

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

CHUCK GURNEY

by Norm Bogan

One of California's all-time greatest gassers was born in Oakland, California, on April 20, 1949. Left-coast speed circles would never be the same. As a youngster, his father Gene raced midget cars with the Bay Cities Racing Association (BCRA). By the age of five, Chuck had also become a racer, at the wheel of a quarter-midget. He raced for five or six years, winning numerous championships. He raced Sunday afternoons at Hayward and then journeying over the hill to run at Alamo in the evening. Gurney quickly became the kid to beat in quarter-midgets from 1955 to '59.

Speedy dreams developed at an early age as Chuck Gurney laid on the living room floor listening to the Indy 500 broadcast on the radio as Sid Collins painted a picture for the intent listeners. Gurney envisioned himself becoming the subject of Collins' reports in the future. One of those mentioned in the Brickyard reports was Johnny Boyd, Gurney's boyhood hero, who often came back to the Bay Area to run Jack London's midget with BCRA and the United States Auto Club (USAC).

Following his parent's divorce, Gurney and his mother settled in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he attended high school. In his junior year, in order to help support the family, Chuck got re-involved with racing in the Albuquerque sprint car circles working on a crew with guys like Don Maxwell, Jerry Miller and local hero Albert "Buddy" Taylor.

Eventually, Gurney returned to the Bay area in 1969 and began to ply his trade doing rough carpentry. With his father's help, he made connections with racing on the West Coast and, although the legal age to race at that time was 21, first strapped into a Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC) sprint car at the Napa County Fairgrounds in Calistoga when he was only 20. Chuck was a wild young kid and was willing to drive most anything, just to be able to race, including a few old flathead Fords along the way. His progress was hampered because some owners were afraid he would get hurt as an underage driver and refrained from hiring him.

In 1970, Gurney lined up a BCRA midget ride for an indoor race at Santa Rosa, CA, and won his first feature about a year later at the same track. His first outdoor win, and subsequently, his first USAC race victory was at the All-American Speedway in Roseville, CA, in 1973, driving for car owner Art Shinoian. He found success with the midgets, as well as running some sprints with both NARC and the California Racing Association (CRA), and garnered the Motorsports Press Association's Open-Wheel Driver of the Year in 1973.

In 1974, Gurney moved to Indiana to compete with the USAC racers in hopes of pursuing his dream of a ride at the Brickyard. George Snider arranged his first USAC ride with John Wergland of Somerset, New Jersey, and soon Chuck became aware of the tough crowd he had joined. Thinking that he was pretty astute on the asphalt, Gurney came up against the likes of Larry Dickson, Gary Bettenhausen, Rollie Beale, Sammy Sessions and Tom Bigelow.

The young Californian discovered that these seasoned veterans could, and would, teach him many valuable lessons. While none directly gave him advice, Chuck gained a lot of knowledge following in their tire tracks. Gurney later secured

rides in two of the better USAC cars for owners Ben Leyba and Don Siebert.

Chuck ran with USAC pretty much full time for the next five years, competing in midgets, sprints, Silver Crown and one stock car race. In his USAC career, Gurney tallied nine midget wins, five sprint car victories, six features in the super-modifieds and 14 Silver Crown checkers, placing him second overall. Chuck also claimed two USAC national championships, in 1985 with the super-modifieds, and in 1989 in the Silver Crown series. Gurney's best sprint season was 1978, when he had one victory and 27 top-ten finishes in 37 races to finish a close second to champion Tom Bigelow.

Norman "Bubby" Jones was approached to drive a Ford Granada for Bill Schwister of Milwaukee in June of 1979, but declined the ride since he was in a dice for the sprint car championship. Gurney accepted the offer and scored a third place overall following Rusty Wallace and Terry Ryan. Later, Gurney passed up an opportunity to race at Milwaukee, due to a conflict with his sprint car schedule and was replaced by Tom Sneva. Looking back in retrospect, Gurney thinks this may have been one of the biggest mistakes in his racing career since he really enjoyed the comfortable feeling of that "taxi."



John Mahoney Photo

Upon Gurney's return to California racing, he joined with car owner Bob Consani, who offered him a \$100 guarantee against 60 percent of the purse for each race. Chuck and Consani were a force to be reckoned with throughout West Coast racing. Gurney developed a driving style of running the top of the track while campaigning in the Midwest with USAC. After returning to the West Coast, western media mavens Ronnie Allyn and Jim Chini observed his 'up-on-top' style and tagged him as the "Rim Rider." Gurney became the 1983 NARC champion and tallied 21 wins at Baylands, second only to Jimmy Sills.

