

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

SAM TRAYLOR

by Pat Sullivan

There is perhaps no pun easier to turn than to suggest that Sam Traylor cast a huge shadow on the sport of sprint car racing. In an age when people over six feet tall were relatively uncommon, Traylor stood three inches taller than that standard and carried over 260 pounds.

Born in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in 1928, Samuel A. Traylor III soon was a regular at the Allentown and Reading Fairgrounds, and Williams Grove Speedway. Born into an industrious mining family, which later owned the Hotel Traylor in Allentown, neither college nor business and industry, captured his heart, at least not like racing.

His first racing machine had a unique and sobering history. The old Frank Kurtis-built machine had been steered by the great Rex Mays on his fateful last run on November 6, 1949, at Del Mar, California. The car was less than pristine, but Traylor, eager to get his feet wet, traveled west to Indianapolis with midget ace Al Herman and mechanic Charlie Sacks to gain experience at the Brickyard.

It was a period of transition at Indianapolis, for while Troy Ruttman won the 1952 classic in a standard dirt chassis, he would be the last to do so. Herman passed his familiarization run on May 15, 1953, under the watchful eyes of legendary drivers Jimmy Jackson, Walt Faulkner, Bill Holland and Johnnie Parsons. However, it did not take long to realize that cracking the starting lineup was too much for which to ask. In fact, during this month of May, 36 different driver/car combinations did not make a qualification run and another 9 drivers were bumped from the field. However, Herman returned in 1955 and earned "Rookie of the Year" honors.

Undaunted, Traylor turned to his first love, sprint cars. And in the 1950's,

Traylor's stable of cars were the picture of class and elegance. As Traylor went back to the east coast sprint wars, he kept a close tab on a driver he deeply coveted, Johnny Thomson. The diminutive Thomson had began his career in 1938, and picking up the pace after a stint as a bomber crew chief in World War II, claimed midget championships in 1948 and '49. The 1953 season had proved to be a frustrating one for Thomson, so he

Williams Grove. Not content to sit by and watch, Campbell scored at the Grove in April, with Thomson winning a week later at the same plant. Campbell then got hot and reeled off back-to-back victories at Altamont, New York, and the Grove. Suddenly, Campbell looked to be a serious title contender.

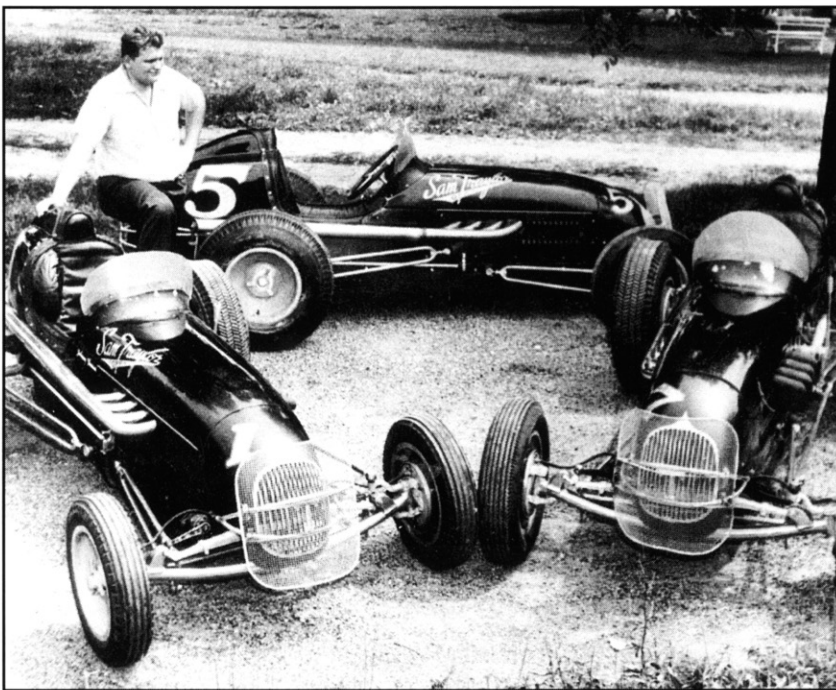
It wasn't to be. Campbell appeared at Indy for the 1954 race and participated in a familiarization run in the Central

Excavating Special on May 10. Unfortunately, he failed to pass this rookie exam, in part due to a recommendation by Bob Sweikert that he was driving too high on the track. Perhaps in response to this disappointment, Campbell deemed that he needed to gain experience on the high banks of the Midwest. To this end, a practice session was scheduled at Indiana's Salem Speedway in July. Gaining entry to the speedway proved to be little challenge, as area resident Troy Ruttman was available to simply open the

gates. Ruttman later reported that Campbell had turned laps under the track record before he plowed out of the speedway and crashed to his death.

