

ALLEN "SAMMY" SESSIONS

By Carol Haynes

Whether it involved racing on dirt, asphalt or snow, Allen D. "Sammy" Sessions of Nashville, Michigan, was a winner. Sessions, born on September 10, 1935, began his career in 1958 at the Hastings Speedway in the jalopy class. He soon moved to the more powerful super-modifieds at the local Michigan tracks of Galesburg, Grand Rapids, Jackson and Berlin along with fellow drivers Art Bennett, Johnny Logan, Jim Gresley, Todd Gibson and Gordy Johncock. He was the 1962 track champion at the Grand Rapids Speedrome in 1962 and also won a national championship super-modified 200-lap race at South Bend, Indiana, that year.

Sammy followed his buddies to central New York in the early '60s, driving the Bingo 151 owned by Pete Webster. At 5'9" and 143 pounds, the wiry and very popular Sessions was nicknamed "The Little Tiger" by Oswego announcer Jack Burgess. In 1963, he won 100-lap events at Sandusky, Shangri-La and Delaware, Ontario. In 1964, Sammy won three features in a row at Oswego in June and was well on his way to the track championship when he was involved in one of the most spectacular accidents in the track's history. He caught a wheel early in the feature on June 27th and cartwheeled over the first turn fence, landing outside the track. Despite a month's recuperation, Sam returned a month later to finish second to Nolan Swift in the track championship. He set the pole and led the majority of the 1964 International Classic and won a 50-lap fall championship race.

By 1965, Sammy was a rookie in the United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car and championship car divisions, cutting his teeth on the tough midwestern and eastern dirt and asphalt ovals like Eldora, Salem, Terre Haute, New Bremen, Williams Grove, Selinsgrove, Reading and Winchester - his favorite track. He finished 13th in his first champ car start at Atlanta in 1965 and earned points in 3 other races to finish 33rd in the championship points.

Sessions was soon doing triple duty with USAC, running sprints, midgets and champ cars all over the country. At that time, the champ car division included both dirt champ cars, later called Silver Crown, and rear-engine Indy cars. The versatile Sessions would find himself racing on the Indiana State Fairgrounds dirt one night and the Pocono 500 a couple of days later in the Indy car. His competition on the circuit was some of the best in auto racing history: Johnny Rutherford, Mario Andretti, Al Unser, Sr., Bobby Unser, A.J. Foyt, Gordy Johncock, Larry Dickson, Roger McCluskey and Jim Hurtubise.

In 1967, Sammy made a long-anticipated and welcomed return to Oswego Speedway in the USAC sprint car race, on his way to a second place in the national sprint car championship. Considered one of the top sprint car drivers on the circuit, Sessions won a 50-lap USAC feature at Oswego in August 1968 in the Gapco Special #83.

By the early 70's Sammy Sessions was on his way to



Allen "Sammy" Sessions

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becoming a household name in American open wheel racing. His big Indy break came in 1972 when he was tapped to drive a state-of-the-art Lola Indy car, teaming him with Indy veteran Lloyd Ruby and Winston Cup star Cale Yarborough. The ride was only for the Indianapolis 500, but his fourth place run caught the attention of many of USAC's elite owners. In June, Sammy and his wife Karen were living in Indianapolis when an early-morning call from Tony Foyt, A.J.'s father, scrambled Sonny out of bed. Said Karen, whom Sammy affectionately called "Trinket", "That was the only time I ever saw Sammy get nervous. He couldn't get his pants on and get out the door fast enough."

Sammy got the ride in Foyt's champ car and ran the remainder of the 1972 series at tracks like Trenton, Langhorne, Atlanta, Pocono and Milwaukee. He finished fourth in the Ontario 500.

Sessions' sprint car career also hit its peak in 1972, when he captured the USAC National Sprint Car Championship, besting Rollie Beale, Lee Kunzman, Larry Dickson, and Larry "Boom Boom" Cannon. Sammy drove for Mauri Amerling of Port Ewen, New York, that season in the number four machine. During his USAC career, Sammy captured 22 sprint car wins and four victories in the midget car series.

Probably Sammy's best shot at an Indy 500 victory came in 1975. Driving for premier crew chief Mike Devin, Sessions was running a close second to Bobby Unser late in the race when the engine expired. Five minutes later, a massive rainstorm washed across the brickyard and the race was red flagged.

In 1976, he attempted to make the Indy 500 in a car owned and wrenched by the fabled Henry "Smokey" Yunick. That same year, Sammy got back together with long-time super-modified car owner Max Dowker and together they won the 1976 Tri-Sac championship, a series which involved racing both supers and sprint cars on asphalt and dirt tracks throughout the Midwest.

Away from the track, Sammy spent many hours in his yard and garden and also enjoyed an occasional fishing trip. His need to go fast also included flying airplanes in his spare time. But racing nine months a year wasn't enough for Sammy so during the winter months, he went racing on the snow. In 1970, he ran the circuit for Mickey Rupp and, in 1971, he won three Michigan International Snowmobile Association Championships.

It was in the winter of 1977 that Sammy, driving for a factory snowmobile team, lost his life. He left behind a devastated family to whom he was totally devoted. In spite of all his racing commitments, the three most important people in Sammy's life remained his wife Trinket, his mother and grandmother. During his rookie year at Indy in May 1968, his grandmother became seriously ill back in Michigan. His mother wouldn't relay the news of his grandmother's illness, knowing that Sammy's choice would have been simple - he would have left Indy behind to be with his family. That was the kind of person he was.