

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

JOHNNY RUTHERFORD

John Sherman Rutherford III was born on March 12, 1938, in Coffeyville (Ks.), but moved with his parents to Fort Worth (Tex.) while still in his teens. His first race was in a 'hot rod' modified stock car at the old quarter-mile Devil's Bowl Speedway in Dallas in 1959. Very early in his career, Johnny followed in the footsteps of his older and more experienced friend Jim McElreath and began piloting super-modifieds and sprint cars. In May of 1960, he entered his first major super-modified event in the Midwest at Earl Baltes' famous Eldora Speedway. "I first started running there back in 1960 in a super-modified. It had a GMC powerplant under the hood and Racemaster tires."

And, late in the summer of 1960, with only a year-and-a-half of active driving behind him, he was competing with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) sprint car division and finished 22nd in points.

In 1961, Rutherford moved up to 16th place in the final IMCA standings after competing in fifteen feature races aboard the Merle Heath number 42 Chevy and then the E.M. "Dizz" Wilson number 73 Offy (as a teammate to McElreath).

1962 was Johnny's last year with IMCA and it was his best. Running the Dave Beatson Chevrolet, Johnny was leading the points through June and July. However, a late-season eye injury and a series of mechanical breakdowns set the Fort Worth driver back to a fifth place finish in points, behind Johnny White, Pete Folse, Jerry Richert and Harold Leep. His IMCA wins came at Illiana Speedway in Schererville (Ind.) on May 13, Cedar Rapids (Iowa) on July 4, Salem (Ind.) on July 15 and Denison (Iowa) on August 14.

He also ran eight races on a "conditional license" with the United States Auto Club (USAC) in 1962

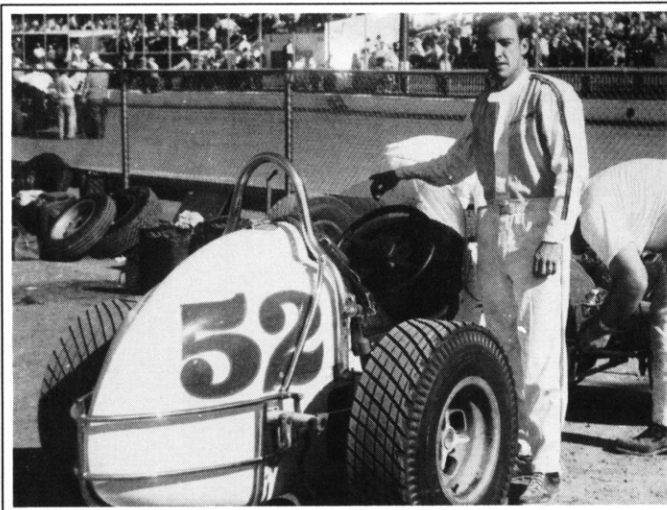
aboard the Beatson Chevy, placing 19th in points (he would have finished 12th in points had he joined USAC earlier in the year). He did well enough in USAC championship car racing, too, running the '62 "Hoosier Hundred" in a Buster Warke-wrenched car and earning a shot at the Indianapolis 500 in 1963 aboard Ed Kostenuk's A.J. Watson roadster.

Besides being a talented young race driver, Johnny was also a very articulate speaker and wise promoters like Earl Baltes usually took advantage of his classy and professional style. According to

USAC sprint car season fourteenth in points after running only five races. He competed in Rufus Gray's GAPCO Special. Most importantly, though, on July 4, 1963, Johnny married Betty Hoyer of Osgood (Ind.).

Johnny started coming into his own in USAC sprints in 1964, with his first-ever USAC win on April 5 at Eldora in Jack Colvin's K.E.Y. Enterprises Special. He finished fifth in points behind Don Branson, Jud Larson, Mario Andretti and A.J. Foyt after running only fourteen races. Said Johnny, "You know, if my luck holds I believe I can win the sprint title next year."

When 1965 rolled around, however, Johnny couldn't resist the urge to concentrate on the Indianapolis 500 in the early part of the season; unfortunately, it only netted him a 31st place finish that year. In the first six sprint car races, Larson had won four, with "Red" Riegel and brash rookie Greg Weld winning the others. On June 13, Rutherford was walking the pits at the Vigo County Fairgrounds in Terre Haute (Ind.), looking for his first sprint ride of the season. He was offered a seat in Steve Stapp's competitive Babe Stapp Special sprinter, and when the day was done, he had beaten Jud Larson and A.J. Foyt to the checkered. However, two weeks later, he wrecked at Indianapolis Raceway Park and lost his ride.



Johnny Rutherford (Bruce Craig Collection)

Johnny, "I remember that I'd show up a couple of days early and Earl and I would drive around western Ohio hitting all the radio stations and newspapers publicizing the upcoming race."

