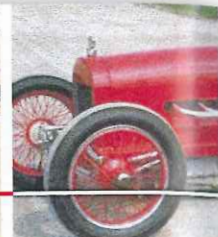




• 2018 INDUCTEES • 2018 INDUCTEES

national sprint car hall of fame

KNOXVILLE, IOWA



bryan Clauson

PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN MAHONEY

by Dean Mills

Bryan Clauson was born April 15, 1989. It's hard to argue the fact that Bryan reached more branches in the proverbial auto racing family tree than anyone else in modern times. From his time in 1/4 midgets, to his early days in Kenyon Midgets, his time as young teenager in wingless 410 Sprint Cars on the bullrings of Indiana, through his USAC days, his all-too-brief time in NASCAR, his three starts at Indy, to his successful transition to Winged Sprint Cars, his time racing Midgets in New Zealand, and his dream to compete in 200 races in one calendar year, he touched all the bases.

His passing, coming just seven weeks after his 27th birthday while in the midst of that "Circular Insanity" tour, has had an indelible impact on the motorsports community worldwide. Once his family learned of his decision to check the box on his Indiana driver's license, they made it their focus to bring about awareness to organ donation, which sparked the largest donor campaign in history. "Driven to Save Lives" will likely ensure that never changes. Much has been written and said about Bryan in the 20 months since his passing. You can find nary a person who ever came in contact with him that didn't see what a remarkable young man he was.

Those that knew Bryan knew him to be one of the most competitive people in our sport and he channeled his competitive fire in his love for auto racing. As a youngster, he would sit in the stands and watch intently as his father Tim competed in 360 and 410 Sprint Cars on the short tracks of Northern California. "Bryan was always so analytical when it came to racing," Tim admitted. "He would sit and watch my races, and then he would take his wooden sprint cars and re-enact my races for me later. And usually, he would point out things that I could have done better out there, and, hindsight, being 20/20, I should have realized then (he had something special). But, being his Dad, I just think I was too close to it to see it."

Then when the elder Clauson got hurt in a race car, that's when life changed for young

Bryan. "I didn't even consider putting him in a car until I broke my back and had to sit out for a while. Naturally, I got bored, and we got a 1/4 midget." It wasn't long before the youngster was winning in 1/4 midgets, following the footsteps of his Dad. Soon he got hooked up with an old competitor of Tim's, John Golobic. And, that's when things took off.

By the time BC was nine years of age, Tim and his wife Diana moved the family to Indiana. It wasn't long before Bryan was old enough to take the next step, and found his way into Kenyon Midgets, first with NAMARS where he won the 2002 Championship, then with USAC. In addition, he began racing full size Sprint Cars, starting when he was 13, at the only place that would let him at that age, Kokomo Speedway. It was four days after his 15th birthday before Bryan got his first win aboard a Sprint Car, at Paragon's 50th Anniversary race, no less.

The cornerstone of Bryan's Hall of Fame career is his USAC resume. His first career victory in United States Auto Club competition came in Kenyon Midgets at the Indianapolis Speedrome on June 9, 2004, just six days before his 15th birthday. He added five more wins at the Speedrome before his 16th birthday, and a final checkered flag there 22 days after it.

June 17, 2005. Two days after turning 16, Bryan began his storied USAC career with a National Sprint and Midget double header at Limaland Raceway Park in Ohio. In the late stages of the 30 lap National Sprint Car feature, he was side by side with USAC veterans Jay Drake and Levi Jones for the lead, until Jones used traffic to outgun Drake and Clauson, who scored his first career podium with USAC. The next night, young Bryan found out just how daunting racing a USAC National Sprint Car could be when he crashed in the opening lap of practice at Eldora, necessitating a trip to the hospital. Undaunted, it was less than four months later that Bryan took full advantage of an opportunity with Keith Kunz' 71 Midget, and became the youngest winner in the history of USAC National competition with a victory at Columbus Motor Speedway, at the tender age of 16 years, four months, and 23 days. A record that still stands and likely never will be beaten.

