

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL OF FAME

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## ART BISCH SR.

BY STEVE ZAUTKE

Arthur J. Bisch was born on November 10, 1926, in Mesa, Arizona, to parents Charles and Alice Bisch. His older siblings were Charlene and Raymond.

Art Bisch was a Pacific theatre World War II pilot who flew torpedo bombers towards the end of the war. Upon returning to his native Arizona, he was one of many veterans who looked to auto racing as an outlet.

After the war, Bisch worked at a saw mill in Flagstaff. A short time later, he moved to Prescott, then he finally settled in Phoenix.

Art joined as a partner in the Arizona Hard Chrome company with Glenn "Bud" Trainor. The business is still going strong today with third-generation manager Ron Trainor at the helm.

It was during this time that Bisch cut his racing teeth driving jalopies and modifieds on the tough, dusty Arizona circuit, including the South Mountain Speedway in Phoenix. He earned victories against legendary Arizona drivers such as Bobby Ball, Bill Cheesbourg, Don Davis, Jimmy Bryan and Roger McCluskey. He would go on to win the Arizona Modified Racing Association (AMRA) championship three out of four years (1950, '51, '53) and he finished second in points in 1952.

As many racers did after the war, Bisch also focused his attention on running midgets. He would win the 1952 Arizona Midget Owners and Driver's Club championship and the '54 URA Arizona midget championship. Through winning on the modified and midget car circuits against the likes of Albert "Buddy" Taylor, Wayne Weiler and some of the best drivers of the southwest, bigger and better things were on the horizon.

Heading towards southern California, Bisch started to run the California Roadster Association, which soon became the California Racing Association (CRA). The cars, which started as roadsters, evolved to modifieds and then sprint cars. Art Bisch dominated the 1956 CRA season, driving the C&T Automotive Ardun Mercury. He won the opener at Gardena on January 3. In May and June, he prevailed in winning six features in a row at Gardena (twice), Manzanita (twice), Globe, Arizona, and at San Diego. Battling Parnelli Jones, Jim Hurtubise and Roger

McCluskey throughout the summer, he won a total of ten features on the way to the championship.

Parnelli remembers the tough CRA circuit fondly, "We had a lot of different cars and different winners every week; it was a good mix. Plus, being in southern California, we could race all year, so we had a long consistent season."

His success in the CRA propelled Bisch into a United States Auto Club (USAC) championship car ride on their traditional West Coast swing at the end of the 1956 season. He made his debut in R.D. Whittington's Kurtis KK4000 which was the car that Jack McGrath was killed in the season prior at Phoenix. Art qualified eighth at both Sacramento and Phoenix in the Whittington car, parlaying a finish of tenth at Phoenix as the better of the two results. For 1957, Art eyed the Midwest and its tough USAC sprint car and midget car circuits.

Bisch turned heads when he finished third at Langhorne, Pennsylvania, in 1957 in the Whittington car. Moving to Ernie Ruiz's Travelon Trailer car later in the season, he followed up the Langhorne success with a fourth in the season finale at Phoenix.

In 1957, Art also finished fifth in USAC Western midget points.

In the 1950's, every driver's dream was to make the Indianapolis 500. In 1958, Bisch made the race in his first try, qualifying the Helse Special Kuzma roadster in the 28th position. Unfortunately, he was caught up in the first lap crash that took the life of fan-favorite Pat O'Connor.

The following week, Art's driving prowess was rewarded when he was hired to drive the Central Excavating Special at Milwaukee. Bisch put the car, which was vacated by Len Sutton, on the pole and dominated the race, holding off challenges from Tony Bettenhausen in winning the 100-mile Rex Mays Classic on the historic one-mile paved oval.

Tragically, later that summer, Bisch died from a head injury two days after a July 4 racing crash at the Lakewood Park Speedway in Atlanta. Bisch had flown to many of his races in a Piper Tri-Pacer. For Atlanta, he brought his friend and fellow competitor, Bill Cheesbourg, with him.

Surprisingly, they almost missed the race when they got lost flying over Arkansas.

Cheesbourg remembered Bisch, "He was a good egg and a good race car driver, one of my best friends. He taught me more about how to control my temper than anyone."

Willie Davis, who first met Bisch in California in 1956, said, "Bisch was a hard working driver who was always trying to get an edge. After practice, he was usually the first to the toolbox, too."

Bisch was elected to the Arizona Racing Hall of Fame in 1987.

Art was married to Marilu Bisch, who passed away in 2006. Art's son, Art Bisch, Jr., drove in the USAC championship dirt car, sprint car and midget car divisions in the late 1970's and '80s.

Art Bisch, Sr., is buried in the Greenwood Memory Lawn Cemetery in Phoenix, Arizona.



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