

CLARENCE "HOOKER" HOOD

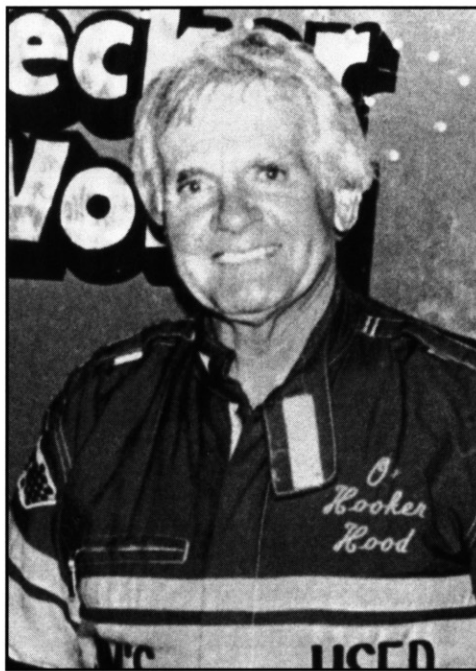
Clarence "Hooker" Hood is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999 in honor of his outstanding achievements as a driver, including his having won several hundred super-modified and sprint car features.

Clarence Caldwell Hood, Jr., was born in Memphis (Tenn.) on April 9, 1926, the son of parents Clarence and Etta Ray Hood. As for his nickname, Hood claims that when he was six, he was out in the yard petting a calf and his Daddy warned him to watch out for the mother. Clarence ignored the warning and was promptly head-butted through a fence by the cow. Some friends suggested he should be called "Hooker" after the way the cow had hooked him. Says Hood, "Me and those boys got in a fight, but I've been a 'Hooker' ever since."

He attended Tech High School, where he competed in track and was a highly regarded football player. Even though several colleges sought his talent, Hood quit school to join the Navy in 1945. Although he never saw combat, he did get his diploma and he did see the first midget race staged after World War II (at the L.A. Coliseum). Hooker remembered, "I saw the first midget race in the Coliseum and I said, 'Man, that's for me!'" It was during this time that he also concentrated his efforts as a Golden Gloves boxer, an endeavor which further led his nickname to stick. After being released from the service in 1948, Hood continued racing motorcycles in flat-track and T.T. events, and ran midgets in the Memphis area. In 1950, Hooker ventured across the Mississippi River to the new Riverside Speedway in West Memphis (Ark.) to watch the modified jalopies in action on the heavy river-bottom gumbo surface. One week later he crawled into a 1937 Ford sedan, only to turn it over. The following week he was in victory lane at the fast quarter-mile with a brand-new '39 Ford.

It is not clear how many total victories (heats, dashes, mains) the "Tennessee Tornado" has won in his nearly fifty years of racing cars, but it is clearly over 700. At Riverside, he raced 'motorsickles' on Mondays, stock cars on Thursdays, and midgets on Saturdays. At the Mid-South Fairgrounds in Memphis, he raced stock cars on Wednesdays and midgets on Fridays. Competition in the different divisions included Angelo Howerton, Ellis Palasini, Harold "Bigfoot" Riley, Leland Sowell, "Coo Coo" Marlin, Bobby & Donnie Allison and "Red" Farmer.

In 1954 and '55, Hood made five starts in National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) Grand National competition with his own '54 Olds 88. Three of his dirt-track starts were at the 1.5-mile Memphis-Arkansas Speedway



Clarence "Hooker" Hood Greg Easley Photo

in LeHi (Ark.), while he raced once each at the North Wilkesboro (N.C.) Speedway and the 4.1-mile Daytona beach and road course. Hooker's best two finishes were 13th and 14th against the likes of Marvin Panch, the Flock brothers, "Buck" Baker, Ralph Liguori, Lee Petty, DeWayne "Tiny" Lund, Joe Weatherly, Curtis Turner, Junior Johnson, Dick Rathmann, Leland Sowell, Ned Jarrett and "Fireball" Roberts. According to Hood, "I never had any heroes in racing. I figured I could outrun anyone in the country."

In '57, like some of those early NASCAR legends, Hooker Hood hauled a little corn whiskey and he got caught. He served "111 days, 4 hours, 19 minutes and 22 seconds" as a prisoner-at-large at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery (Ala.), driving trucks. According to Hooker, "The worst part of the whole deal was hearing race cars on Saturday night over at Montgomery Speedway."

Although most of Hood's racing has been on dirt, he has done his fair share on asphalt. He ran some of the first modified/sportsman races on Daytona's super-speedway, with a fifth there in the 1970 Permatex 300 as his career-best super-speedway stock car effort.

During the Sixties, the super-modified era was heating up in the Mid- and Deep South, with asphalt tracks featuring the winged-wonders from Pensacola (Fla.) to Memphis' Lakeland Speedway. Hooker's rivals at the time included Ellis Palasini, Ival Cooper, Gene Tapia, Donnie Allison, Rat Lane and Armond Holley. Said Hood, "I ran pretty good on the pavement and I've won some races there, but I didn't win nearly as many as I won on dirt." Hood hit his peak on dirt at West

Memphis in 1965 and '66. That year ('66), Hooker won twenty of 22 feature events. According to Hooker, "I was leading one when I had a flat tire, and there was one I wasn't there. The way its always been at Riverside is that if you can run fast there, you'll run fast anywhere."

Hood has captured track titles in at least three states. According to Hooker, "I just went anywhere there was a race. It didn't make no difference to me where it was. But when I called up, I just always asked them what it paid to win. I didn't worry about second place."

In 1967, Hood had a hallmark year and won 57 times in 63 shows aboard his home-built 350-cubic-inch Chevy-powered super-modified number 99 car, sponsored by Lyle Marsh. He netted \$20,000 that year and won the prestigious National Dirt Track Championship at Marshall (Mo.). He did so after winning at Devil's Bowl (Mesquite, Tex.) on Friday night and West Memphis on Saturday night, and arriving too late for hot laps. However, Hooker went out and won his heat, the dash and the 50-lap main, lapping everybody but a second place Ray Lee Goodwin. About one-third of his victories in '67 were at West Memphis, or the "Ditch" as it is known.

In 1968, Hooker backed up his incredible accomplishment by taking another 48 victories. Throughout his career, Hood has made a habit out of giving his trophies away, mostly to kids. He has also treated the young ones to his trademark handstands, free ice cream, and rides in his car after the races.

In the Seventies in the South, super-modifieds gave way to late model stock cars, but Memphis remained a hub for dirt-track sprint car racing. And it has done so through the 1980's and '90s, with Hooker Hood leading the charge against the likes of Bobby Davis, Jr., Sam, Sammy & Jeff Swindell, Elmer & Terry Gray, Ronnie Daniels, Mike Ward, Rick Ungar, Hoyette & Greg Hodnett, and many others, including 1984-85 United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car champion Rickey Hood!

The self-employed Hood has three sons by his first wife: Robin, Kenny, and Rick. Hooker also has two daughters by wife Carolyn, Stormi and Misti. Says Hooker, "I tell 'em that if I have another daughter, I'll call her Partli Cloudi!"

Clarence "Hooker" Hood has said, "I've had a good life and I wouldn't do anything different except to try and run a little faster, and that would be hard to do."