Bryan then became the youngest ever winner of a USAC National Sprint Car race (at the

time) on April 23, 2006 with a victory for Keith Kunz at Winchester in the Rich Vogler Classic. He was still seven weeks shy of his 17th birthday. He followed that up nearly a month later with a National Sprint Car win in Concord, North Carolina in front of his new boss, Chip Ganassi, who was looking to bring BC to NC permanently to race stock cars for him. In August, Bryan doubled down and swept both ends of a National Sprint and Midget double header at Salem Speedway during the running of the 49th Joe James/Pat O'Connor Classic. It was a Nationally Televised event for the Outdoor Channel, and surely hastened Bryan's departure to the NASCAR ranks, as did a crash that broke two vertebrae in his neck three weeks later at Lucas Oil Speedway in Wheatland, Missouri.

In 2007, Bryan began his brief foray into stock cars with five starts in ARCA competition, with one pole and a victory at Gateway International Raceway. He competed in what was then called the NASCAR Bush Series 26 times over the next two years, splitting time with Dario Franchitti for Ganassi with one pole and two top-ten finishes before the team folded when sponsorship disappeared amongst the economic downfall of 2008.

Meanwhile, Bryan had continued to race USAC National Midgets whenever his scheduled allowed and won four events between June 16, 2007 (Indianapolis Raceway Park) & August 10, 2008 (Kokomo Speedway). That helped Bryan make one of the hardest decisions of his young life, when he chose to walk away from NASCAR completely to go back to full-time USAC competition for the 2009 season. Of the decision, his father explains it best. "Bryan never cared about the money (he could make down there), he just wanted to race," Tim stated flatly. "He was so young when he went down there, and he had a list of races he wanted to win. In his own words, he 'didn't want to be a start and park guy' or race in cars in which he couldn't be competitive. When he had to make a choice, RACING was more important than the almighty dollar." So he walked away.

What transpired from 2009 until his untimely death in August of 2016 was something right out of a Hollywood movie. We all know the stats and the trajectory of his career in that time period, but here are some of the highlights. June 13-14, 2009, Bryan celebrated his birthday weekend with a pair of wins (Lawrenceburg and Kokomo) during Indiana Midgetweek, then won his first Indiana

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Sprintweek race at Bloomington less than a month later. He won his first Belleville Midgets Nationals with two victories in one day on August 1, followed by a win at the Pepsi Nationals at Angell Park to end that month, then went West in the fall and scored victories at the Oval Nationals, and grabbed his first Turkey Night Grand Prix at Irwindale, to close 2009 with eleven victories in USAC competition. 2010 saw a second consecutive Belleville title (not sanctioned by USAC), as well as ten wins split between all 3 divisions of USAC National competition, with marquee victories coming with a National Sprint Car win at Iowa Speedway, back to back wins at Sun Prairie on August 28 & 29, his first win at Eldora of any kind in the Silver Crown portion of the Four-Crown Nationals for Tony Stewart and a second consecutive Turkey Night Grand Prix at Irwindale. In addition, he scored the first of two consecutive USAC National Midget Championships, as well as became the first ever "USAC National Driver Champion", which carried with it, a scholarship for Indy Lights Series competition the following year. Over the next two years, he made eight Indy Lights starts, with one podium finish, while he honed his skills in preparation for a shot at the Indianapolis 500.

2011 saw BC bookend the season with National Sprint wins at Ocala in February to start the year, and on consecutive nights at Canyon Speedway Park to close the year in October. In between, he defended his National Midget title with five victories, including a pair at Dodge City, and one each at Putnamville, Lawrenceburg, and Angell Park. With his second consecutive Indy Car scholarship, he was able to put a deal together to run the 2012 Indy 500.

In 2012, Clauson put together another ten-win USAC season, with victories in National Sprint Car competition in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, his adopted home state of Indiana (Gas City and Kokomo), and California. In the process, he scored his first of two consecutive USAC National Sprint Car titles. In addition, he scored National Midget wins in the Hoosier state (Putnamville) and Wisconsin, as well as his second Silver Crown feature at Eldora's Four-Crown in three years. All this added up to another Indy Car scholarship, with his third and final "USAC National Driver of the Year" Championship, which ceased to exist after three seasons.

