

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

GARY BETTENHAUSEN

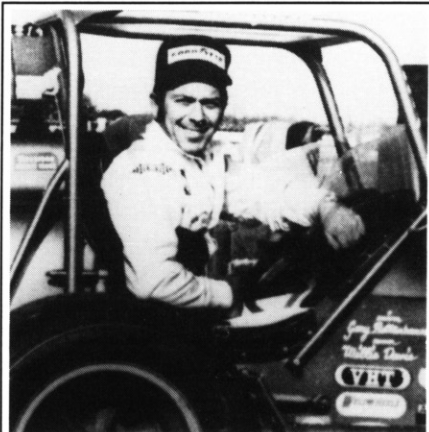
According to the 1972 United States Auto Club (USAC) Yearbook, "Gary Bettenhausen was born to race."

Truer words may never have been written. Born on November 18, 1941, to two-time (1951 & 1958) national driving champion Melvin Eugene "Tony" Bettenhausen and Valerie Rice Bettenhausen, Gary grew up in Tinley Park (Ill.) amidst stock car and open wheel racing. Tragically, the elder Bettenhausen was killed in a practice crash at Indy in 1961.

Gary began his racing career in USAC stock cars in 1963. By 1965, he had added USAC midget racing to his season schedule. One year later, he tried the USAC championship car division for the first time. The following year, in the final race of the season and just one week prior to his 26th birthday, Gary Bettenhausen began his distinguished USAC sprint car career at Ascot Park in Gardena (Calif.). Gary won the trophy dash and scored a third place feature finish behind winner A.J. Foyt (Jr.) in A.J. Watson's Leader Card Special.

1968 saw Bettenhausen concentrate on USAC's open wheel divisions, something he would continue to do for the remainder of his career. Aboard the Willie Davis Sprint car number 24, Bettenhausen won seven times (including a September event at Knoxville, Iowa) enroute to his second place finish in points behind Larry Dickson of Marietta (Ohio).

The following year, the sophomore sprint star Bettenhausen won the USAC national sprint car championship with seven wins in Willie Davis' City of Syracuse Special and one win in the Robert Ziegler sprint-



Gary Bettenhausen (Bruce Craig Photos Collection)

er. His car was again owned and maintained by Davis of Burbank (Calif.), who got his start racing hot rods on the southern California dry lakes before he discovered the Carrell Speedway and eventually USAC sprint car racing.

In 1970, Dickson regained the championship, with Bettenhausen again second aboard the Davis sprinter. Gary won seven events, including the prestigious "Joe James/Pat O'Connor Memorial" race at Salem (Ind.). "Those Bettenhausen-Dickson duals really caught the imagination of the racing public," said Russ Clendenen, veteran USAC official. "Those two really had some wars on the track, but they were great friends in the pits."

The "Larry and Gary Show" continued in '71, with Bettenhausen

wrestling the title back from Dickson. The Willie Davis Thermo-King sprinter was equipped with a Ford powerplant and it claimed four victories, while Gary's fifth triumph was aboard the Ben Leyba sprinter at Winchester (Ind.). At the awards banquet that winter, Gary Bettenhausen revealed that he wouldn't be able to follow the full USAC sprint car circuit in '72. due to his championship car commitments.

From 1972 until 1981, Gary B. captured another six wins for Willie Davis, including the rich "Hulman Classic" race at the Terre Haute (Ind.) Action Track in 1974. He also won an additional seven USAC sprint car wins with such owners as Ben Leyba, Paul Leffler, Paul Moorman and Sherman Armstrong. His career USAC sprint car feature win count stands at forty (40).

Through the '80s, Gary Bettenhausen indeed focused his enormous energies on Indianapolis and championship car racing, winning the dirt car titles in 1980 and 1983. However, to the delight of his many fans around the county, he never forgot his short-track roots, competing whenever and wherever his schedule permitted. In the 1990s, the four-time Indy car winner (Phoenix, Michigan, Trenton, Texas) continues to compete in that form of racing, as does his brother Tony (Jr.). His brother Merle, who like Gary suffered an arm injury in racing, has retired from the sport. Gary also has one sister, Susan. The Martinsville (Ind.) resident is married to Wavelyn and has four children: Gary, Shawn, Cary and Todd (twins).