



# Louis "Rusty" Espinoza

by Norm Bogan

Why is Louis "Rusty" Espinoza being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame? He doesn't possess a resume of feature wins or series championships like many drivers and car owners. He hasn't gained fame as a media person or flamboyant promoter. Rusty Espinoza represents the heart and soul of short track racing, as one of the persons working behind the scenes to keep the show going year after year. His childhood fascination germinated a lifelong dedication to sprint car racing.

Rusty claims that fifty-four of the current members of the Hall of Fame were personal acquaintances and he now eagerly awaits his plaque being placed alongside all his friends.

Louis "Rusty" Espinoza was born in Anaheim, California, on April 29, 1924, and has lived in the city most of his life. At a young age, his parents divorced and his mother moved the family to San Diego's "Old Town" section. It was here at the age of ten that Rusty was first introduced to auto racing at Silver Gate Speedway, located at the present site of the Sea World Amusement Park. He and his brothers would trudge across the sand dunes from their home to the racetrack and worked in the concessions collecting soda bottles from beneath the grandstand after the races. This is where he first viewed his lifelong racing hero in action, Bud Rose (Harry Eisele).

As a teen, the family returned to Anaheim and Rusty tried out for football. But, Anaheim had some pretty good talent. So, one of his friends from San Diego told him to join his family in Oceanside, where Rusty realized his high school football dreams. On December 8, 1941, Rusty enlisted in the Navy and eventually ended up as the coxswain on a 36-foot LST. He spent his time landing troops in the South Pacific and making stops at storied places like Guadalcanal, Bougainville and other Solomon Islands garden spots. In 1944, Espinoza came home on leave and married his sweetheart, Josephine (Josie).

Returning to civilian life, Rusty became the first employee at the Robertshaw Controls plant in Anaheim. For the next thirty-four years, he toiled away in the production department with aeronautical components, eventually moving to the Research and Development Group, testing many new products.

In 1949, Rusty and one of his Navy shipmates, Tom Finney, traveled to Carrell Speedway in Gardena, California, to attend California Roadster Association (CRA) races. Tom was the track photographer and Rusty was to be his assistant. Soon, Tom was asked to fill the position of timer/ scorer. This was a paying position, so he turned his camera over to Rusty, who shot and sold photos to all the drivers of that era. Rusty also began working at the back

gate, so between his signing in all the participants and also taking their pictures, he became quite well known.

In 1951, a CRA secretary was needed and with his popularity, Rusty was nominated and elected. He served in that position for forty-one years, unopposed. Since the CRA secretary position didn't pay, Rusty continued signing in the racers at the pit gate for all those years, which did pay.

Reflecting over the years, Rusty named special drivers and matched some with different qualities. Jimmy Bryan was a good friend. Espinoza watched drivers like Johnny Rutherford, Jim Hurtubise and Parnelli Jones as youngsters coming up through the ranks and then going on to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. A couple of favorites, Ray Douglas and Granvel "Hank" Henry, perished along the way. Former motorcycle racer Don Hawley was seen as one of the toughest drivers, Ed Lockhart was a gentleman driver, and Jeff Bagley was seen as a youngster with much potential, who left the world way too soon. Louie Unser referred to Rusty, as another brother, joining Jerry, Bobby and Al. Espinoza recalls being hit in the pits by driver Tony Farr's race car, but he was uninjured.

Former CRA starter, Shim Malone, wrote a letter to the United States Auto Club (USAC) to have Espinoza serve as his observer on the starting stand at both the Riverside and Ontario speedways. Rusty says that Shim had promised him his set of flags when he retired as a payback for the burritos that Josie used to send to him at Ascot.

Queried as to what the differences were between the racing when he first got involved and today, he says that it is costlier, faster and more sophisticated presently, but the longtime camaraderie continues in the sport.

Away from racing and work, Espinoza became an accomplished scuba diver and also, took up body surfing. Many Saturdays would begin early with a trip to the surf, followed by an evening at Ascot.

Rusty praises his wife Josie and daughter Linda for all their support over the years. As a teen, Linda kept an eye on a few of the handsome racers. Her favorite was "Bud" Sterrett, but after his fatal crash at El Centro, she lost some of the allure of auto racing. Linda went on to marry a football guy, named John Robinson, who served as head coach at USC, UNLV and with the Los Angeles Rams in the National Football League (NFL).

Robinson is so proud of his father-in-law being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, that he and Linda are treating Rusty and Josie, plus grandchildren and great-grandchildren for the journey to the festivities at Knoxville.

Rusty Espinoza received the Jim Miller Award from CRA in 1975, named for a rising young CRA driver, who lost his life in Viet Nam. Additionally, he was inducted into the Legends of Ascot Hall of Fame in 2004. Rusty was a dedicated servant for CRA and revered by those that came to compete. Rusty Espinoza devoted his life to being there for others and was highly respected for his service and friendship to the sport of sprint car racing.

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