

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Jud Phillips

by Donald Davidson

Best remembered for being Bobby Unser's winning chief mechanic at Indianapolis in 1968, the friendly, self-effacing Jud Phillips received a fair amount of credit during his career--but not nearly enough. He is probably thought of primarily as a highly respected National Championship chief mechanic who prepared the winning car 18 times, for Bobby Unser (eight times), Don Branson (six), Mike Mosley (two) and Billy Vukovich and Tom Sneva (once each).

What is not so generally known is that Jud was chief mechanic on the championship-winning car in the United States Auto Club (USAC) Midwest sprint car series in 1956 with Pat O'Connor and in '59 with Branson; was builder of the car which won the USAC national sprint car owner's title in 1962 and '63 (Bruce Homeyer's Konstant Hot Special, driven mostly by Roger McCluskey); and was builder, car owner and chief mechanic of the title-winning car, again with Branson, in 1964. Not only that, but the ex-Homeyer car won it again in 1966 with driver McCluskey and owner Clarence "Mutt" Anderson.

Other than for a brief hiatus from sprint cars during the summer of 1962, he served as a chief mechanic in both National Championship and sprint cars from 1950 through '66. It was not unusual for him to contest between 40 and 50 races a year, while, during the later years, also maintaining a car for tire testing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. A typical racing trip would see Jud leaving for the weekend, always by road, towing both a champ car and a sprint car.

He got his start in 1948, preparing a West Coast stock car owned by Bob Estes and driven by Bill Taylor. In the fall of 1949, Jud headed east with an Estes-owned sprint car to contest a series of late season International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) fair dates with Joe James. They finished 13th in points. They switched to the American Automobile Association (AAA) in 1950, but got off to a bit of a slow start while making the transition from dirt to the high-banked paved tracks. It didn't take them long to figure it out. A second-place finish at Dayton, Ohio, on April 29, 1951, was followed by a win at the same track on May 13 and an eventual third-place finish in the final point standings behind Troy Ruttman and Duane "Pappy" Carter.

The summary of Jud Phillips' 17-season sprint car career is that his drivers scored an amazing 34 firsts, 37 seconds and 27 thirds. By far the most successful was Branson, with 22 firsts, 23 seconds, 14 thirds and a pair of titles. O'Connor racked up seven firsts, three seconds and one third. Joe James had a first, a second and a pair of thirds. Don Freeland was in there with a first,

two seconds and five thirds, while Jim Rigsby, who lost his life at Dayton on August 31, 1952 while striving to take over the point lead, had a first, two seconds and a third.



Phillips Family Collection

Jimmy Bryan won a 100-miler (run in two segments) at Langhorne in 1955 and A. J. Foyt, Jr., accounted for a first and a second in the early part of '62, just before Jud took his hiatus from sprint cars. Others who finished either second or third in sprints prepared by Jud were Troy Ruttman (second in the season opener at Dayton in 1952), Eddie Sachs, Ed Elisian, Jim McWithey, Al Keller, Bob Wente and Billy Earl, who finished second in a confusing crash-infested affair at Middletown, New York, in 1950.

A truly astounding aspect of Jud's career is that in spite of all the extraordinary changes which took place at Indianapolis during his tenure, there was not a single phase to which he was not able to successfully adapt. Phillips went all the way from Jim Rigsby shuddering over the bricked main straight with a dirt car to 12th in 1952, through a series of steady Offy "roadster" runs, to rear-engined cars in the mid-1960s, turbocharged engines in the late 1960s, aerodynamics and massive rear wings in the 1970s, and finally winding up with Kevin Cogan placing fourth with brain-challenging ground effects in Jud's swan song in 1981. Cogan hadn't even been born when Jud ran Rigsby and Freeland. Between 1952 and 1981, cars under his care in the "500" placed 12th or higher no less than 20 times, 12 of those being within the first five, and six within the first three. Not only that, but Jud always did his own engines.

Perhaps his most endearing trait, all of the above was accomplished with small, close-knit crews and always with unfailing good humor. An after-hours bench racing session with him was an absolute delight, few having been a better story-teller or the possessor of a more infectious laugh. And consider this: during his entire career, Jud only worked for four car owners. After Bob Estes (1948 until 1960), there was Bruce Homeyer, who purchased the Estes team when Bob left racing, followed by Bob Wilke (Leader Cards) from the summer of 1962 until 1970, and finally Jerry O'Connell from 1971 until 1981. Jud and Bobby Unser were together for four years; Branson, in two segments, for a total of almost seven.

After the Cogan run in 1981, Jud retired to concentrate on a long-cherished hobby. It had been his ambition to own and restore an example of every type of engine on which he had worked.

Jud Christin Phillips, who was born on April 20, 1927, in Vancouver, Washington, passed away. Jud is survived by Sally, his wife of 42 years (and the widow of Jim Rigsby), and their daughter, Carol.

