

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

SAM HANKS

Although born in Columbus (Ohio) on July 13, 1914, Samuel Dwight Hanks lived in Alhambra (Calif.) since the age of six. Living across the street from an airport, he learned to fly in the late 1920's by working on airplanes and engines in exchange for flying instruction and time. In high school, he was the student instructor for both machine shop and auto mechanic courses. In the early and mid-1930's, he raced his Model A Ford and prepared other cars for the Muroc Dry Lake drag races in California.

Sam's illustrious career began in mid-1936 in the midget racing circuits in the Los Angeles area, including both the Atlantic and Gilmore Stadiums. He started with an Evinrude-powered midget, but by the end of the season he was driving one of the more-potent Offenhauser-powered cars. In fact, he finished second in his first 150-lap Grand Prix Turkey Day race at Gilmore Stadium to Ronney Householder.

In only his second year of professional driving, Hanks claimed the 1937 American Midget Association (AMA) Pacific Coast midget championship. According to Sam, "But if I was to make any real money out of this I knew I had to own my own car, so for 1938 I bought the black Offy which I drove and did all the mechanical work on until 1948.

In 1939, Sam campaigned throughout the Midwest and East, competing on the most popular midget tracks in the U.S. with tremendous success, winning both the Chicago (Ill.) board and Uniontown (Penna.) championships in his now-famous Roy Richter-built "money Car". In 1940, he claimed the Detroit (Mich.) and Toledo (Ohio) championships. One year later he was named the Michigan/Ohio Circuit champion and the national midget champion.

His talent behind the wheel of a midget race car opened the door to Indianapolis, and in 1940 Leon Duray hired Hanks to drive his machine. In his first 500, he qualified 12th fastest and finished 13th. In 1941, on the day before the race in a carburetion test run, a connecting rod broke in this car and it locked up, skidded through the infield fence at the end of the front stretch, and flipped.

Sam was thrown out of the cockpit and he landed in the hospital, luckily for just four days. Three weeks later he was back racing and he went on to score the 1941 National Midget Championship. Incredibly, this was the only time in his 18-year racing career that "The Thin Man" was ever upside down.

During the early part of World War II he was employed by the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation in the P-38 production division. Later he was commissioned in the Air Force and was assigned to the

Wright Field in Dayton (Ohio) as a project engineer for Pratt & Whitney engines. It was there where First Lieutenant Hanks met Iowan Alice Hedrick and they married in Detroit in 1947.



Sam Hanks (I.M.S. Photo)

After the war, Sam won the first midget race in which he participated after the four-year layoff in November 1945 at the Los Angeles Coliseum. His biggest midget win was also in the Coliseum on August 17, 1946, when he won the 250-lap Gold Cup race and he claimed over \$6,000 of the record \$28,000 purse. Sam was also instrumental in getting midget auto racing into the Pasadena Rose Bowl in 1946. It was during this season that Hanks stayed home and won the United Racing Association (URA) blue circuit midget championship. He also qualified Gordon Schroeder's Spike Jones-sponsored 16-cylinder Sampson for the front row at Indy, but the engine blew after just 18 laps. Hanks drove the last 400 miles as a relief driver for Joie Chitwood to a fifth place finish.

After every Indy 500, Hanks would return to the mid-western and eastern midget circuits in his own midget. He finally replaced his original midget with a new KurtisKraft chassis, which he raced to approximately 30 wins in 1947, including a victory in the "Night Before the 500" classic. He was highly successful throughout the remaining years in midget rac-

ing, winning the 1949 American Automobile Association (AAA) National Midget Championship over Ronney Householder, Paul Russo and Dennis "Duke" Nalon. He retired from midget racing in 1952 and he began concentrating on the big car championship trail and the Indy 500.

In 1952, he finished third at Indy and third in the National Championship point standings driving the Bardahl Special. In 1953, he again finished third at Indy and won the AAA National Championship title driving the Ed Walsh-owned Bardahl Special big car.

He drove in only eight championship races in 1954, retiring from that series at the end of the year. Also that season, Sam Hanks set a world's closed course record of 182.554 m.p.h. driving the Firestone Tire test car at the Chrysler Proving Grounds in Chelsea (Mich.).

Sam Hanks was equally impressive in stock car racing. After finishing second in the AAA national point standings in 1954, Hanks teamed with Bill Stroppe's Ford Mercury team and he claimed the 1956 and '57 Pacific Coast championships. In 1957, he finished third in USAC national points with four wins.

In 1955, Hanks teamed with George Salih at Indy but his car suffered mechanical failure. The following year he finished second to Pat Flaherty after recovering from an early incident. However, it was in 1957 that it all came together for Sam Hanks, owner George Salih, sponsor Sandy Belond of Belond Exhaust and Salih's radically-designed lay-down engine roadster, known as the "Sidewinder". In winning the 500 with a record speed of 135.601 m.p.h., he claimed \$103,844 of the \$300,252 purse. Sam announced his retirement from racing in the Winner's Circle, but he would honor his commitment to Mercury for stock car racing, winning the first race after Indy at Trenton.

After his retirement in 1957, the financially-secure Hanks was appointed Director of Racing Competition at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway by owner Anton "Tony" Hulman. He held the position from 1958 through 1979. He was also affiliated with the Raymark Corporation (Raybestos brakes) and the Los Angeles Times special events/motorsports program. Sam Hanks passed away on June 27, 1994, at his home in Pacific Palisades (Calif.).

He has been inducted into the following Halls of Fame: Helms Athletic Foundation (1958), Indianapolis Motor Speedway (1981), Eastern Auto Racing Club (1982), Motorsports (1983), AA/USAC Midget Auto Racing (1984), Michigan Motorsports (1985), and Hoosier Auto Racing Fans (1987).