



Photo: John Mahoney

JOHNNY CAPELS

- MECHANIC AND ADMINISTRATOR

By Richie Murray

FROM BUILDER TO DRIVER to chief mechanic to team manager to car owner to series president, Johnny Capels' highly decorated career took him to all fields of the auto racing landscape.

Capels was born on May 20, 1936, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to John and Jane (Anderson) Capels. By the time Capels turned 15, he began his lifelong involvement with automobiles. After school, he worked at a local auto repair shop, which just so happened to be owned by New Mexico's modified racing champion.

Armed with an innate desire to learn and succeed, young Johnny was soon constructing and piloting his own modifieds in his home state. That journey led him to becoming a driving champion with the New Mexico Motor Racing Association, and later, dipping his toes into the administrative side of the sport as series president.

By 1968, Capels had migrated to Indianapolis at the urging of fellow New Mexico racers, the Unsers, to assist in their burgeoning USAC National Championship racing programs while simultaneously embarking on a driving career of his own in the USAC National Sprint Car division.

Capels, as a USAC Rookie in 1968, won his only National Sprint Car feature at New York's Erie County Fairgrounds in a car owned by Al Unser. Also competing at vaunted venues such as the Terre Haute

Action Track, Reading Fairgrounds and Eldora Speedway that year, Capels' victory arrived in just his second career USAC start. Yet, as it turned out, it was a role outside the limelight of the driver's seat that provided him his greatest success in the sport.

As a mechanic, he was instrumental in capturing back-to-back Indy 500s with Al Unser and the famed Johnny Lightning Special for the Vel's Parnelli Jones USAC National Championship team in 1970-71, working alongside aces George Bignotti and Jimmy Dilamarter.

In fact, it was Bignotti who Capels last drove for in USAC Sprint Car competition during 1970. Following a ninth place finish at Williams Grove Speedway in October of 1970, Capels never appeared in the box score as a driver again. But don't you dare call it a retirement. Capels once quipped, "I never retired as a driver; I just didn't come out and strap on the gear in 1971." Instead, Capels shifted gears in his career and never looked back. It was a move that paid off big time.

With a new focus, Capels reached uncharted heights, following up his Indy triumphs by crew chiefing back-to-back USAC National championships for driver Joe Leonard during 1971-72, winning four races over the two-year period at Ontario, Michigan, Pocono and Milwaukee, including top five finishes in all eight of their starts in 1972.

Capels' mechanical wizardry on

the dirt was just as superb as it was on the pavement. He earned USAC Championship Dirt Car titles as a mechanic on the famed Viceroy cars for Al Unser in 1973 and Mario Andretti in 1974, and as a car owner and constructor for Pancho Carter in 1978, which made Carter USAC's first Triple Crown champion.

In 1975, Capels partnered with car owner Alex Morales as the team's chief mechanic and team manager. There, Capels directed marquee victories in the inaugural Michigan 500 in 1981 for driver Pancho Carter and once again in the 1986 event with Johnny Rutherford in the seat, the final victories for both legendary wheelman. Capels eventually purchased the team following the death of Morales in 1988 and introduced the Alfa Romeo engine to Indy Car racing in 1989.

Christened "The Golden Greek," a nickname given to him by National Speed Sport News' Bill Hill, Capels was named the president and COO of Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) in 1989. Capels ventured to USAC in 1992 as Director of Competition, and later, Senior Vice President before becoming USAC President and COO in 1997, directing the ship in a transition period following USAC's split from the Indy Racing League. In the coming years, Capels led a renaissance period for the venerable club as its young talent became the pipeline to both Indy Car and NASCAR.

Capels retired from his term as USAC president and COO in 2001 and was formally awarded with the Sagamore of the Wabash by Indiana Governor Frank O'Bannon.

In 1999, Capels formed the USAC International Road Racing Officials Team to officiate the Formula One World Championship Series under USAC from 2000-07 and for Moto GP from 2008-10. Capels further served as the Director of the Automobile Competition Committee for the United States (ACCUS) and was USAC's Chairman of the Board of Directors from 2002-10.

Capels died on June 9, 2022, at age 86. That same year, USAC named its National Chief Mechanic of the Year in honor of Capels with the first recipient of the "Golden Greek Award" being Keith Kunz/Curb-Agajanian Motorsports' Jarrett Martin. ■