

# JOIE RAY - DRIVER

By Patrick Sullivan

**OF THE MANY RACERS** who have been enshrined in the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, Joie Ray may hold the distinction of having the fewest career wins. In this case statistics are irrelevant. Ray was one of this sport's great ambassadors. More importantly, he appealed to our greater selves and by example reminded us of all we could be better people.

Born to Joseph Ray Sr. and his wife Ella on September 29, 1923, all things considered, he could not have been reared in better circumstances. Louisville had a vibrant African American community and Ray Sr. was a recognized civic leader. He served as the President of the First Standard Bank, and later joined the Eisenhower Administration with a focus on housing.

As a young boy, Ray became friends with others who made their mark. One was Georgia (Montgomery) Davis Powers, the first African American woman to serve in the Kentucky State Senate. She was a close confidant of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Another friend, Muhammad Ali, grew up four doors away. Despite his supportive surroundings, the world outside of Joie's enclave was less kind. To underscore this, consider that one grandfather and a great uncle had been slaves.

Ray tried to emulate the life of his father but he was too restless. He was ready for action. In fact, he wanted to get involved in auto racing. He sometimes played the numbers and one day he got lucky. Flush with cash, he purchased a Dodge powered race car.

On Easter Sunday, 1947, he headed to Mitchell, Indiana, to try racing for the first time. His first attempt scared him. Still, he stuck with it. He became a regular in a blue collar group known as the Midwest Dirt Track Racing Association, better known as the Kerosene Circuit. As a Black man he was an outsider and a curiosity, but what he possessed was a magnetic personality. In this period, there was no one more important to Ray than James Bernard "Chick" Smith. Smith had been racing since 1929. He was not only successful, he was also well-regarded. Smith had a soft spot for Joie Ray. A defining moment came at Franklin, Indiana. Announcer Hank Heald was looking trackside when he exclaimed to all "Who is the [obscurity] in

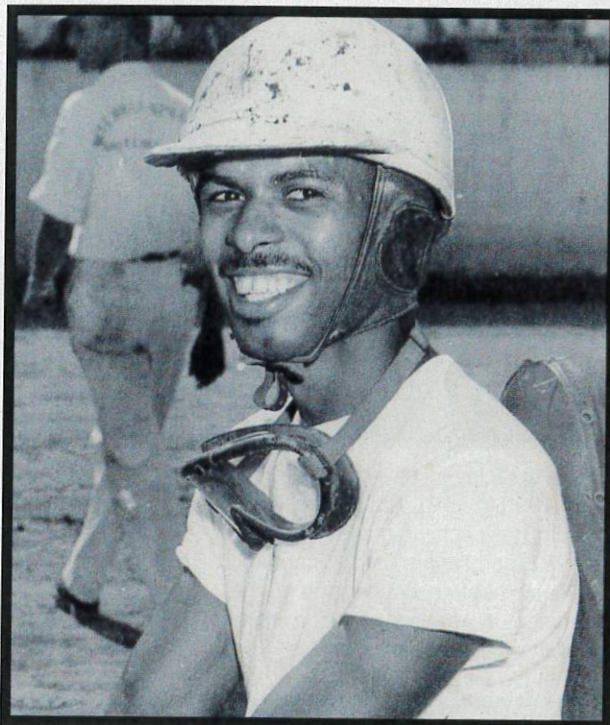
number seven?" MDTRA standouts Smith, Bill Cantrell, and Cliff Griffith were not amused. They motioned to Ray to stay put as they headed to the press box. A quick chat with Heald followed. With their message delivered Hank then pronounced to the crowd "Ladies and gentlemen in the red number seven is Joie Ray, the world's greatest colored driver." In his fashion he and Heald later became friends. That's Joie Ray.

Joie improved and was hungry to hit the road. He raced with the IMCA, and he didn't shy away from tough places like Jungle Park Speedway, the Belleville High Banks, or the so called hills. of death closer to home. In less than stellar equipment, he did his best. More importantly, he earned everyone's respect.

The movie "Green Book" documents the travails of African Americans as they travelled across a segregated country. Joie Ray lived this. During his sojourns, local authorities once suggested the safest place Ray could stay was in the jail. So, he did. Once he was directed to a place run by "Miss Peaches". That was okay, too. Yet, at critical times, his racing peers stood up for him. Once when he was told he could not eat his post-race meal in the public area, Bobby Grim interceded. Grim told the proprietor if Joie wasn't allowed to eat with them no one was paying their bill.

He won three feature events. He took an IMCA race at Wausau, Wisconsin, but admits some frontrunners mistook the white flag for the checkered flag. Ray also won two features in Carrollton, Kentucky. Joie never embellished his record. Ever.

What he did do was break the color barrier with the country's leading sanctioning body - the American Automobile Association. It occurred on June 26, 1949, at Salem Speedway. Ray qualified 13th in a 25 car field and transferred to the feature via the



consolation race. He did it. The race was won by Troy Ruttman who, predictably, became a friend.

Some were unhappy that Joie was allowed to compete. It took the sometimes gruff Travis "Spider" Webb to get to the point. Webb said "Joie, number one you passed your test, that's the main thing. Two, your blood is red, and my blood is red. And, finally, you're a race driver." Enough said. Ray would be back.

Joie was once asked to join the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes, a series designated for African American drivers. He declined. His reason was simple. He felt to improve you must compete against the very best. That's what he did. In the history of sprint car racing, there have been better drivers, but there have been few finer people than Joie Ray. Ray died on April 13, 2007 - just over 60 years after his first race. ■