Meanwhile Thomson soldiered on, winning five more mains en route to a series title. In a year where Wally Campbell had proven to be a worthy competitor and teammate, Thomson was destined to pick up additional internal competition in the form of Al Keller and Charlie Musselman. Musselman won at Flemington, New Jersey, while Keller had a splendid '54 season, winning three times and finishing seventh in points.

Traylor had found a unique talent in Keller, who was a proven winner in any vehicle. Keller made 29 NASCAR starts between 1949 and 1956, and his lone victory stands as one of the most unique in the history of the series. The date was



Sam Traylor

Bruce Craig Collection

was anxious to make a change. Accepting an offer from Sam Traylor, Thomson ventured south to Richmond, Virginia, and scored his second win of the season.

When the 1954 season dawned, Thomson was part of a two-car Traylor punch with '51 national modified champion Wally "Crazy Wheels" Campbell. Campbell had been impressive in the previous season, finishing fourth in AAA Eastern circuit points with four wins. There are those who saw him race that proclaim Campbell to be one of the most fearless and gifted drivers of his time.

The season was one of both triumph and tragedy for Traylor's team. On the positive side, it was a year of domination by Johnny Thomson. The Traylor team was fast out of the gate as Thomson won the Eastern openers at Reading and

SAM TRAYLOR, cont.

June 13, 1954, and the race was contested on a 2.2-mile road course at the airport in Linden, New Jersey. Buck Baker captured the pole in his Oldsmobile, but when the checkered flag flew on the fifty-lap affair, Keller had won-in a Jaguar! It remains the only win recorded in a Grand National (now NASCAR Winston Cup) event in a foreign car.

Determined to return to Indianapolis, Sam Traylor and ace mechanic Ken Hickey reworked the old Wolfe car and gave Keller the chance to put it in the field for the '55 500. Keller lined up in the 22nd starting spot, but on lap 57, encountered a spinning Rodger Ward. In the chain reaction that followed, the great Bill Vukovich tumbled out of the track to his death.

Keller and Traylor returned to Indy the following year and, in David versus Goliath fashion, entered their dirt car against the powerful roadsters of the day. To the surprise of many, Keller toured the Brickyard faster than any dirt car in history and ran 195 laps in the race, garnering a 14th-place finish.

As for Indianapolis, Traylor had visit-

ed, danced, and left. Not prepared to invest in the equipment necessary to run up front, and still consumed by his beloved sprint cars, he returned to familiar turf. With the United States Auto Club (USAC), the Traylor juggernaut never missed a beat. In addition to the expected strong performances by Thomson, Traylor had added west coast driver Van Johnson to his team. While the new charge flipped at Reading in mid-October, he won the season closer at Williams Grove a week later. At the close of the '56 season, Thomson was second to Tommy Hinnershitz, and Traylor finished in the second and third positions in owner points.

If there were any doubts that Sam Traylor's team still had fire in their belly, the '57 and '58 seasons dispatched those quickly. Championships have always been won on the basis of consistency, and this was never more evident than in the '57 season. Bill Randall won the Eastern crown without benefit of a single feature win. Thomson took the next season's opener at the Grove and by year's end, he

and the boss enjoyed their second sprint car championship.

The 1958 season proved to be the end of an era, as Traylor never again won a USAC main event as an owner. During the decade of the Fifties, Traylor had recognized and employed some of the greatest talents of all time. In Johnny Thomson, he had a man many still feel was the best open-wheel driver ever. It was a golden time, but it was also a brutal time. Of the star drivers who piloted Traylor's cars, all died racing: Herman (1960), Johnson (1959), Keller (1961), and Thomson (1960). Sadly, and ironically, Thomson perished at Allentown, the hometown of his long-time sprint car owner.

Sam Traylor lives today in Indian Harbour Beach, Florida.

Story courtesy of FlatOut (Mind Over Media Publishing).