

JAMES M. "BILLY" WINN

by Donald Davidson

Unquestionably one of the outstanding dirt track drivers of the 1930's, James M. "Billy" Winn was a Kansas City, Missouri, product who gained most of his considerable notoriety on the half-mile tracks of the eastern states. His skills even raised the eyebrows of the Europeans at the Vanderbilt Cup races on Long Island in 1936 and 1937, and he became closely associated with the legendary Harry A. Miller in the final days of Miller's career. But what really put him on the map was an association with the famed promoter Ralph "Pappy" Hankinson, for whom Billy was a leading draw for a full decade.

Diminutive and solidly built, the appropriately named Winn had blond hair and sported a wisp of a mustache, a la Ted Horn. A flashy dresser, he wore plus fours for a while and never raced without a trademark flaming red shirt and red helmet, hence his nickname, "The Red Devil." The bloodlines of that tradition came from a red cloth helmet given him by an early mentor, Bob Robinson, just prior to Robinson's demise in 1930.

In spite of his dirt track prowess, Winn first gained success as a regular at the steeply banked Woodbridge, New Jersey, half-mile wooden board track where he raced with success against Fred Frame, although Frame usually won. Between 1932 and '34, Winn registered 27 feature triumphs. He recorded a season high of 10 wins on his way to being runner-up to Bryan Saulpaugh in the inaugural championship in 1932. One year later he ranked third behind Bob Sall and Johnny Hannon, respectively, with 10 more wins. And he piled up another seven wins as runner-up to Johnny Hannon in 1934. The following year, he dropped to twelfth, mainly because he had curtailed his activities to only those events promoted by Ralph Hankinson. And, in a separate point system the publicity conscious Hankinson created for his own events, Winn ranked second to George "Doc" MacKenzie. Billy won that title in 1934.

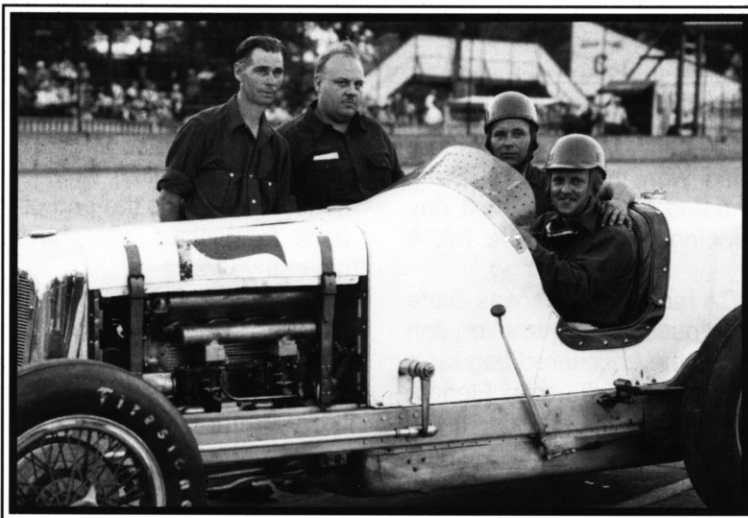
In the meantime, Hankinson ventured into the Midwest and Winn went with him, going wherever he was needed and wherever deals were being offered. Winn won the American Automobile Association (AAA) National Championship race at Springfield, Illinois, in 1934 and '35, as well as those at Syracuse, New York, in 1935 and '37. Although he continued to rank among the leading dozen point scorers in the East each year, a trio of wins on the Milwaukee Mile and one at Roby, Indiana, over a two-year

period had him fourth in Midwest points behind Rex Mays, Wilbur Shaw and Chet Gardner in 1936, while only Mays and Jimmy Snyder outscored him in 1937.

Truly outstanding was his performance in the pair of international Vanderbilt Cup races held over a complicated multi-turn dirt track road course on Long Island. He qualified an amazing second for the 1936 event, splitting the all-powerful Alfa Romeo team, and while the Alfas had the advantage on the long straights, their drivers were not familiar with the intricacies of dirt tracking through the turns. The Europeans were confounded, as were the fans, as Winn mixed it up with Tazio Nuvolari, Giuseppe Farina and Antonio Brivio and was running third after almost four hours when his rear axle broke after 64 of the 75 laps. The following year he qualified seventh, engaged in a spirited

duel with the Mercedes-Benz of Englishman Dick Seaman, and was said to have been in tears when the crankshaft broke after only eight laps.

Although he never had much luck at Indianapolis, he did compete in the "500" eight times, starting in four of them and serving as a relief driver in four others. He shared a Fred Frame-owned Duesenberg to ninth in 1932 with his longtime Kansas City colleague, Jimmy Patterson, and was seventh as relief for



James "Billy" Winn

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Cliff Bergere in 1934 and sixth for Shorty Cantlon in 1935. In 1937, a car he owned placed seventh in the hands of Billy Devore and Fred Frame.

In 1935, he had been one of the first drivers to be signed up for the ill-fated 10-car team of factory-entered Ford V8s, only to have difficulty with both of the cars he tried to qualify at the last minute. But he did form a close bond with Harry Miller, designer of the cars, and he went with Miller to Pittsburgh to work for Gulf Oil Company and develop a quartet of revolutionary cars for the 1938 "500." Two were front-engined and two rear-engined, but none of them qualified. Billy spent race day as relief for Ronney Householder in one of the equally revolutionary Sparks and Thorne cars. He broke down with supercharger trouble while running 3rd at 154 laps.

By this time, Billy had cut back quite a bit on his racing endeavors. He had married the famed Helene Yockey, a wealthy racing enthusiast who had been widowed by fellow driver Joe Russo after only six months of marriage in June 1934. By May of 1936, Billy had moved to Detroit to serve as an executive with Helene's furniture company.

It all came to a tragic end on August 20, 1938, when Billy hooked a rut on lap four of the 100-miler at Springfield and cartwheeled to his death.