Calistoga was especially good to Gurney, since making his maiden voyage in a sprinter there in 1969. He is third overall, running both with and without wings, collecting seventeen features, behind Brent Kaeding and the venerable Leroy Van Conett. Gurney won his first Calistoga feature on May 24, 1980, and finished second to Van Conett for the NARC championship in 1980, losing the point lead on the final night of racing. Gurney was the victor on the night that Gary Patterson perished in 1983 and came back to pay his respects, by capturing the first tribute to Patterson in 1984. On May 10, 1985, Chuck scored a victory at the first-ever winged sprint car race at Calistoga.

CHUCK GURNEY, continued

Gurney also made a number of trips south to run with CRA, acquiring nine features with the non-winged club from 1980 to '84. In 1981, driving for Ace Noffsinger at El Centro, CA, the rear-end broke and they didn't have a spare. Noffsinger drove back home, changed out the rear-end and met Gurney at Chula Vista, CA, the next afternoon. At the end of the evening, the rebuilt racer was in victory circle, a testament to the hard work and perseverance by the racing crew. Gurney picked up four victories at Ascot, three at El Centro, one each at Baylands and Chula Vista. Of his nine victories, three were for Bob Consani, three for Quentin Bammer, two for the Lovell Brothers and the win for Noffsinger.

In the mid-to-late 1980s, Chuck continued to race sprinters with both NARC and CRA, setting the non-winged track record at Keith Hall's Manzanita Speedway, which stood for about ten years until Brad Noffsinger broke it. During this time, Gurney leaned toward the longer races, especially the dirt miles with the USAC Silver Crown cars. His years of experience running on the smaller tracks had seasoned him to be a patient competitor and the big miles were to his liking. From 1983-85, Gurney's consistency carried him to three third-place finishes in the championship competition, twice winning the Hulman Hundred and Hoosier Hundred each on the Indiana State Fairgrounds. Gurney captured the Tony Bettenhausen 100 at Springfield, IL, seven times. Many of these victories were at the wheel of long-time car owner Junior Kurtz's Plastic Express dirt championship car.

Gurney scored back-to-back victories at Springfield and DuQuoin in 1996, and came back with what appeared to be sure victories at Phoenix and Indianapolis in 1997. While leading on the final lap at Phoenix, Chuck ran out of fuel and was edged by Jimmy Kite at the line. At Indy, he again ended up second and his overall points for the season placed him in tenth position.

Other high profile racing victories in Gurney's career were winning the midget segment of the Copper World Classic in 1983, the 1989 Belleville Midget Nationals, and the 1988 and '89 Turkey Night Grand Prix races at Ascot Park. These victories all came at the wheel of the famed Larry Howard midget car. Chuck names the 1988 Turkey Night win as his most memorable race. Leading the race in the early stages, the engine lost some power and Rich Vogler got by to take the point. Gurney was able to keep Vogler in sight and made a last lap pass to take the victory away from Rich. The following year was much easier as Gurney led the race from green to checkered.

Chuck's early fantasy of racing at Indianapolis never came to fruition. Gurney did have an opportunity to race Bruce Crower's stock-block Chevy at the Speedway in 1975, but a crash in practice prevented him from completing his rookie test. He finally got his chance to drive an Indy car in 1975 at Phoenix, starting and finishing fifteenth. Later that year, he competed at Trenton, N.J., and again scored a finish of fifteenth, followed by an eighteenth place finish at Milwaukee. What became his last ride in an Indy car was at Ontario Motor Speedway in his native California in 1978, finishing 24th.

In 1979, Chuck again returned to the Brickyard, racing for Crower in a backup car for Dennis Firestone. With all the struggles to get the Firestone car into the show, Gurney never got the necessary time and was forced to be a spectator.

Coming to the close of the 1990s, Chuck settled into a home in Livermore, CA, and cut back on his racing participation to focus on the racing career of his son Chuck, Junior. His son has also come up through the quarter-midget ranks, then moved to the micro-midgets and on to the full midget cars. Last year, Chuck, Jr., ran a winged 360-cubic-inch sprinter with the northern California Civil War Series. He plans to return this year to that series, while also running some USAC Western States pavement sprint car shows and possibly some winged 410 c.i. Golden State Challenge Series sprint car races. Chuck has been a positive influence for his son, encouraging Chuck, Jr., to practice patience and develop a feel of the car to achieve the optimum performance. Gurney counsels his son about dealing with the media and off-track events, and using those opportunities to further his racing career. Chuck Gurney is a proud father of son Chuck, Jr., now 21, and daughter Ashley, 17.

Chuck has been honored five times as the Motoring Press Association's Open-Wheel Driver of the Year in 1973, '82, '83, '85 and '89. For the past 50 years, Chuck Gurney has been a force in racing in the northern California community and has displayed that talent throughout the state and the nation.

Gurney's racing career and his trade of carpentry has matured over the years. Gaining knowledge in racing, Chuck became more adept at staying competitive throughout longer races. Aging like fine wine, Gurney's trade has progressed from rough carpentry as a youth to the sophistication as a finish carpenter today.