

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

RICHARD "MITCH" SMITH

Richard Dale "Mitch" Smith of Linglestown (Penna.) was born on December 5, 1930, and began his racing career in 1945 competing on motorcycles, although it was cut short when it was discovered that he was only fifteen years old at the time. One year later, with parental consent, Mitch resumed a career which lasted until 1978.

A stint in the Marine Corps also interrupted his racing, but on discharge, he began racing jalopies. His first car was a 1932 Ford coupe which he raced at such tracks as Gold Mine, Hilltop and Zellers Grove Speedways. Mitch also competed regularly in the flathead division at the Silver Spring Speedway. He won his first track championship at Hilltop Speedway, near Lebanon, in 1955.

"The Flying Milkman" won a pair of 26-hour marathon races at Williams Grove Speedway in 1962 and 1963 to add to his many early racing laurels. It was also during the early Sixties that Mitch Smith and Lynn Paxton, another future racing legend from the Keystone state, became fast friends.

In 1966, Mitch teamed up with Don and Mary Flack to race their "Flying Tiger" number 2 super-modified, winning 18 features. The following season he switched to the Reister Chevrolet and collected 15 checkered flags along with his first track championship at Port Royal Speedway.

The 1968 season saw Mitch pay 20 visits to victory lane. He was third in points at the legendary Williams Grove half-mile oval.

In 1969, his first season with Gary Wasson, Smith won 18 main events and dropped to fourth in points at Williams Grove. However, he came in second in points at the Selinsgrove Speedway.

"The Linglestown Leadfoot" scored 22 victories in 1970. He also competed in the prestigious 200-mile Langhorne (Penna.) National Open modified sportsman classic, driving one of Don "Dutch" Hoag's 2700-pound Chevy coupes. Mitch finished 15th in the talent-laden 45-car field.

1971 was Mitch's year to bask in national glory aboard the Gary Wasson sprinter, wrenched by Dick Hench, Dave Brown and Billy Gettle. That year the 41-year old veteran who raced super sprints on a weekly basis at Williams Grove, Selinsgrove and Susquehanna Speedways competed with the United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car division on three separate occasions, each time utilizing a Temporary Permit (TP). Track promoters, such as Jack Gunn of Keystone Auto Racing on Speedways (KARS), were offered a couple of temporary permit licenses per race by

the conservative USAC foundation to allow local drivers to compete strictly as a box office attraction. Mitch Smith won all three shows on temporary permits!

The first show was on June 19th at Williams Grove, the "Ascot of the East" as it billed itself. Mitch Smith set two new USAC track records that night with a one-lap time of 24.02 seconds (74.938 miles per hour) and a ten-lap time of 4:06.36 minutes (73.064 m.p.h.). In the 40-lap feature, Smith beat USAC regulars Dick "Toby" Tobias of Lebanon (Penna.), Don Nordhorn, Larry Dickson, Rollie Beale, Lee Kunzman, Gary Bettenhausen in the Willie Davis Ford-powered sprinter, Lennie Waldo, Jim Sheaffer (also on a TP), Johnny Anderson, Bobby Black and Karl Busson in front of an ecstatic Central Pennsylvania crowd, including the legendary Tommy Hinnershitz.



Richard "Mitch" Smith (Bruce Craig Collection)

Mitch's second USAC start was on July 17th at Gunn's other track in Selinsgrove. Again Smith set USAC track records for one- and ten-laps, 23.42 seconds and 4:01.56 minutes, respectively. Later, in the feature, Mitch easily defeated fellow Pennsylvanians Lee Osborne (TP) in the Wally Meskowski number 7, Bobbie Adamson (TP) in the Robert Ziegler number 42, and Tobias in the Russ Ruppert number 17. Rounding out the top ten were Kunzman, Joe Saldana, Bruce Walkup, Tom Bigelow, Duane "Pancho" Carter (Jr.), Larry "Boom Boom" Cannon, Greg Weld and Darl Harrison.

His final start with USAC that year occurred on September 25th in the prestigious "Ted Horn-Bill Schindler Memorial" race back at 'the Grove'. In this \$7,050-total-purse event, second-quick-timer Mitch and his brand new Gary Wasson-owned, Floyd Trevis-built number 5 sprinter started the 'A' main in fifth. On the sixth lap, moments after moving into second place, Mitch hooked a rut in the third turn, bounced and slid to a stop against the outside rail. Undaunted, Smith went to the rear of the pack and began a steady climb back to the front of the field. Mitch took the win 3.5 seconds ahead of soon-to-be-USAC-champion Gary Bettenhausen, followed by Tobias, George Snider, Dickson, Cannon, Ronnie Rough of Nescopeck

(Penna.), Jackie Howerton, Carter, Sammy Sessions, Waldo and Saldana. Mitch and the Wasson sprinter both truly earned the nickname as "The Foundation Shakers" in '71. In addition to his USAC sprint car victories in '71, the part-time milkman won 31 features including two in American Racing Driver Club (ARDC) midgets. He garnered his first Selinsgrove track championship and his only Susquehanna Speedway point title. Smith also ran the American Three Quarter Midget Racing Association (ATQMR) indoor midget series at Atlantic City (N.J.) aboard a Crosley-powered Floyd Trevis-built car.

Smith entered his fourth and final USAC sprint car race on September 23, 1972. His back was so cramped up from previous crashes (13 in one particular season), he was in constant pain. Although he didn't win, he did finish a respectable sixth, allowing Lee Kunzman of Guttenberg (Iowa) later wear a jacket which had embroidered on its back, "I beat Mitch Smith at Williams Grove".

According to Paxton, "Mitch Smith was one tough race car driver; he had more natural ability, more natural talent, than most drivers I could name." Of course, Paxton admits, "Mitch didn't know a whole lot about setting up a race car, and was at the mercy of a mechanic. Still, whether the race car was right or not, he got it going. He always got 110 percent out of his cars. Mitch made racing exciting. It didn't matter if he was first or 20th, Mitch was charging."

Mitch won his second Port Royal Speedway point championship in 1977, then took his last checkered flag at the

Port on April 22, 1978, aboard the Al Hamilton-owned, Joe Hamilton-wrenched number 77 sprinter before retiring. Mitch started racing there on October 10, 1953, and claimed his first Port Royal feature on May 25, 1957. The Juniata County Fairgrounds was also the site of Mitch's trio of "Tuscarora 50" wins in September of 1968, '69 and '70.

Mitch's car owners during his career included B. Kepler (1953, 1958-60), Don Flack (1954, 1966), Gary Wasson (1955, 1961, 1969-72), John Reister (1956, 1967-68), Oscar Dunkelberger (1957), Al McClure (1962), Al Hamilton (1975-1978) and himself (1964-65).

When not racing, Mitch was employed by his former car owners, the Flack Brothers, as an insulation installer. His hobbies included golf, bowling, roller skating and small-game hunting. He also competed on the AMF factory Snowmobile racing team. In 1987, Mitch suffered a heart attack while at his construction job at a hospital. He came through it okay, only to have complications arise a few days later and he passed away at age 57.

Mitch is survived by his wife Nancy and their children Mitchell and Kelly, and his sister Gerry Hartman.