

EARL HALAQUIST

Earl Halaquist was born in Tompkins, New York, on September 7, 1925, to Stanley and Jennie Halaquist. He had three brothers, Phillip, Robert, and Peter. After high school, Earl entered World War II as a Navy air crewman.

According to tall, slender Halaquist, "The first race I ever saw was a sprint car race, and I drove in it. It was at Little Valley near Buffalo, and I was 21. A guy in my hometown of Franklin, New York, asked if I wanted to go to the races with him. This was 1946 and I'd never seen an automobile race. A friend of his from Cortland had a car, and my buddy talked him into letting me drive it. I didn't finish up front, but I did qualify and I found out that I liked those open cars."

Soon afterwards, the machinist at the local Bendix magneto plant owned a sprint car. "It was a flathead Ford four-cylinder that looked good, but it didn't have the power to compete with the Rileys, Cragars and Hal DO's."

During the late 1940's, the top drivers in the Southern Tier region of Pennsylvania/New York were Eddie Gallione, Amos & Johnny Hill, Henry "Grandpa" Gritsbach, Curtis Ackley, Sandy Sanford, Hank Bruning, Les Shaffer, Harry Eckert and George "Boots" Bouley.

In 1950, Halaquist bought a 4-port Riley and raced it with the Eastern States Racing Association (ESRA), the Big Car Racing Association (BCRA) and the United Racing Club (URC) when they ventured into the Southern Tier region. The Sidney, New York, resident won a few races with the Eastern States organization, earning \$150 or \$200 for a win. His best finish with URC was a second on the asphalt at Shangri-La Speedway in Owego, New York.

The top drivers in URC competition in the early to mid-1950's were Mike Magill, Bert Brooks, Lou Johnson, Buddy Powers, Hal Rettberg, Bob Courtwright, Bobby Marshman and Dick "Toby" Tobias. In 1956, Halaquist finished tenth in URC points, which was quite an accomplishment for the upstate New Yorker.

The following year Earl moved up to eighth in URC points. He even drove 2,400-pound Chrysler Hemi-powered sprint car the Little 500 sprint car race in Anderson, Indiana.

By the late 1950's, Earl knew that 'moving up' in the sport meant racing full-time with URC, including the Sam Nunis-promoted fair dates up and down the Eastern Seaboard. So, after driving for Ted Blair of Springfield, Mass., Halaquist walked into the 1959 URC banquet as the fourth-highest point-getter behind Lou Johnson, Hal Rettberg and Dave Humphrey (and one place ahead of Eddie Gallione).

It was at that banquet that the soft-spoken Halaquist met car owner George Nesler, and they agreed to partner for the 1960 season. According to Earl, "When I first started driving for George Nesler, he was a public service bus driver in New Jersey. He borrowed

a few hundred dollars out of some grocery money his wife had saved and went in partnership with an attorney he knew on a land purchase. When I stopped racing for George he was a millionaire. And he didn't make it off our racing."

Earl finished third in points behind Hal Rettberg and Beau Clarke in 1960, and Eddie Gallione and Bob Courtwright in '61, respectively. However, in 1962, Halaquist and Courtwright tied for the URC point championship with 2,669 points each. Their nearest competitor, Don Gillette, would finish third with 1,873 points. In 1963, Earl would finish second in points to Jim Maguire. However, from that point forward, the modest Halaquist and the conservative Nesler would dominate URC for the rest of the decade. Earl claimed his second title in 1964, defeating "Red" Reigel, Don Gillette and Lou Johnson for the honors aboard his Floyd Trevis-built TrevisCraft sprinter.

One year later, Halaquist would finish second in his brand-new Ronnie Ward-built car to his Nesler teammate Larry Dickson of Marietta, Ohio, in the trusty TrevisCraft sprinter. As luck would have it, Earl lost the title by less than one hundred points after blowing an engine during the Williams Grove Speedway finale.

In 1966, while Nesler-backed Dickson was off running with the United States Auto Club (USAC) with the Ward machine, Halaquist claimed his third URC title over Lou Johnson.

Earl's fourth title with URC came in 1967, as he claimed 14 feature wins. Steve Krisiloff and Lou Johnson trailed him in points that year. Earl also won aboard the Mordenti Offy in an American Racing Drivers Club (ARDC) midget event at the mile-and-an-eighth dirt track in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, that year.

URC title number five came in 1968, when Halaquist and Nesler again tasted champagne by defeating Fred "Jiggs" Peters and Lou "Peach-picker" Johnson in the point

race. Asked who his toughest competition was, Earl recently remarked "Bert Brooks, Lou Johnson, Jimmy McGuire, Bobby Courtwright - they were all tough. And in USAC, we raced against Roger McCluskey, Jim Hurtubise and A.J. Foyt - all those guys. We ran Williams Grove, Oswego, Reading, all the eastern races we could. Of course, we always drew a bad pill for time trials because they took care of their own. They had two pill bottles, one for their guys and one for everybody else. Still, I had a couple of top-tens with those guys and I also ran with Tom Cherry's All-American club from the midwest."

Finally, in 1969, 'the Earl of Sidney' won his sixth point championship with the United Racing Club, a record which still stands today. The top six were rounded out by Tom Price, Dick Mealy, Walt Bettler, Gino Swarhout and Dick "Toby" Tobias. Remembers he, "Chris Economaki used to call me 'The Earl of Sidney,' like I was royalty. I always got a kick out of that."

Earl ran ARDC midgets for a year, in 1970, before retiring when his vision started worsening. He has 53 career URC feature wins, which was a record which stood until 1981 when it was broken by "Buck" Buckley, Jr. According to Earl, "The greatest time of my life was when I was driving with URC. My only regret is that I never had the chance to run Indy. I had the opportunity with George Nesler, but I couldn't go because I couldn't get the month of May off. I would have lost my job and I needed the job to support my family. But who knows how I'd have done? We've got a great family, and that's what counts in life."

After retiring from racing and Bendix in 1970, the hard-working Halaquist drove trucks as a teamster for another eighteen years. Today, Earl and his wife Patricia live in Bainbridge, New York, surrounded by most of their children. There is Elaine, Lee Jane, Nancy and Michael from his first marriage and Dennis from her first marriage, and Earl Halaquist, Jr., from their union together.



Earl Halaquist

Bruce Craig Photos