

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Jimmy Sills

by Rob McCuen

Jimmy Sills was born on May 26, 1953, to Marilyn and Jimmy Sills, Sr., a northern California racer in the early 1950's with the Bay Cities Racing Association (BCRA). The elder Sills started out in the hardtop division, but graduated to, and won indoor features at Oakland in 1956 with the BCRA midget car division. Sadly, he passed away from cancer at age 30, when Jimmy, Jr., was just three years old.

Marilyn later married supermodified and stock car racer Richard "Dick" Johnson of Elverta, California, who moved the family to North Carolina in the late Sixties to race in NASCAR's Grand National division. Young Jimmy was a football standout in high school in North Carolina, but he soon moved back to the Sacramento area and began racing supermodifieds at the famed West Capital Speedway in 1973.

Sills raced for Ed Watson, a car owner for whom his dad had driven, and won a feature in his sixth time out. Jimmy roamed northern California, racing against the likes of Johnny Anderson, Jimmy Boyd, LeRoy Van Conett, and Gary "Preacher" Patterson. A lot of his racing, and later winning, was with Louis Vermeil's much-respected Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC). He was also no stranger to carving his way to the front from fully inverted NARC fields. Like any dedicated cushion-buster, he dismantled some machinery along the way. But, when Jimmy, who was also known as "Buckwheat", made the highlight reels, it was usually with a checkered flag in his hands.

"I won a lot of races running the cushion," said Sills. "Jack Hewitt told me once that you feel like you've done something when you pass somebody on the outside. When you pass on the inside, you feel like they gave it to you."

In true outlaw fashion, Jimmy also started traveling more to places like the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest and central Pennsylvania. He was also gaining a reputation as a smooth-as-silk hard charger. Perhaps his most famous forward march came aboard Joel McCray's number 21 sprinter at the 1980 Dirt Cup when he beat the late Gary Patterson to the stripe for one of his six championships in the coveted Skagit Speedway classic. Not content to just win it, Sills did it in spectacular fashion with a stellar alphabet crusade from the back of the 'D' main. His wins in the Jim Raper Memorial Super Dirt Cup at Skagit have come in 1974, '80, '85, '87, '89 and '89.

A quick study if ever there was one, it didn't take him long to get into the swing of things. A mere six weeks removed from his debut at Sacramento's West Capital Raceway back in 1973, Sills scored his first career feature win in the notoriously stout supermodified division and he's been kissing trophy queens ever since. This would prove to be an auspicious beginning to a long and storied career. Through quick to concede that he never bothered to track his wins, Jimmy estimates his lifetime feature tally at "between 350 and 400."

It didn't take Sills long to become a hot commodity in the open-wheel universe and from 1973 to present, Jimmy has lent his magic touch to 67 car owners in all, many of whom are legends in their own right.

Perhaps more than anything else, it's his amazing versatility that sets Sills apart from so many of his contemporaries. He's tasted victory champagne in midget cars, sprint cars, supermodifieds, Silver Crown cars and even on motocross bikes. Mile tracks, both dirt and paved, high-banked half-milers, and rubber-down, blue-groove bullrings that require the precision of a brain surgeon have all succumbed to Jimmy's uncanny ability to adapt to whatever is thrown his way. With or without tin atop the cage, the affable Californian is widely regarded as a master at the elusive art of fine-tuning an ill-handling race car.

While he's not above muscling a malevolent machine into submission if that's what it takes, Sills is in fact more scientist than cowboy. He might resort to out-braving you, but he's more apt to out-thinking you. Old school and 'hands on' to the bone, he can tame a twitchy chassis with the best of them. Former employer Bob Consani, who has put cars under such stalwarts as Chuck Gurney, Bill Vukovich, Jr., Davey Hamilton and George Snider, and was responsible for engineering some of Jimmy's most-treasured wins and titles, has nothing but high praise for Sills. "He's definitely a very talented race car driver. I pretty much had him in mind to drive for me before I asked him. His record speaks for itself and he's a good guy to work with, too. Probably one of the easiest drivers I've ever worked with. Very knowledgeable."

