



Melvin "Tony" Bettenhausen

by Larry Ball, Jr.

Melvin Eugene Bettenhausen was born September 12, 1916 in Tinley Park, Illinois. The youngest of eight children, the family worked to make the farm go after his father was killed at age 48: kicked in the chest by a work horse. Melvin's oldest brother Clarence became the head of the family. Every day Melvin would box with the foreman of the hired hands, Frank Jackson. Big Frank would pose and say, "I'm Jack Dempsey. Now who'll be Gene Tunney?"

"I'm Tunney!," the young Melvin would say. The name stuck. Eventually, it morphed into "Tony".

In 1936, the then 19-year-old Tony saw an ad in the Chicago Tribune that read, "See The Midwest's Greatest Stars." It was an ad for midget car racing at the Riverview Stadium in Chicago. Unable to get his brother Clarence to go with him, Tony set out alone to the 1/5-mile dirt oval next to the Riverview Amusement Park. After seeing his first race, he was hooked! He devoured the articles in National Auto Racing News educating himself. Tony knew very quickly that he had to be a race car driver.

In April of 1937, Tony married Valerie (Val) Rice. The honeymoon was hardly a traditional one; he took her to the Indianapolis 500. Upon returning from Indy, Tony was even more obsessed with racing.

One day, Clarence reminded Tony that Emil Andres lived not far from their farm. Tony was well aware of this fact, but never really had worked up the nerve to go see Emil. That changed one day when Tony went over to Emil's house and knocked on the door. Emil, by this time already a veteran of the Speedway, answered the door to find Tony Bettenhausen grinning at him. "I'm Tony Bettenhausen, and I want to be a race car driver!"

That is all it took. Emil took Tony under his wing and began taking him along to Riverview. Now Tony was in the pits. He was part of the action. He took advantage of the opportunity to learn all he could.

Not long after Tony started going with Emil to the races, Tony decided to buy a race car. He asked Emil to introduce him to Wally Zale so he could offer to buy his midget. Zale's car was a Floyd "Pop" Dreyer-built chassis with a Harley-eighty. Tony bought the car for \$600. To everyone's surprise, Tony thought it best to have Emil drive the car some first. Eventually, Ted Duncan would drive for Tony. By August, this team would win a feature at Riverview.

On December 12, 1937, Tony made his debut as a race car driver. He won the Class B race at the Chicago Armory, coming from inside row five to do it. Tony would continue to gain experience at the Armory, and look forward to the outdoor season.

By April of 1938, Tony had returned to his ownership role teaming up with Dennis "Duke" Nalon to go out east. The team struggled. At Nutley, a 1/7-mile high-banked wood oval, Duke was offered a ride in the Caruso Offy. He took it. With this, Tony's outdoor debut would be at Nutley! Duke thought it would be alright. He really didn't think Tony would make the show. Duke was mistaken. Tony qualified fast enough to run a heat and the consi in which he finished third. From then on, Tony would drive.

1938, '39, and '40 saw Tony's reputation as a midget driver grow. He had joined Emil Andres, Duke Nalon, and Paul Russo as a member of the "Chicago Gang." By late 1940, he was averaging a feature win a week. Photos of Tony now regularly appeared on the cover of National Auto Racing News referring to him as "The Blond Blizzard." He was a race car driver.

In May of 1941, Tony made another step as a race car driver, graduating to sprint cars. Tony made his sprint car debut in the Iddings #5 at the high-banked Dayton half-mile. The rookie finished second in the feature. His

second race in a sprint car was once again at Frank Funk's Dayton Speedway. After setting quick time, Tony again finished second in the feature. His mentor, Duke Nalon, was third.

On June 22, the American Automobile Association (AAA) returned to Dayton Speedway and Tony won his first sprint car feature. In July he would win his second, again at Dayton. What's more, he was leading the AAA Midwest Sprint Car point standings! This was impressive given the fact he was a rookie, but even more so given the competition. Tony was running with Hall of Famers: Emil Andres, Tony Willman, Everett Saylor, Travis "Spider" Webb, Dennis "Duke" Nalon, and Bill Holland.

Tony would have strong finishes everywhere he went. He would run second at Winchester and Jungle Park. He would win in October at the 5/8-mile Hammond Raceway. By the end of the year, however, the mentor would outshine the student. "Duke" Nalon would win the Midwest title. Tony was second, with Elbert "Pappy" Booker, "Spider" Webb, and Bill Holland completing the top five.

1941 also saw other firsts for Tony. In August, Tony made his Championship Car debut at Milwaukee, where he drove the Blue Crown Spark Plug #25 to a respectable sixth place finish. One week later, he would drive the same car to a second place finish at Syracuse. Then in November, his son Gary was born.

The 1942 season began with uncertainty. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, racing activity was not initially curtailed. In January and February, Tony ran the indoor midget schedule. Then, in late February, AAA announced that racing would be suspended for the duration of the war. Although AAA was not running, many of the tracks would run without AAA sanction. Basically, everybody that raced was then an outlaw. Tony won sprint car races at Jungle Park, Dayton, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, before the government banned all auto racing effective July 31, 1942. In 1943, Val would give birth to Merle. Susan was born in 1945.