2013 marked the most lucrative USAC season of his career, with 22 wins over five divisions, with 10 victories at his personal ATM machine, Canyon Speedway Park alone. This included a last lap victory at the "Western World Championships" in which he defeated Darren Hagen with a last lap, last corner pass, using something he called his "Superman move" to win \$20,000 after sweeping both divisions on the card. Despite all this, Bryan began testing the waters of winged Sprint Cars, and won his first career feature with a wing by beating Christopher Bell in a photo finish to score a MOWA victory in the "Herb Barlow Memorial" at Jacksonville Speedway in Illinois on September 13th. Once again, Bryan broadened his own horizons.

BC started 2014 by winning the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals for Joe Dooling and Rusty Kunz, an emotional victory that was as meaningful as any win Bryan had ever had. He still managed to win nine USAC races in the 2014 campaign, with bucket list victories coming at Terre Haute during Indiana Sprintweek in The TSR 20, and Eldora in Dooling's 63 Midget during the Four Crown. He also grabbed the

\$10,000 to win Fall Nationals at Lawrenceburg. But, the highlight of the year may well have been putting the Buffalo Wild Wings car in the A Feature at the Knoxville Nationals, making him the first USAC National Sprint Car Champion to accomplish the feat since Steve Butler in 1987. Clauson finished 17th.

For 2015, BC teamed with Matt Wood Racing and put more winged Sprint Car races on his plate, while returning to the Indy 500 for KV Racing/Jonathan Byrd Motorsports. His USAC schedule was curtailed even further, but he still managed victories at Bloomington, Putnamville, and Tucson, and managed high profile wins at the Belleville Midget Nationals (in the process becoming just the second three-time winner along with Jerry Coons, Jr.), the \$20,000-to-win Jason Leffler Memorial at Wayne City, IL, and the prestigious Oval Nationals at Perris Auto Speedway. However, the biggest win was undoubtedly the victory in the Friday Qualifying night at the Knoxville Nationals. After qualifying second quick, BC won his heat, started 3rd in the feature, and took the lead on lap nine on his way to the historic win. The next night, he scored a 12th place finish in the Knoxville Nationals A Feature.

In 2016, Bryan ran second in the Chili Bowl to Rico Abreu. His USAC season began with three wins at Canyon in Southwest Sprint Car competition, as well as winning at Las Vegas aboard Mike Martin's car with another "Superman Move" on the final corner in March. He won at Perris in CRA competition the next night, then finally got a win at Eldora in a USAC National Sprint Car, completing the sweep of all USAC National divisions at the Big E. He ran the 100th running of the Indy 500, making his third start at the Brickyard, leading three laps (including lap 100), and finished a career high 23rd in the Greatest Spectacle in Racing. That evening he ran up the hill and completed the "Indiana Double" with a win at Kokomo Speedway, his 16th career victory at the 1/4 mile speed plant. It is no secret that Kokomo was his favorite race track, and he was always proud to be a Kokomo Speedway Sprint Car Champion (in 2014). He continued to juggle his wing schedule, with his non-wing schedule, and grabbed his first and only All-Star Circuit of Champions feature victory on July 21 at Sharon Speedway. He brought home wins in USAC competition at Grandview, Lincoln, Port Royal and West Memphis, nabbed a July Indiana Sprintweek event at Lawrenceburg, then won his 112th career USAC feature on August 3rd at Solomon Valley in Beloit, Kansas, which put him fifth all-time on the USAC winners list. Sadly it would be his last. A trip to Knoxville the next day insured he was qualified for the Knoxville 360 Nationals, but instead, he had his eyes set on another Belleville Midget Nationals win, in hopes of becoming the first four-time winner. An accident on the opening night of Belleville forced him to say no to a 305 winged car opportunity for the final night at the High Banks, but he felt good enough to race the Midget, and qualified for the Belleville Midget Nationals, his 117th race of the season. Bryan was said to be "running the race of his life", charging from his ninth starting spot to the lead in just 13 laps. He was on his way to victory when fate intervened. Bryan Clauson perished just seven weeks after his 27th birthday, bringing to a close a storybook career that lasted only 22 years in full.

April of 2018 saw the Grand Opening of the Bryan Clauson Suite Tower at the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum. In June, Bryan became the youngest person inducted on Saturday, June 2, just thirteen days before his 29th birthday.

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