

national sprint car hall of fame

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL OF FAME

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NATIONAL SPRINT CAR
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bobby Davis, Jr.

by Tony Martin

Bobby Davis, Jr., was born on April 8, 1963, in Memphis, Tennessee, to parents Shirley and Bobby Davis, Sr. He has three sisters.

Bobby Davis, Sr., was a renowned car owner who employed several of the country's finest drivers. The elder Davis won a track championship with driver Tommy Noblin at Riverside International Speedway in West Memphis, Arkansas, (a.k.a. 'the Ditch') along with victories all across the country.

Tommy Noblin was followed by Rickey Hood and a young Sammy Swindell, who took over the driving duties of the 'Memphis Missile.' It was in this environment that Bobby Davis, Jr., thrived, spending countless hours with those engaged in preparing the cars for battle. The Bobby Davis Electric Company, Inc., number 71 sprint car team, with Swindell driving the Tommy Sanders-prepared car, was always a threat and young go-kart and micro-midget racer Bobby generally made the road trips with the team.

Bobby Davis, Jr., who graduated Craigmont High School one year early so he could go racing, first got behind the wheel of a sprint car in 1980 at the age of 17. His first car was built by Hanover, Pennsylvania, native Tommy Sanders, who had spent time with the likes of Bobby Allen, Jan Opperman and Kenny Weld before moving to Memphis. And, although considered a West Memphis protégé, Bobby chose to hit the road a majority of the time. In his very first attempt at competing, Davis set fast time on the final night of a two-night World of Outlaws (WoO) program at the Big H Speedway in Houston, Texas.

Later in his rookie season, Bobby traveled to Knoxville Raceway in Iowa and was awarded the 1980 "Rookie of the Year" title, along with fellow

laps at Riverside but most were while packing the track before I started racing," said Bobby. Surprisingly, he says, "I don't think I ran at 'the Ditch' more than a dozen times and most of those were big races."

In late March of 1982, eighteen-year-old Bobby became the youngest driver to ever win a WoO show. It took place at Lanny Edwards' Devil's Bowl Speedway in Mesquite, Texas, with Daryl Saucier wrenching the car.

While still running the Bobby Davis Electric car in 1982, Bobby traveled to the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield for an afternoon WoO race on the mile track. In a trouble-plagued day that turned out to be a life-changer, Fairfield, Pennsylvania's famous car owner Bob Weikert, along with driver Keith Kauffman, were parked next to the Memphis upstart. Kauffman put the famous number 29 "Beefmobile" Gambler sprint car on the pole, with Bobby alongside.

At the mile, Bobby came from dead last to third, before mechanical problems sidelined him. That night, at the quarter-mile track known as 'Little Springfield,' Bobby triumphed in an All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) main, despite having to ram through a crash in front of him on the final lap. When Bob Weikert saw the mangled mount with its crushed wing in the motel parking lot the following morning, he found it hard to believe that Bobby had actually won with it.

'Pappy,' as Bobby always refers to the outspoken central Pennsylvania car owner who was like another father, was impressed. Mechanic Ken Jenkins called Bobby on the following Tuesday and asked if he'd be interested in moving to the Keystone State to fill the seat of one of the best rides in the sport. Bobby's answer was, of course, 'yes,' as he jumped at the opportunity in second half of 1982. Jenkins and motor-builder Ron Shaver are two of the most frequently mentioned individuals when Davis speaks of those who helped propel his career.

In Pennsylvania, Davis was pretty much handed the reins in operating the car – something he did with great success. Although Bobby was responsible for setting up the car, Kenny Hammond acted as the crew chief and was charged with maintaining the power-plants. Ron Zook was along to assist as well.

"Mr. Weikert, Mrs. Winnie, and the whole Weikert family were great!" exclaims the polite Bobby Davis, Jr. He adds, "'Pappy' really motivated you and treated you great."

