

# ALLEN HEATH

Allen Fred Heath was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, on January 18, 1918.

After the Heath family moved to Seattle, Washington, in 1922, Allen skipped classes at the North Queen Anne School and spent his days at his father Fred's racing-oriented garage. That is where he met veteran Pacific Northwest midget car racer Einar "Swede" Lindskog, who took Heath to the races at the Silver Lake Speedway.

Heath began driving midgets in 1938 for Al Legge at Pete Peterson's Midget Speedway. Heath had an inauspicious beginning, as the first time he drove, he crashed. And the second time he drove, he flipped. From day one of his career, Allen was a crowd-pleaser with his trial-and-error method of learning, his propensity for busting fences, and his unique ability to put a car wherever it needed to go to win. He proudly claimed the nicknames the "Canadian Screwball" and the "Seattle Madman". However, he also was making a name for himself as a driver who could successfully man-handle a 'B' quality car against 'A' quality competition.

By the end of 1941, he had won 12 feature races. In 1942, he won an even 30 feature races. When World War II came, Allen enlisted with the 101st Division as a paratrooper. But, due to a bad ankle, he was reassigned to the 12th Air Force as a motor pool staff sergeant in Italy and North Africa. Promptly after being discharged in 1945, Heath drove midget owner Seth Renning's car in the shortened '45 season.

Allen Heath won 31 midget races in 1946 driving Tacoma meat-packer Tom Carsten's Kurtis-Kraft V8-60. It is said that he won 86 of 106 total events, including 28 straight. Naturally, he won the 1946 Washington State championship. One year later, he won 50 midget races and claimed the '47 Washington State championship.

It was also in 1947 that the rising star tried his hand at sprint car racing at Portland, Oregon, on Easter Sunday. Having qualified for the day's Trophy Dash, Heath climbed Zeke Ziegler's wheel and went so high that Paul Boomer actually drove underneath unharmed. Heath spent several days in the hospital and swore he'd never set foot in a sprint car again. According to Allen, "I got involved in an accident in front of me. I ran over a guy's car, cracked up, and took off like a ball of fire. I wasn't burned, but I was skinned from head to toe. I didn't need a shave for a month. And I was so bandaged up, all I had was a peephole to see through."

It has been written that "Splinterhead" flipped in five of his first six outings in a sprint car. Later in '47, Heath left Seattle for Northridge in southern California. At the time, the United Racing Association (URA) had a Red Circuit for cars with flatheads and rocker arms, and a Blue Circuit for those with overhead cams and Offenhausers. There Heath, who was a body and fender repairman, married Gladys. He drove for owners A.J. Walker, Vic Edelbrock and Eddie Kuzma, competing against the likes of Johnny Mantz and Perry Grimm. Heath ran Al Dean's Kurtis-Kraft midget in 1948 against Billy Cantrell, Billy Vukovich and others on the



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tough URA circuit. He drove the Clay Smith/Danny Jones midget in 1950, a ride he shared with Walt Faulkner over the years.

In 1950, Allen Heath won the URA title, driving the Lysle Greenman number 2 midget car. It was also during the early 1950's that Heath started broadening his horizons by venturing away from the West Coast and driving more sprint car events. The "Northridge Knothead" won an American Automobile Association (AAA) feature at the prestigious Williams Grove Speedway in Pennsylvania in 1952.

Like many URA midget, California Roadster Association (CRA) and Western Racing Association (WRA) 'big car' drivers before him, Heath had dreams of graduating to AAA championship car racing and, ultimately, Indianapolis. However, for whatever reason, the likeable Heath did not have a very successful champ car career. He was replaced in Al Dean's Kuzma-built car at Indy in 1952 by Bob Sweikert. Nor did he qualify at Indy the next year. In fact, Allen started just four championship car races in 1952-53, with a second place finish to Rodger Ward at Detroit, Michigan, being his best finish and earning the team \$1,350.

