "Speed" Wynn, Jimmy Wilburn and Iggy Katona. In the late Forties, Pete drove the Libby Ranger number C-10 and "Pop" Hukle's number 98 and 99 Rangers.

In January of 1949, Folse won his first feature in one of Hukle's cars at Speedway Park, and he backed it up with another win there in October. Later that year, Pete claimed his first International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) win aboard the Eddie Buckner number 4 Offenhauser-powered 'big car' at Speedway Park on November 27. 1949 was also the year that fellow Floridian Frankie Luptow captured his first IMCA 'big car' championship over Emory Collins, Jimmy Wilburn and Deb Snyder. In December of that year, Folse flipped the Buckner car hard at Speedway Park, suffering cracked ribs. Worse than that, he had to surrender the ride to Katona for February's races, per orders of the Birmingham (Ala.) car owner.

The next year he won twice more on the IMCA trail, back in the Buckner Offy, at the Tampa Fairgrounds on July 23 and at the Birmingham Fairgrounds on October 6. He also cracked the 'top 20' in IMCA's final point standings, finishing eleventh. Luptow again was crowned champion in 1950, besting Collins, Snyder and Clair Cotter.

The Buckner Offy saw IMCA victory lane only once in 1951, on July 1 at the Willmar (Minn.) Fairgrounds, again with the "Flying Frenchman" behind the wheel. He slipped to sixteenth in points the same year that Luptow scored his 'three-peat', defeating Snyder, Bert Hellmueller and Cotter.

Folse had his best year to date in IMCA competition in 1952, winding up sixth in points behind new champion Deb Snyder, Jimmy Campbell, Bill Holland, Bobby Grim in Hector Honore's "Black Deuce" and Bob Slater. Wins for Folse came at Shreveport, Cedar Rapids (Iowa) and Denison (Iowa) in the Buckner Offy.

During the long winters in the early Fifties, Pete honed his driving skills by becoming one of the



Pete Folse Sr. (Bruce Craig Collection)

top modified stock car drivers in the Sunshine State, running several times a week in the Tampa-St. Petersburg area.

Folse won the biggest race of his early IMCA career with Buckner at the Tampa Fairgrounds on February 14, 1953. Shortly after that, Pete moved to the Peaches Campbell-owned ex-Gus Schrader Offy and ran the UMCA circuit. He even captured a feature at Oberlin (Ks.) that year with the famous red number 5 Offenhauser.

Pete went back to a Ranger aircraft-powered car for the '54 Florida State Fair races, but his lack of success against the Offies kept him running modifieds for most of the year. The next year he drove the Calloway Ranger with some success in February, although he decided to take his rim-riding style to England for an early summer tour. In

August, he jumped at the chance to pilot the Tom Randol Offy in National Speedways, Inc. (NSI) IMCA (sanctioned meets and he garnered several 'top five' finishes with it. And he did finish the '55 season fifth in NSI points, and ninth in IMCA points after missing the 'top twenty' the two previous seasons. 1955 was also the year that Bobby Grim claimed his first of four consecutive IMCA championships. Bobby started driving for the Pana (Ill.) owner in 1948.

1956 was another off year, yet in 1957 he came back with wins at Jacksonville (Fla.) and Hutchinson (Ks.), once again in the Buckner machine. He finished ninth in points after being absent as a full-time IMCA competitor for several seasons.

"Pistol Pete" Folse grabbed the August 28 IMCA thirty-lapper at St. Paul in 1958 aboard the E.M. "Dizz" Wilson number 71 sprinter. It was his biggest career victory to date and came during a year when he competed primarily on Frank Winkley's Auto Racing, Inc. (ARI) IMCA-sanctioned circuit. He also claimed the final two shows of the year at Shreveport on October 18-19, trying out Honore's number 2 machine. He would up '58 in eighth place in points.

The man who had worn flashy clothes, partied with the best of them and was well-regarded within sprint car racing received his real fame, though, beginning in 1959, when he replaced Bobby Grim as the pilot of Honore's Bardahl Special.