Upon his arrival in the land of the 'Pennsylvania Posse,' Davis gained the attention and respect of

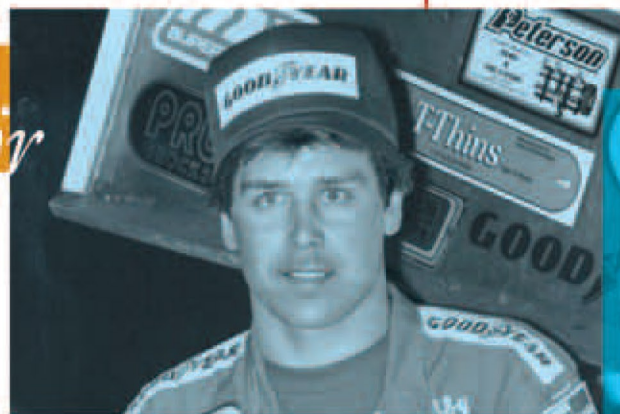


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one of the nation's best, Lynn Paxton, who was and is one of the area's premier students of the sport. This respect runs both ways as Bobby speaks very highly of his frequent combatant. Bobby includes Paxton amongst a small number of drivers with whom he was confident enough to run 'elbow-to-elbow.'

"I was not surprised at all that Weikert picked this youngster to drive as he was always looking for talent. Bobby was a young kid with a young crew and, as good as the competition was in the area, no one was in their league. He was a very clean driver and has my upmost respect," said Paxton.

While racing on the tough central Pennsylvania circuit, Bobby won 26 features for Bob Weikert in 1983. That year, Weikert and Davis won nine main events at Williams Grove on their way to the track title over Lynn Paxton. That year, Dave Blaney won the Tuscarora 50 at the Port Royal Speedway, while Paxton claimed the National Open in Al Hamilton's famed sprint car and then promptly retired.

His failure to win the Port Royal Speedway title that year still haunts Davis. He dejectedly relates that "although we won 11 of 17, they docked us points when we raced somewhere else on Saturday nights."

Also in 1983, Davis won the All Star Circuit's Ohio Sprint Speedweek title, three WoO victories and he grossed over \$100,000 for the year. In one of the WoO wins, at Don Martin's Lernerville Speedway in Sarver, Pennsylvania, in early August, Bobby lapped everyone except Steve Kinser and he was closing in on him at the finish.

On October 11, 1983, walked into Bob Weikert's home and quit the ultra-successful Weikert Livestock ride. Said Bobby, "We had a great year and everything, but if I stayed on a local deal, I'd feel like I was backin' up."

At the end of his Pennsylvania pursuits, Ken Jenkins once again called and Bobby found himself in the seat of C.K. Spurlock's Gambler house car. Most of his efforts were aimed at the World of Outlaws. He is still ranked 13th among all-time winners with 46 A-Main victories. He also claimed 22 wins with the All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC) during his career.

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driver Duane Feduska, at the Knoxville Nationals. Bobby was also named the 1980 WoO "Rookie of the Year."

The following year, he ran part-time on Ted Johnson's tough WoO national tour, catching races in Illinois, Missouri, Texas, and on the West Coast. Again, the young man who looked up to Doug Wolfgang didn't stay at home much. "I made a lot of



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The Gamblers were owned by Gil Suiter (Gil's Drilling) in 1984 and Quinton Bammer (Moeller Brothers) in '85.

Davis says, "We had a hell of a team! Renowned crew chief Kenny Woodruff and designer Floyd Bailey were very talented and always gave me a good product to run."

After his turn at Gambler, it was on to the Paul Morgan-owned Consolidated Credit machine with Challenger proprietor and friend Ken Jenkins at his side. Although Bobby did much of the wrenching himself, mechanic Doug Strauss was on-board in 1985, while Chris Santucci and John Arnold provided their talent turning the wrenches in '86. Bobby also wheeled the Guy Forbrook- and Tom Wimmer-owned machines.

During the 1984-87 timeframe, Bobby won the 1984 Jackson Nationals in Minnesota, the 1985 Eagle Nationals in Nebraska, and the 1986 Western World Championships at R. Keith Hall's Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix, Arizona.