Later in 1953, at the Illiana Speedway in Schererville, Indiana, Heath broke both legs, his left arm and shoulder, and crushed his left hand in an accident aboard Fred Tomsche's sprinter. Said Heath, "You name it and I had it. They could have used a shovel to get me on a stretcher."

He recuperated for weeks in a local hospital, having been told that he would likely lose some fingers on his left hand. However, by the time he was transferred back to the Los Angeles Sawtelle Veteran's Hospital, gangrene had set in due to some remaining dirt particles. Allen remembered, "The doctor came in one day and said he was sorry, but I'd never drive again. He said they were going to amputate my left hand. I asked him if he had to, and he said he did. So I said, 'Well, cut the son-of-a-gun off then, only I'll make a damn liar out of you. I'll drive again if it's the last thing I do.'"

Amazingly, less than one year later, Allen Heath started shotgun on the field in a 100-lap midget race in San Bernardino and won using his steel hook, which was a first-of-its-kind prosthesis from the UCLA Medical Center. The two-part hook consisted of two rounded pieces of metal. A plastic pin was inserted through the biceps of his left arm and two small cables connected the pin to the hook.

He operated the hook by flexing his bicep muscles.

The five-foot, eight-inch driver with a wicked left hook won the URA midget point championship again in 1958. It was the same year he won a 500-mile URA midget race at Riverside aboard the Charles "Dutch" Hurd Kurtis-Kraft V8-60. In 1961, Heath was named the Pacific Coast midget car titlist. Heath once said, "I never had any fear in a race car. If I could win a race by putting my car in a place on the track the next guy wouldn't go, fine. It's all a big con game, anyway. The more I get 'em scared of me, the better I am."

In 1957, the California Racing Association (CRA) became an all sprint car organization,

meaning roadsters were no longer allowed to compete. That year, Heath finished sixth in points behind champion Nick Valenta, Billy Cantrell, Roger McCluskey and Roy Prosser.

The following year, Heath slipped to eighth in points behind champion Prosser, Valenta, Ray Douglas, Jim Hurtubise, Wayne Weiler, Parnelli Jones and Granvel "Hank" Henry.

Chuck Hulse claimed the '59 CRA title, ahead of Bud Sterrett, Heath Jones, Prosser, and McCluskey.

In 1960, Heath claimed six CRA feature events at J.C. Agajanian's Ascot Park with the Famighetti Brothers' Chevy. The "one-armed bandit" also finished fourth in points behind champion Don Davis, Danny "Termite" Jones, and Colby Scroggin.

One year later, Heath scored five more wins at Ascot with the Famighetti brothers, and another one at Clovis in the Baghosian Brothers Chevy. He ended 1961 third in points behind champion Jack Brunner and runner-up Cantrell, and ahead of Douglas and Bob Hogle.

Heath opened the 1962 CRA season aboard the Famighetti Brothers Chevy with a win at Ascot, and he wound up the season with another win at Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix, Arizona, in the Vel Miletich T-Bird. That year, Heath finished fifth in points behind champion Colby Scroggin, Cantrell, Dee Jones and Gene Brown.

1963 brought four more wins for Miletich, three at Ascot plus the season-closer at the Western Speedway in Gardena, and another one at Ascot in the Shinohara-Osborn-West Chevy. He also placed third in CRA points behind champion Hogle and runner-up Dee Jones, and ahead of Bob McCoy and Don Melton.

Allen Heath claimed his twentieth and final CRA win in 1964 at Ascot Park in the Shinohara-Osborn-West sprinter.

He also placed in the top 20 in United States Auto Club (USAC) national midget points in 1963-65, without ever having left the west coast, and is credited with ten national midget car feature wins. He was inducted into the Golden Wheels Hall of Fame in 1975 and the AAA/USAC Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame in 1991. Allen Heath passed away on March 6, 1981, after suffering a fatal heart attack. He was survived by his wife Gladys and his step-son Gil and step-daughter Glenda.