

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

KEITH HALL

by Windy McDonald

Robert Keith Hall was born on October 9, 1934, in Inkam, Idaho, to Otis and Gwendelyn Hall. There were seven Hall children: Dave, Dee, Keith, Peggy, Boyd, Gene and Karen. Keith loved basketball and football, and played both at University of Southern Mississippi and Arizona State University, where he received his degree in Physical Education.

It was in Phoenix, Arizona, that Keith met his wife, Connie Haggard. They had five children: Kory, Ladd, Link, Tracie and Dusty. In 1957, Keith purchased the Phoenix Auto Auction, which he owned for eleven years.

Keith Hall's racing career began when, as manager of the wholesale auto auction, he was offered a sprint car in exchange for an outstanding debt of about \$2500. Although Keith did not know exactly what a sprint car was or where they ran, he was an experienced powerboat racer and knew about the excitement generated by high speeds. He called his crew chief and had him look the car over. Johnny Meyers told Keith it was well worth the price of the debt. So began Hall's career as a race car driver, racing under the name Bob Hall and the car number 25.

Keith immediately showed his skills and was named rookie of the year in 1963. He finished second to the legendary "Tiger" Gene Brown, who won 15 features, many times, but elected to skip most of the races held in Tucson and did not crack the top ten. He scored two main event wins in 1964.

During the 1965 season he had several discussions with Rudy Everett and Lawrence Meskimen, owners of the Manzanita Speedway, about the possibility of purchasing their auto racing facility at the corner of West Broadway and 35th Avenue in Phoenix. The lease held by Harry Redkey had only one year remaining and the owners jumped at the chance to sell. Hall bought out Redkey's lease and finalized his purchase of the track, which was converted from a dog (racing) track in 1951 to a quarter-mile dirt track, and then enlarged in 1954 to a half-mile. He also had to buy about six additional acres which encompassed turns three and four of the track. Negotiations were tough and, with his back against the wall, Keith paid more than the value of the land, but it was either that or eventually the half-mile dirt track, which had a quarter-mile track on the inside, would cease to exist.

Work began on improving the facility in the off-season with a new press box, new concessions, paved concourse and some new grandstands. The track re-opened on March 11, 1966, and a new era in auto racing began.

When Hall took over there were only three divisions running on a regular basis—sprint cars, figure-eights and late model stock cars. He did away with the figure-eight track and brought back the modified stock cars, which evolved into super-modifieds. He soon added claimers and modified stocks. The midget cars came in 1974 and, before long, Hall had nine divisions running at Manzy on a regular basis. Plus, he scheduled visits by the United States Auto Club (USAC)



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midgets and the California Racing Association (CRA) sprint cars. He ran Friday and Saturday nights.

It was not long before many of the wooden bleachers were replaced by aluminum seating and the pits were moved to the inside of the quarter-mile track, and then paved.

Hall really put Manzanita on the map when he declared his intention of running a major championship event for the sprint cars in October of 1968. It would be a three-day event and would pay a then-unheard-of \$10,000 purse. The response was overwhelming as 86 of the nation's top sprint car drivers headed to the desert for the October 9-12 running of the Western United States Championships.

Hall had a unique format for his Western. Half the field ran qualifying heats of 20 laps each on Thursday night and the remaining cars repeated the process on Friday night. The top three finishers in each heat race made the Saturday night feature with the next three going to the semi, and the next three landed in the consolation race.

The top two in Saturday night's 12-lap consi transferred to the semi, and the top two in the 25-lap semi earned their way to the 50-lap feature. Bob Cleberg of Tucson was the only Arizona driver in the top ten, but he took the \$2000 first-place prize money with Don Nordhorn and Bob Kinser finishing second and third, respectively.

Through the years, the fields grew larger and the purses increased on almost a yearly basis. By 1971 the winner received his choice of a pick-up truck or a car, with the top Arizona finisher taking the one not chosen.

Hall was a showman through it all, coming up with all sorts of things to entertain and amaze the fans. One year all employees, even those dispensing the beer, wore tuxedos. Miss Manzanita, elected from a group of contestants and selected at the annual press dinner, was brought around the track in a horse-drawn carriage and the driver wore tails and a top hat.

Main event drivers were introduced after arriving on the front straightaway in hay wagons, on horseback, in a Coors beer truck, and on anything else which Hall could come up with. The Western later would be known as the Western World Championships and reached 161 entrants, necessitating the format to change to a four-night event. He later put qualifying main events on the preliminary nights.

Drivers received a Manzanita jacket and a Western hat most years, but Hall was known for putting a theme on his races, and when it was a "Mexican Fiesta" they received a poncho and sombrero. He also had "Viva Las Vegas" and "Blame it on Rio" and others themes. The winner occasionally won trips to exotic lands, but more importantly, the winner could say he won one jewel of the sport's "Triple Crown": the Pacific Coast at Ascot Park, the Western World at Manzy, and the Knoxville Nationals in Iowa.

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Keith's efforts with the race now known as the Western World Championships earned him "Promoter of the Year for a Special Event" honors, but his promotions were more than a once-a-year deal. He had such things a donkey races, bicycle races and other fun events for the fans. No track in the nation runs as many nights of racing as does Hall and his Manzanita race plant, which has sported a third-mile track on the inside since 1985. His regular season starts early in February and runs into November, with about 80 nights a year on the racing schedule.

The past 15 to 20 years have really tested his ability. He is now promoting twice-a-week shows in what is generally regarded as one of the toughest markets in the nation. He has to compete for the entertainment dollar against Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL) and the National Football League (NFL). He also faces competition from the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and Arena Football, plus Arizona State University (ASU) sports and concerts on almost a weekly basis.