



## national sprint car hall of fame



## Larry Beckett



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by Bob Mays

**L**awrence E. Beckett was born in Loveland, Ohio, on November 17, 1905, to William Howard and Ida L. Beckett. Shortly thereafter, Larry moved with his family to Dayton, Ohio, where he played left guard on the high school football team.

In 1922, while still in high school and having seen just one race, Beckett talked his way into the cockpit of a car owned by Art Richter and Ralph Miller at a track in Richmond, Indiana. And, according to motorsports writer Nat Kleinfield, he won the feature in his first outing.

Said Beckett, "After I had run a few laps, the other fellows were so frightened at the way I covered the track (from the inside to the outside) that they let me go out front where they could watch me without getting hurt."

After completing high school, Larry joined the Dayton Police Department and soon advanced to motorcycle patrolman. It was not long before the chief of police got wind of Beckett's "other job," and told him to make a choice, motorcycle cop or race car driver. It was an easy choice for the 185-pound, 5-foot 10-inch young man and Larry was now a full-time race car driver.

One of Beckett's top finishes came at the Montgomery County Fairgrounds in Dayton in 1929, when Larry finished third in the only 200-lap race ever run on the half-mile track. He also went 'out of the ballpark' that season at New Bremen, Ohio, in car number 13, but was okay other than a wrenched shoulder. He also never drove that number car again.

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He tied Bob Carey's track record at the super-fast Greenville, Ohio, oval in 1930. He won the feature there in 1932, defeating Mark Billman and Tony Willman. Greenville would also be the site of another one of his bad accidents, where he was thrown fifty feet from his car. Luckily, only his back was torn up, but it healed. Later in 1932, he ran third at Detroit to Carey and Ira Hall. He won again at Troy, Ohio, over Bill Chittum.

The year 1933 saw Beckett in victory lane on a regular basis. Early in the season, Larry traveled to

Tampa, Florida, and met up with car owner Harlo John "Jack" Sheppard, an entrepreneur originally from Davenport, Iowa. Sheppard and Beckett set to work on building a new Hal-powered car for Larry to drive and it saw them visit 17 states, winning 21 features during the year. One of the most important wins came at Hibbing, Minnesota, when Larry swept past Sig Haugdahl for the victory.

Starting the 1934 season the same way he ended '33, Larry was victorious in the Tampa 'big car' feature on January 30, leading Gus Schrader and Sherman "Red" Campbell to the flag. Schrader started on the pole for this race flanked by Beckett. At the green flag, Larry shot out to a lead that he steadily increased throughout the race. This was one of Beckett's biggest thrills in his career. Beckett also won a roadster race at the Camp Foster race track in Jacksonville, Florida, to end the 1934 season.

Larry became a regular on the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) tour racing against Herschel Buchanan, Butler "Buddy" Callaway, Emory Collins, Clyde Gilbert, Bill Morris, Len Musick, Arch Powell, Ben Shaw, Gus Schrader, Austin E. Wetzler (a.k.a. "Tex West") and many other top names on a regular basis. He also made regular appearances on the Central States Racing Association (CSRA) circuit against the likes of Joie Chittwood, Johnny DeCamp, J. Carlyle "Duke" Dinsmore, Mike Salay, Everett Saylor and Jimmy Wilburn.

Larry scored a pair of big wins at Savannah, Georgia, late in the 1936 season, ending the winning streak of Lou Brown. Beckett sat in third behind Brown and "Buddy" Callaway until Callaway made a mistake by nearly spinning. Larry blasted the white number 15 Jack Sheppard Special around Callaway and, just as quickly, swept around the surprised Brown for the win. The second victory came in the Lou Brown Memorial several weeks later.

In early 1937, Buddy Callaway and Larry Beckett won the traditional Tampa Fair races on January 26 and February 14, respectively. Larry finished seventeenth in the 1937 CSRA point standings, which was won by fellow Dayton racer Everett Saylor.

In 1938, the sport of stock car racing was just getting going and Larry won an early event during that season at Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta, Georgia. He enjoyed the oddly-shaped one-mile oval so much that he came back for a 'big car' event later in the year and swept the show, winning every event in which he was entered in Jack Sheppard's Riley.

He also won a Mickey Martin-promoted stock car race in late November at Macon, Georgia. On December 4, Beckett won a 50-mile 'national championship' stock car race at Lakewood over runner-up Robert "Red" Byron.

Beckett continued to tour the 'big car' circuits of IMCA and CSRA with Jack Sheppard. Larry's annual routine was to spend the winters in Tampa, where he mixed racing with running a 39-foot cabin cruiser for fishing parties. He would leave in April for the racing wars in Indiana and Ohio, before traveling to Montana, the Dakota's and Canada in late summer and fall. He would then return to the sunny South for more winter racing. He also worked as an electric and acetylene welder in his spare time.

But, by the late-1930's, a new kind of racing was making its mark - the mighty midget cars. Larry started taking some rides in the 'doodlebugs,' including on the seventh-mile velodrome board track at Nutley, New Jersey, and came to the fifth-mile Capitol Speedway in Washington, D.C., for an American Automobile Association (AAA) midget car race on Tuesday night, August 8, 1939. The track had just had its grand opening on July 25, with Dennis "Duke" Nalon scoring that win.

From all accounts, the new track was pretty primitive. The lighting was very poor and dust became a major problem. Beckett was leading the first 15-lap, six-car semi-final race when he clipped a hay bale on the inside of the track. The contact threw his car into a series of cartwheels and Larry was thrown on the track; he passed away the next day of a fractured skull and a broken neck. He was survived by his second wife, Dorothy, and was buried in Dayton's Memorial Park cemetery.

Larry and his first wife, Margaret Will, who died of tuberculosis in 1936, had two children, Larry, Jr., and Betty Lou. Lawrence E. Beckett, Jr., was born in 1923 in Dayton, lived in the St. Louis area, and died in 2012 in Tucson, Arizona. The United States Air Force (USAF) Lieutenant Colonel was survived by his wife, Evelyn Mae Beckett. Their son, Lawrence E. Beckett III, today lives and works in Tucson with his wife Debra. Larry Beckett III also has a sister, Lauren Beckett Kelley, who lives in Ajo, Arizona.