Always a prolific traveler, Sills seldom stayed in one place long enough to contend for track championships. In 1982, racing against such heavy hitters as Jimmy Boyd, Tim Green, Ronnie Day, Brent Kaeding, Dave

Bradway, Jr., and the aforementioned Gurney, he knocked off 10 features in the famed Bailey Brothers number 01 sprinter en route to a season title at Baylands. When the renowned California speed plant shuttered in 1988, it was the Sills name that would be recorded in the books as the all-time leader in feature wins with 43.

John Mahoney Photo



Though by no means a stranger to Midwest migration at this stage of his career, the big-time wins had eluded him in the tradition-rich corn-belt. That was about to change in a major way. His confidence soaring from his breakout year at Baylands and elsewhere, the Bailey team towed eastward like men on a divine mission. If back-to-back wins at Kansas City's Jayhawk Nationals in 1982 and '83 were not enough to show the world that he was a top-shelf chauffeur, Sills' opening night triumph at the 1983 Knoxville Nationals removed all doubt. It remains one of Jimmy's most revered career victories. He got as high as third in the Saturday finale before the car jumped out of gear and dropped him to fifth, his best ever Nationals finish. Surprisingly, his often-stellar performances at the Nationals yielded only one other top-ten, a sixth at the stick of Bob Tuttle's Iowa-based car in 1981.

Other career benchmarks include championships at the Perris Auto Speedway non-winged Oval Nationals and at the Silver Dollar Speedway in Chico. He has also won Australia's international crown jewel, the Grand Annual Sprintcar Classic at the Premier Speedway in Warrnambool, Victoria, in 1978. In what would prove his only full-time assault on Ted Johnson's World of Outlaws (WoO) national tour in 1986, Sills finished

fourth in points behind champion Steve Kinser, runner-up Bobby Davis, Jr., and Ron Shuman, respectively. He scored one win in the Cahill Brothers/Lenard McCarl number 7X machine that year with WoO.

In 1988, he hauled his helmet bag to central Pennsylvania and took over the reins of Bob Weikert's famed Beefmobile. He rewarded his new boss man with a pair of wins at Williams Grove, one at Selinsgrove and two more at Lincoln. For an encore, he copied top honors in the test of will and skill known as Ohio Speedweek that year.

Sills can lay claim to eight career WoO wins, thirteen USAC Western States Midgets checkered flags, and one victory apiece in both sprint cars and midget cars under the USAC National Series banners. Other sanctioning bodies that have issued first-place checks to Jimmy include All Star Circuit of Champions (ASCoC), California Racing Association (CRA), Sprint Car Racing Association (SCRA), and BCRA, the same midget car club with whom his father had raced.

Even if Sills would have stuck to his retirement guns back in 1989 and never leaned on another cushion or banged another wheel, the racer formerly (and briefly) known as "Luke Warmwater" had most likely already accomplished more in his career than most of his contemporaries. In USAC dirt championship car, or Silver Crown, racing, Jimmy Sills captured championships in 1990, '94, and '96.

Jimmy is tied for third with J.J. Yeley in career USAC Silver Crown wins with 12 (his lone pavement win came at Richmond in 1996 while driving Gary Stanton's Mopar), and was the esteemed division's all-time leader in laps-led until Dave Steele recently eclipsed the mark.

Ever the perfectionist and always on the lookout for any edge he could find, Sills once resorted to having himself hypnotized in an effort to snap out of a perceived qualifying slump.

Thankfully, Jimmy Sills is still competing on a sporadic basis, in recent seasons having made trips to both Australia and New Zealand. And he still makes his traditional trek to Tulsa for the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals, where in 2006 his night ended in the C-main. "Yeah, I went down there for my annual flip," cracked Sills.

He's already won Knoxville's Masters Classic twice and he figures he'll saddle up at least four or five times this season. Meanwhile, 'the Professor' stays sharp operating his highly regarded open-wheel driving school. His reaction to being inducted into the hallowed Hall is a classic Jimmy Sills understatement: "I'm just pleased that after all these years somebody noticed."