In '63, with his career on the rise, he startled the people in the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) in 1963 when he put the Henry "Smokey" Yonick Chevy on the pole at Daytona Beach (Fla.) for the February '500' with a new track record of 165.181 miles per hour. Rutherford proved his fast lap wasn't a fluke when he went out and later won a 100-mile qualifying race. Later that year, Rutherford finished the

At that time Wally Meskowski was between drivers, so they 'hooked up'. Rutherford took the orange and white Competition Engineering Special and almost won at Eldora. Then he won at Winchester on July 11, setting a track record. He won again six days later at Reading (Penna.), running away with it. A crash with Greg Weld disabled the car at Kansas City (Ks.) on July 23, but Wally spat and swore and sweated to repair it in time for three straight wins in August at Terre Haute and St. Paul (twice). He earned \$10,000 within a two-month period, while Wally grinned and kept counting the money. Unlike other sprint car owners, Meskowski always claimed to show a

(Johnny Rutherford Bio Continued Below)

profit at the end of a season. They claimed another win on October 10 at Winchester.

The crewcut Texan was red hot that summer of '65, while Larson's star was fading, yet Weld was still a threat in his Meadowbrook Water Softener Special. The point season finale at Ascot Park in Gardena (Calif.) on November 13 was remarkable in that Rutherford, Weld and Meskowski all lost their composure under the pressure. Johnny posted a bad qualifying lap, but Weld did even worse. Both made the main through the consolation race, which Johnny won and Greg captured the fifth and final transfer. In the feature, Johnny lost the right front wheel as Wally had neglected to tighten it down. In the pits, the Texan was slamming his hands against the body panels in frustration, all the while Wally was shouting, cursing, and wielding a new wheel and hammer. That wheel came off, too! All Weld needed was an eighth or better for the title. However, all he could muster was a tenth and Rutherford won the point championship by 2.5 points. It was a proud achievement for both Meskowski, who finished third in car owner points, and Rutherford!

The thrill of victory only lasted the winter, as on opening day (April 3) of the 1966 season at Eldora, Johnny's worst mishap in a sprinter occurred. "We were running and I wasn't doing particularly well. I had a brand new sprint car that Wally Meskowski had built. Wally had owned the number nine car I'd driven to the USAC title the year before. Good car. Foyt and Marshman and McCluskey and I had all won with it. It was probably the best sprint car I'd ever driven.

"Anyway, Wally had changed some things for the new car and I never did like the way it felt. So I was struggling in that race and Wally came out to the edge of the track and signalled me to move

down. I did, and my teammate Mario Andretti went right on by me in the old number nine car that I'd liked so much.

Well, I let Wally know, as best I could with hand signals, what I thought about the whole thing. Another lap or two went by, and I was setting up Mario to try and pass him back, and he kicked up a rock or a clod or something and it hit me right between the eyes. That stunned me and I relaxed a bit on the throttle, hooked a rut in turn two and flipped out of the race track. And the rest, as they say, is history. Man, it was horrendous."

Johnny suffered two broken arms when the Wynn's sprinter flipped high and hard, landing over the outside guard rail. "The flip was so violent that it broke all the surface blood vessels in my face and head. I had no whites in my eyes; they were solid red."

He did not race again until the 1967 Indianapolis 500. It was an ominous start to a season in which five drivers lost their lives in USAC sprint car competition: Jud Larson and "Red" Riegel at Reading, Ron Lux at Tulsa, and Don Branson and Dick Atkins at Ascot Park.

During his rehabilitation when he underwent nine major operations on his right arm, Johnny was quoted as saying, "I can't sleep nights. You wouldn't believe the pain. But I want to get back in a racing car, so I stand it somehow, I don't know how."

Rutherford returned to sprint cars after that Eldora flip and raced them through the late Sixties and early Seventies (in fact, at one point he was reunited with Wally Meskowski), although he never achieved the same success as before that fateful day in April of 1966. Through it all, Johnny still says, "On all the tracks I ran in my career, I would

still have to rate Eldora as one of my favorites. I know most people remember me there because of the bad crash I had, but I had some good days there. I liked to go fast, and there was no better place to do it than Eldora."

In the mid-Seventies, he remained an advocate of sprint car racing, noting that "Sprint cars may not teach you how to drive an Indy Car, but they teach you how to be a race driver." He should know, as he has won the Indianapolis 500 three times (1974 and 1976 with Team McLaren and 1980 with Jim Hall), sat on the pole there three times (1973, 1976 and 1980), and won the Pocono 500 (1974) and Michigan 500 (1986) once each. He has 27 championship car victories to his credit, and was "Driver of the Year" in 1980 after winning both the USAC and Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) IndyCar titles in the same season.

He wears the nickname "Gentleman Johnny" off the race track well, although he prefers the handle "Lone Star J.R." much better. His family includes wife Betty and children John IV, born June 8, 1968, and Angela, born January 13, 1971. Rutherford has also maintained his boyhood interests in music and art. Johnny was inducted into Auto Racing's Hall of Fame in Indianapolis in 1987, the Fort Worth Sports Hall of Fame, and the Texas Motorsports Hall of Fame in 1988.

"Sprint car racing has to be the most exciting racing in the world to watch. Sprint car racing also has to be the most exciting racing in which to participate. I know I had the most fun of my racing career in sprint cars, and I know that (back) then I had to prove myself as a driver and I didn't have to carry a suitcase full of money to get the opportunity to show my stuff."