After the war, Tony began to concentrate more on the Champ Cars, and, as a result, his sprint car schedule was cut back. In fact, Tony would not be in a sprint car until August of 1947 at Milwaukee where he had a top five finish. He ran only three sprint car races in 1948, winning at Milwaukee.

By 1949 Tony was only running midgets and champ cars. He would make his limited schedule pay off in 1951. Together with car owner Murrell Belanger, Tony began his assault on the AAA National Championship after the Indy 500. It had to be after the 500 because Tony was committed to drive for Lou Moore at Indy in the Mobilgas Special, which was the former Blue Crown Special. Lee Wallard would drive for Belanger at Indy, but it was understood that Tony would be the driver for the rest of the Championship trail. Wallard drove the Belanger 99 to the win in the 500. One week later, Wallard's career would be cut short by burns received in a sprint car race at Reading. Tony would go on to win eight of the fifteen champ car races that year, setting the single season record, which was later broken by A.J. Foyt, Jr., in 1964. In one seven-race stretch, he led 640 of a possible 650 laps. Tony was the 1951 AAA National Champion. Also in 1951, Tony, Jr., was born.

In 1952, Tony would finish 23rd in the 500. After failing to make the champ car race at Milwaukee, Tony announced his retirement. The retirement was not to be complete. The "Tinley Park Express" would race once a year at Indianapolis. The retirement lasted until September of 1953 when Tony called Murrell Belanger about racing at DuQuoin. He would lead the first 70 laps in the #99, now carrying the Miracle Power sponsorship, before dropping out on the next lap due to mechanical failure. In any event, he was back. Any doubt of this fact was quickly cast aside when Tony won the following week at Syracuse. He would run a respectable sixth at the Indianapolis Mile. The champ car season ended with Tony putting the Miracle Power Special in victory lane at Phoenix.

During the 1954 season, Tony added midget cars and one stock car race (a win at Milwaukee) to his schedule along with the champ cars. In August, Tony suffered severe injuries at a 250-lap midget race at Soldier Field in Chicago. While leading the event by half a lap, his Harry Turner Offy blew up in the south turn. The car flipped on its side and slid into the concrete wall with Tony caught in between. Tony suffered a severe fractured skull, a broken right shoulder and six deep lacerations to his face and head. He would be out of commission until the champ car race at Phoenix in November. Driving the Blakely #41, Tony would finish sixteenth at Phoenix and seventeenth at Las Vegas after crashing out. 1955 had to be a better year.

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During April and May of 1955, Tony was back in a sprint car. Val was not pleased. She couldn't understand what Tony possibly thought he had to prove. It had been since 1948 that he had driven a sprint car. He would drive at Dayton, Oklahoma City, Kansas City and Salem for Mari Hulman in the HOW Special. It appeared starting the season in the sprinter was good preparation for the Speedway. Tony, with Paul Russo in relief, would have his best finish ever at the Speedway; second place. Back in a sprinter, he would finish eighth in the LaVilla #1 at Dayton on June 26. This would be his last sprint car race of the season. Tony would spend the rest of 1955 racing midgets, champ cars, and stock cars.

1956 would be the last season the "Tinley Park Express" would drive more than one race in a sprint car. On August 12, Tony drove the Schmidt #44 at Williams Grove. After the dust settled in the 30-lap feature, he had finished second to Charlie Musselman. Jimmy Bryan, Tommy Hinnershitz and Gene Hartley completed the top five. Tony only ran three more sprint car races that year. He would compete at New Bremen (sixth), a 30-lapper at DuQuoin (fourth), and a 100-lap event at Salem (fourth).

Back to just midgets and champ cars in 1957, Tony would struggle. Not once did he crack the top ten in the champ cars. Tony didn't even make the race at Syracuse where he had won the year before. His only win of the year would come in a 50-lap midget race at Illiana in Schererville, Indiana.

After a solid year in the champ cars, Tony would finish first in the 1958 United States Auto Club (USAC) National Championship standings ahead of George Amick, Johnny Thomson, Jud Larson and Rodger Ward. Interestingly, Tony didn't win a champ car race that year. In fact, he only won one race in 1958. Tony was the victor in a 100-lap midget race at Milwaukee, leading only the last lap to take the win from Don Branson.

According to available records, Tony's only sprint car ride of 1959 came on October 11 at Houston, Texas. On that day, he drove the Sherk #5 to a fifth place finish in the 50-lap feature. He would only drive a sprint car one more time. On June 26, 1960, The "Tinley Park Express" would make his last start in a sprinter. Tony ran twin 50-lappers at Milwaukee driving the Competition Engines #8. He finished fifth in the first 50-lapper, and failed to finish the second. Tony Bettenhausen's sprint car career had come to an end. Less than a year later he would be killed in an accident at Indianapolis while shaking down a car for his friend Paul Russo. At the time, Tony was survived by his wife Val, and their children Gary, Merle, Susan and Tony, Jr. He is buried in Tinley Park Memorial Cemetery.