Pete won three straight IMCA point championships, and followed that with two consecutive runner-up positions. His five years of rim-riding with Honore's Offenhauser produced 111 features, mostly with IMCA.

In 1959, Folse bested Jim Hurtubise, Harold Leep, Jack Rounds and Parnelli Jones for the rich title in the car people still called the "City of Roses Special" in honor of Hector's hometown. His 22 IMCA victories that year included the June 7 fifty-lap "Hawkeye Futurity" at the Iowa State

(Pete Folse Bio Continued Below)

Fairgrounds in Des Moines and the 50-lapper on August 29 at the one-mile Missouri State Fairgrounds oval in Sedalia. For winning the prestigious "Hawkeye Futurity" over Hurtubise in an Offy and Jones in a Chevy, Folse was awarded the Gaylord White Memorial Trophy. His 1959 National Speedways point title in 1959 was also the last year that the NSI organization crowned a champion separate of the overall IMCA title.

In '60, he won 31 IMCA features and topped Emmett "Buzz" Barton, A.J. Shepherd and Jerry Blundy in the season-long points. The highlight was again winning the 50-lap "Hawkeye Futurity" at Des Moines on June 19. According to the IMCA Yearbook, Folse and Honore, the two Frenchmen, cleared more than \$16,000 in purse and point monies for the year. According to Pete, "I try to help ol' 'Pappy' work on the buggy, but every time I do he just chases me off! If I do manage to do something, 'Pappy' just comes along and changes it or does it all over again. I'm really lucky to be driving for 'Pappy'."

The following year he and Honore won 19 races and the IMCA championship over Barton, Leep, Jerry Richert, Jim McElreath, Jerry Blundy, Herschel Wagner, Johnny White and Arnie Knepper. A highlight included winning the "Florida Championship" on February 19 at Tampa. Again, the team was credited with winning over \$13,000 during the season where they were never out of the top spot in points. It also marked Honore's seventh straight IMCA title!

In 1962, they recorded eight wins together, including another February "Florida Championship" and were edged for the year-end title by Johnny White in "Dizz" Wilson's machine. The final race was held on the high banks of Frank Funk's Winchester (Ind.) Speedway and White was one of IMCA's all-time best high-banked asphalt drivers. Richert, Leep and Rutherford rounded out the top five.

Seven wins came in 1963, with Folse topped in the points by the Chevy-powered Gordon Woolley of Waco (Tex.). White, Jerry Daniels, Blundy and Richert followed.

In 1964, Honore replaced Pete Folse with Jerry "Scratch" Daniels. And, Honore finally replaced the Offy with a Chevy in the "Black Deuce", although "Pappy" never again achieved the levels of success that he had with Bobby Grim and Pete Folse. Pete won at Tampa on February 15, 1964, in the Roy Thomas number 9 Offy, although it was to be his last official IMCA win ever.

Of course, many of Pete's greatest triumphs came before hometown fans at the Tampa Fairgrounds, where he won those three Florida titles. He was a long-time Tampa Bay area resident and worked as a welder when not rim-riding America's dirt tracks. And, according to Hector "Pappy" Honore, "I never had a driver run any harder than Pete Folse!"

"The Flying Frenchman" passed away on November 25, 1975, apparently from pneumonia, leaving his wife Nancy, two sons Richard and Pete (Jr.) and two daughters Paulette Hunter and Terry Doherty. Since then, both Nancy and Richard have passed away.

Pete's last years of life were hardly pleasant and he was forced to battle with continued health problems, none of them being minor. First there was his struggle with blindness, which fortunately proved to be temporary. Next came a painful series of throat operations for cancer, culminating with the removal of his larynx. In August of 1975, though, Pete Folse was quoted as saying, "Some people say I should have done more with my driving; things like trying Indianapolis. Hell, I never wanted to go there. I was just a dirt track racer and I'm proud to claim that. Anyway, my life has been great, although it's a little tough now. Even so, I wouldn't change it. No, I wouldn't change it. 'I've been just what I wanted most... a race driver.'"

