



# Joe Sostilio

*To give you an idea of how tough the American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern sprint car title was to win, all you have to do is look at the records.*

Before World War II, that roster included Dennis "Duke" Nalon, daredevil Joie Chitwood and eventual Indianapolis 500 winner Bill Holland. After the war, Ted Horn won three straight, including 1948 when he was awarded the title posthumously after he was killed at DuQuoin, Illinois. The "King of Dirt", Tommy Hinnershitz then won four straight through 1952. To think a midget driver from Massachusetts could take the crown away from the Pennsylvania legend was unthinkable.

Joseph Sostilio was born in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, on January 3, 1915, the son of Natale and Mary Sostilio. His siblings included Peter, Natale, Jr., and Louise. He also had a step-sister Mildred.

As a child he grew up at his father's contracting business after his mother was killed in a streetcar accident. Joe spent hours listening to the Amos 'n Andy show on the radio. One of the characters on the show was named Rosebud, and a truck driver working for Sostilio's dad took the young lad under his wing and nicknamed him "Rosie" (or "Rosy Joe"), a monicker that stuck through his long racing career.

At age seventeen, Joe won the first race he ever entered, at the old Readville, Mass., track, in a Model 'A' Ford in 1932. In 1935 and '36, Joe won the New England Dirt Championship for "big cars." In 1938, he won the New England Sprint Car Championship and he won the Vermont State Midget Championship the following year. He finished fourth in the first midget auto race ever held at the Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg, Penna., on October 5, 1941. He also competed in a handful of AAA "big car" races prior to World War II.

After serving in the war, Joe became a regular with the Bay State Midget Racing Association, finishing second in points in 1945, fourth in '46, and finally winning the championship in '47 on the heels of 31 feature wins, 23 seconds, and 12 third-place finishes. In 1948, he placed sixth in points with the United Car Owners Association as a teammate to champion Johnny Thomson.

1949 found Joe Sostilio of East Natick, Mass., primarily racing stock cars, including winning features in three consecutive weeks in South Bend, Indiana. However, he also started turning his attentions, seriously, back to the American Automobile Association (AAA) and their three divisions - midget cars, "big cars" or sprint cars, and championship cars.

In 1950, at the urging of his friend Johnny Parsons, he returned to AAA sprint car racing and finished twenty-second in points on their Eastern Region "big car" circuit. One year later, in '51, Joe

moved up to seventh place in the season-long points in a second car to teammate Parsons.

In 1952, Joe Sostilio finished fourth in AAA Eastern competition, behind champion Tommy Hinnershitz, runner-up Ernie McCoy and Jimmy Bryan, respectively. Joe won twice that year aboard the George "Dutch" Culp machine.

In 1953, he challenged Hinnershitz for the AAA Eastern sprint car crown, but the Pennsylvania veteran didn't make it easy. The four-time champion opened with wins at Reading, Penna., and Trenton, N.J. When the tour pulled into Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg, Penna., in early May, Sostilio set fast time in Frank Curtis' Offy. He blistered the half-mile at 24.24 seconds, a record that would stand for eighteen years. The Curtis car was the same one in which Joe had driven for Parsons in 1951. Only cigar-chomping Jimmy Bryan beat him that day at the Grove.

Bryan won again at Hatfield, Penna. Ernie McCoy also won at Hatfield while Parsons won at Morristown, N.J. Fellow New Englander Johnny Thomson won at Altamont, N.Y., and Bryan took another win at the Grove. Hinnershitz won the Delaware State Fair. It took until August, but Sostilio finally won when the circuit returned to Morristown. Bill Holland won at Bedford, Penna., Flemington, N.J., and Rutland, Vt. Hinnershitz also took a win at Flemington. Wally Campbell took wins at Reading and Morristown, but Sostilio won at West Springfield, the closest track to his Massachusetts home.

Hinnershitz took another win at Allentown, Penna., and at the Grove, and Thomson won in Richmond, Va. Wally Campbell won at Charlotte, N.C. and Sostilio took a win at Reading. Ernie McCoy won his second of the year at the Grove and Campbell continued his southern swing with a victory at the Raleigh, N.C., Fairgrounds. Sostilio won again at Hatfield, setting up the finale in November at the Cleveland County Fairgrounds in Shelby, N.C.

Driving through a snowstorm to get there, Sostilio finished behind winner Hinnershitz. But, a strong series of top-three and top-five finishes throughout the year helped bring Joe Sostilio the championship. Friend Tommy Caruso recalls that "Joe felt winning that title was a major accomplishment. The Eastern title was as tough as anything that could be done in the country. It's not like he was living down there. He was traveling every weekend and he was working full time at his trucking business. Another thing a lot of people aren't aware of," said Caruso, "is that he won that title driving for many different car owners (George "Dutch" Culp, Frank Curtis, Jake Vargo, Fred

Tomshee, John Fray, Leitenberger Brothers)."

Winning the AAA Eastern sprint car title got Sostilio a shot at the Indianapolis 500 in 1954. Driving for Ed Walsh, Sostilio had the car in line to qualify when Walsh asked him to give up the seat to the more experienced Art Cross, who had been bumped. "Joe told me," said Caruso, "That for a moment he thought about what he should do, but he got out because he was at the mercy of the car owner."

Cross qualified 27th for the '500'. "Joe easily would have qualified," said Caruso. Cross, who finished second in 1953, finished the '54 classic in eleventh. It turned out to be Sostilio's last best chance at the 500, despite subsequent attempts to qualify.

He returned to running sprint cars, midget cars, and championship cars, putting Walsh's Bardahl Special on the pole at Langhorne, Penna., in 1954. His career-best finishes on the AAA championship car circuit were a pair of seventh place runs at Langhorne and Darlington, S.C., in 1954.

In 1954, Sostilio finished twelfth in the AAA Eastern points. One year later, in '55, he finished seventh in points. In 1956, he finished ninth in the three-race United States Auto Club (USAC) Florida Winter Series. In '58, he finished twenty-eighth in the USAC Eastern sprint car point standings.

Clearly the AAA/USAC Eastern Region sprint car title continued to be a tough nut from 1954 through '60. Johnny Thomson won it twice, Tommy Hinnershitz another three times, and Bill Randall won one, too. No less a driver than Anthony Joseph Foyt, Jr., won the last regional title in 1960, before the United States Auto Club (USAC) combined the Eastern and Midwestern tours for the national title in 1961.

Although Joe Sostilio retired from active driving in the late Fifties, he remained active in vintage car events until his death in New Port Richey, Florida, on July 9, 2000, at the age of 85. He was survived by his daughter, Helen Dolan, his brother Natale, Jr., and his sister, Mary Louise Carriero. Joe's wife, Alyce L. Millen Sostilio, passed away on January 14, 2000.

Joe Sostilio was posthumously inducted into the New England Auto Racing Hall of Fame and the National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame in 2003.

*By Chris Romano*

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