

HAROLD LEEP

Harold Leep was born in Cookson, Oklahoma, on January 3, 1933, to May and Leonard Leep. At an early age, Harold and his family moved to Arkansas City, Kansas. At age 14, Leep joined the air force and was stationed in Japan. Upon returning home, he had found that his family had moved to Wichita.

In 1950, while working for a Wichita used car dealer, Harold volunteered to help finish a friend's jalopy stock car for the opportunity to drive it. According to Leep, "I drove it one time. I crashed and got fired."

That experience, however, did not dampen the young man's spirit. In 1951, he won his first feature event at Enid, Oklahoma. And, by 1954, he had earned a good reputation for being a hard racer in those flathead Ford hot rods. In 1955, Leep drove his first sprint car race in Norton, Kansas.

Around the same time, 1955-56, Wichita builder/mechanic Chester "Chet" Wilson was racing and winning with drivers Frank Lies and

Auto Club (USAC) and Indy. Later, that wasn't true, but back then it was." As the first driver of Wilson's Chevy-powered "Offy Killer", Harold Leep successfully piloted the car for several seasons, mostly with IMCA but also in unsanctioned events. Together, Wilson and Leep dominated IMCA action at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, winning there in 1958, '59 (twice), and '61 (twice). They won IMCA features at Sedalia, Missouri, in 1959; Des Moines, Iowa, in 1959 (twice); Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1959; Memphis, Missouri, in 1960; Knoxville, Illinois, in 1961; and Faribault, Minnesota, in 1961.

In IMCA points, the Wilson/Leep combination finished 21st in 1957. The next year, he finished 12th. Harold finished third in 1959 behind champion Pete Folse (Sr.) and Jim Hurtubise, and ahead of Jack Rounds and Parnelli Jones. After a lackluster year in 1960, when Leep took off mid-year to go USAC championship car racing, they rebounded with another third in points in 1961, behind champion Folse and runner-up Emmett "Buzz" Barton, and ahead of Jerry Richert (Sr.) and Jim McElreath.

Leep's USAC champ car experience was with builder/mechanic Wally Meskowski and car owner Peter Schmidt of St. Louis, Missouri. Their only start, though, of the season was at Syracuse, New York, where Leep placed the Eddie Kuzma-built champ car in 14th.

In 1962, Leep left Wilson to drive the Harold "Red" Lempelius Offy. He won the "Hawkeye Futurity" in June at Des Moines, followed by wins at Knoxville, Mason City and Sedalia in August, Lincoln, Nebraska (twice) and Oklahoma City in September. That year, Leep finished fourth in IMCA points behind champion Johnny White, Pete Folse and Jerry Richert, and ahead of Johnny Rutherford.

In 1963, Leep started racing with Chet Wilson again, winning at Knoxville and Minot, North Dakota. However, he finished the year back in the Irene Lempelius-owned Offy with a big win at St. Paul, Minnesota. He finished eleventh in points, bought a bowling alley and announced his retirement from racing.

Following those two years of an on-again, off-again relationship and Leep's on-again, off-again retirement, the Wilson/Leep combo had a strong year in 1964, finishing fourth in IMCA points behind champion Richert, Jim McCune, Jerry Daniels, and ahead of Jay Woodside. Their wins that year came at Oklahoma City (twice), Des Moines, Sedalia, and Mason City, Iowa.

After the '64 season, Leep was ranked fourth in lifetime IMCA points for the decade 1955-64, after Folse, Bobby Grim and Barton. Said Leep, "Sprint car racing is the hardest work there is. I was tired of the travel and I needed to take care of the bowling alley. But I still wanted to race."

And, although he wasn't totally done with IMCA as he and Chet Wilson picked up two wins at the Nebraska State Fair in Lincoln in 1965 and another one at OKC in '68, Leep was in the process of returning to his roots.

Southwestern supermodified racing was flourishing at places like Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Lawton in Oklahoma; Dallas and Amarillo in Texas; and Wichita and Hutchinson in Kansas. In fact, Chet Wilson's early drivers Frankie Lies and Walt McWhorter were racing in the Wichita area, along with ex-IMCA pilots Dale Reed, Grady Wade and Jay Woodside. Emmett Hahn, Aaron Madden and Wayne Cox were the hotshoes in Oklahoma.

Veteran Harold Leep, aboard one of those 100-inch cars, won season point championships at Wichita's Eighty-One Speedway in 1965, '66, '67, and '69. In 1968, Harold and car owner "Jelly" Wilhelm made thirteen trips from Wichita to Eagle, Nebraska, and won eleven features. And, in 1969, Leep won the 'triple crown' of southwestern racing with track titles at Wichita, Tulsa and Oklahoma City. He won the Oklahoma City Supermodified Nationals twice, in 1968 and '69.

In 1971, the National Championship Racing Association (NCRA) started sanctioning 100-inch car races. Emmett Hahn won the title that year, but Leep and Grady Wade were tied for third in points.

Leep won the 1972 NCRA championship by taking four wins, including the prestigious National Supermodified Championships at Hutchinson. The slick track specialist also raced his T-body super that year with the sprints at the Western World Championships at the Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix, Arizona. In 1973, the "Wichita Iceman" repeated as the NCRA supermodified champion.

After another brief retirement in 1974 that lasted until mid-1975, Leep came back driving for friend Pat Suchy in 1976. He won the NCRA point championship again, taking the title away from 1974-75 champ Frankie Lies, and won his third OKC Supermodified Nationals. It was also the year that he sold his bowling alley.

In 1980, Leep won the National Supermodified Championships at Hutchinson as he was reunited with his friend/car owner "Jelly" Wilhelm. Said Leep, "Hutchinson, Kansas. I still get excited about Hutchinson. I don't know why. Maybe it's the heat. You know, it's always over a hundred up there, hard on cars. But for supermodifieds, Hutchinson has always been the big race. It's kind of like Knoxville is for the sprinters. If you win at Hutchinson, it's a feather in your cap."

In 1982, Harold moved to Muskogee, where he still resides today. In 1983 and '84, Leep won his fourth and fifth National Supermodified Championships at Hutchinson, respectively. He also retired from driving at the end of '85.

Leep, who has been married to his wife Geraldine since 1988, retired from his Leep Oil and Gas company in 1990. Unable to stay away from the sport that has been such a big part of his life, Leep has been promoter at Muskogee Speedway from 1991 until '95, and from '99 to present.



Harold Leep

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Walt McWhorter. Harold had heard that Chet had built a brand new car to house his 283-cubic-inch, fuel-injected custom Chevy engine. The sprint car was totally hand-crafted and Harold wanted the ride in Chet's new red machine. According to Leep, "I pestered him until he let me drive it."

Their first race together was in Denison, Iowa, and Leep set fast time and won the feature, which was part of Ray Duckworth's United Speedways circuit. So, Harold Leep and Chet Wilson were a team, and they raced with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) and United Speedways. Said Harold, "We'd load up and make a trip of it. We'd race with Duckworth one day and IMCA the next."

In 1957, '58, and '59, Leep and Wilson won three straight United Speedways point championships. In fact, in one year, he won every race except one. Explained Harold, "A guy named Ned Kirkpatrick won that one. It was so dusty and dirty you couldn't see. I caught him but I couldn't pass him. We ran second."

However, as owner/operator of two Wichita gas stations and married to Sibyl with one son, Harold Lloyd Leep, it was difficult for the elder Leep to stay on the road for long periods of time. Leep's commitments to family and work would interfere with his hobby and dreams many times throughout his long career. Leep offered, "Back then the IMCA was a stepping stone to the United States