In 1988, 'the Memphis Missile' teamed up once again with chief mechanic Kenny Woodruff to campaign the Casey Luna Ford number 10 sprint car from Albuquerque, New Mexico. The Davis-Woodruff-Luna team finally won the World of Outlaws (WoO) point championship in 1989, earning \$250,895 along the way.

Finishing second through tenth that year in WoO points were Jeff Swindell, Kris Eash, Tim Green, Joe Gaerte, Jac Haudenschild, Andy Hillenburg, Keith Kauffman, Doug Wolfgang and Steve Siegel, respectively.

Unfortunately, the 1989 season will be always be remembered as the time of the World of Outlaws (WoO)/United Sprint Association (USA) split.

In some people's minds, the fact that the combatants often chose to run somewhere else clouds the great accomplishment achieved by Davis and the Luna team. This is not the case with Davis who proudly proclaims, "My job was to beat whoever showed up and that's what I did!"

To add an exclamation point to the accomplishments of that year, Bobby dominated the best of both groups to claim the 1989 King's Royal title at Earl Baltes' Eldora Speedway.

In the six-year span, 1984 through his championship-winning run in '89, Bobby Davis, Jr., never finished out of the 'top three' in season-ending World of Outlaws points. He was third in 1984, runner-up to Steve Kinser in '85 and '86, and third in '87 and '88.

Luna's unconventional Ford-powered sprint car continued near the front of

the field until Woodruff suffered a heart attack during the 1991 campaign. Casey chose to park the car until Kenny could return, forcing Bobby to make a hard choice.

With the goal of moving on to the ranks of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), Bobby knew he couldn't just wait. "I knew I had to do well to get picked up for a ride," Davis said.

So it was time to return to Memphis with his wife of seven years, who is also named Bobbie (but known to many in racing as "Pudge"). He returned to help his dad, Bobby, Sr., with the family industrial and commercial wiring electrical business. He set up shop in a company garage. It was there that the unsponsored and generic-looking red number 4 sprint car was created.

Along with family and friends like Barry Blue, Jimmy Holder, Lonnie Boaz and Garvin Hershey, the journeyman racer with a ton of talent and determination was ready to take on the other teams with their big rigs and their matching wallets. The Davis duo of Bobby and Bobbie were chasing racing in hopes of him landing him a ride in NASCAR.

"Once I got to the track, my stuff was as good as anybody's," Bobby relates. Despite considerable time and effort being spent in an attempt to land a NASCAR ride, the Davis' efforts failed. They didn't fail because of a lack of talent and determination, though. They failed because he had everything that was needed, except a big wallet to bring to the table.

Another accomplishment that is missing on Davis' resume is a Knoxville Nationals win, though it is again not for a lack of effort nor talent. He has five 'top five' finishes, nine 'top ten' finishes, and he was runner-up to national champion Steve Kinser in both 1987 and '88. He qualified for the championship A-Main in fourteen out of sixteen attempts.

Even so, veteran *Open Wheel* magazine writer Bruce Ellis ranked Bobby Davis, Jr., as the fourth-best sprint car driver of the 1980's, behind Steve Kinser, Doug Wolfgang and Sammy Swindell, respectively. In that same 'top ten' list, he was ranked ahead of Bobby Allen, Keith Kauffman, Brad Doty, Dave Blaney, Jack Hewitt and Ron Shuman & Jeff Swindell (tied), respectively.

Following his retirement as a driver in late 1996, Bobby Davis, Jr., took over the Bobby Davis Electric Company when his dad was sidelined with health problems. In 2012, the decision was made to close the Bobby Davis Electric Company. The immensely talented ex-racer now works as a senior electrical technician with VersaTech, a large company that had formerly been a client and which provides electrical automation and communications. Today, he is a foreman working with companies involved in oil and natural gas exploration.

He and Bobbie live in Germantown, Tennessee, near his beloved Memphis.