

JOHNNY WHITE

Johnny White is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999 in honor of his outstanding achievements as a driver, including his winning the 1962 International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) championship.

Johnny White was born January 18, 1932, in Detroit (Mich.).

He first raced modified stock cars on local Detroit area tracks in 1953. In '54, he drove his first sprint car in a race at Toledo (Ohio). In his first four years, the skinny driver/mechanic drove in a lot of open competition events. He didn't much care for the sanctioning bodies, especially those like the United States Auto Club (USAC), which dictated the races you could and couldn't run.

In '57, Johnny finished twelve laps ahead of 32 other drivers in the Little 500 at Anderson (Ind.) aboard Hoy Stevens' GMC-powered car. White's aggressive driving style allowed him to have much success on the high-banked asphalt tracks in the Midwest, where you couldn't afford to be too conservative. He was already being called the 'bravest of the brave'.

White, who was living in Warren (Mich.), was running a lot of midget races in 1958, '59 and '60, in addition to running open competition sprints and making occasional starts with IMCA and USAC. The tall, funny racer was also gaining quite a reputation for being an excellent builder and mechanic. He often used weight and tire combinations that no one else used, yet they were quite successful for him.

In 1961, White spent more time with the IMCA fair circuit and it paid off. Johnny placed eighth in points, capturing one win at Owatonna (Minn.) in the Ernie Johnson Offy and three wins for Ennis M. "Dizz" Wilson: twice at Nashville (Tenn.) and once at Birmingham (Ala.).

Johnny White won the IMCA point championship in 1962 aboard Wilson's Offy-powered machine nicknamed "Big Iron". Johnny captured three victories that year, winning at Winchester (Ind.), St. Paul (Minn.) and beating Pete Folsie for the crown at the final event back at Winchester. Finishing behind White and Folsie in points were Jerry Richert, Harold Leep and Johnny Rutherford. The cigarette-smoking, coffee-consuming nomad also picked up some open comp wins at Toledo and Mount Clemons (Mich.).

For 1963, White built his own Chevrolet-powered car in his Warren garage. Said he, "She only weighs fourteen hundred pounds, but she's got five hundred horsepower."

The car, numbered 1, was owned by Sid Weinberger and it was campaigned on the IMCA circuit by White himself. In May, Johnny won a race at Winchester and then followed it up with his second Little 500 victory, this time IMCA-sanctioned and with Bob Coulter as his co-driver.

Johnny quickly posted more IMCA wins at Des Moines (Iowa), Dayton (Ohio), Winchester, Cedar Rapids (Iowa), and Knoxville (Ill.).

White, who was married to Shirley and had four growing children to feed (Jimmy, Jacky, Jerry & Sandra), got the call in early August that he was finally ready to accept. Harlan Fike, owner of the Fike Plumbing sprinter on the USAC circuit, wanted Johnny's considerable talents on his team.

White responded to Fike's offer with one win in nine events, at Allentown (Penna.) in September over A.J. Foyt, and a ninth place finish in USAC points. He also drove John Pfrommer's Offy in USAC championship car competition, finishing seventh at the Hoosier Hundred and earning the Rookie of the Race award. The cocky White continued racing midgets in his spare time, too.

Interestingly, Gordon Woolley inherited the White-built Weinberger ride in IMCA competition, and he went on to claim that title.

In 1964, White's star was shining bright due to the recognition of his driving ability, guts, and mechanical ability. However, White broke his hand in an early season midget race in Tucson (Ariz.), the day before a champ car event at Phoenix. Yet, because of his known dislike of hospitals ("I hate hospitals; I just don't like to go near 'em.") and his love to race, White still ran the Phoenix race with his painful broken hand.

In May, White drove through the fiery early-race crash at the Indy 500 (which claimed the lives of Eddie Sachs and Dave MacDonald) to finish fourth and be named Rookie of the Year. He collected \$20,000, not bad for a driver who liked to quip that he raced because he didn't want to have to hold down a regular job.

Tragically, though, just two weeks after his magical Indy experience, White jumped the cushion and hooked the fence rail at Terre Haute (Ind.). His sprinter, that he himself had built, tipped over atop the rail and flipped over the fence.



Johnny White

Bruce Craig Photos

Johnny White suffered a broken neck and crushed spinal cord in the accident. Although he survived the accident, he was to be paralyzed from the neck on down for the rest of his life.

Johnny moved to Indianapolis, took up residence in a modest house and spent much of the remainder of his days flat on his back in bed, with Shirley and his family at his side. He loved to talk racing, though, and he once told journalist John Sawyer, "Goddamn right I was an outlaw racer. Nobody was gonna tell me where to race, what to drive or make me paste a pretty sticker on my car. Not until I was ready, anyway. The only reason I ever joined USAC was 'cause they've got a lock on Indy and I wanted to run the Speedway. But I still thought the same way; drove the same way, too. No membership card can change the nature of a man. And I would've won the (expletive deleted) Speedway one day. If I hadn't got hurt."

On Christmas Eve, 1977, Johnny White passed away.