

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

TOM CHERRY

By Don Anderson and Dave Argabright

Thomas Cherry, born in 1911, just might be one of the best-kept secrets in the history of short-track racing. You will find few people outside the midwest who are familiar with this remarkable record, but those who saw him race harbored strong respect for his skills and pleasant, honest demeanor.

His success was not limited to driving race cars. He also proved his mettle as a promoter, car builder, mechanic, fabricator, and businessman. During his splendid career he drove sprint cars, roadsters, midgets, and stock cars, and he was successful in every class.

Cherry was a friendly, somewhat quiet man, a man who seldom "blew his own horn".

He was instrumental, long with Dutch Hurst and others, in forming the Mutual Racing Association in Muncie, Indiana in 1938, Tom's hometown. Running "roaring roadsters", the group raced at the Muncie Steeplechase (literally, a steeplechase course) in 1939. By 1940, they began racing on the tight paved oval at Mt. Lawn Speedway near New Castle, Indiana. That was the year of Tom's first Mutual championship.

Shortly after the outbreak of World War II, Tom enlisted in the Navy. He finished his hitch in 1946, and returned to Indiana and resumed racing. He ran roadsters with Mutual, but primarily concentrated on racing midgets. In 1946 and '47, he ran outboard midgets on a regular basis.

In 1948 he drove the Calvert KK Offy midget and had a sensational year, facing some of the best competition in the country and winning regularly. During the winter that followed the 1948 season, he and "Hack" Winger built the No. 38 roadster, and in 1949 Tom was full-time with the V-8 powered roadsters.

During this period he established Tom Cherry Automotive Engineering in Muncie. Tom sold speed equipment and engines to racers all over the midwest. In the weeks prior to a big date at Anderson, Dayton, Salem, or Winchester, his shop and the parking lot outside would be filled with race cars and tow rigs. Drivers such as Rex Mays could be found here, working on their cars prior to race day.

Cherry was second in the Mutual standings in 1949, then took the crown by a wide margin in 1950. During this period Cherry and the No. 38 were almost unbeatable, setting track records and winning feature events all over the midwest.

In 1950, Tom took his roadster north to Michigan, running against sprint cars at tracks such as Saginaw, Owosso, and Flat Rock. By 1951 the roadster craze

was beginning to fade, and Cherry converted his No. 38 to a sprint car and hitched up with the Central States Racing Association (CSRA) sprint circuit.

His sprint car carried a flathead Mercury engine, and he was regularly up against 270- and 318-inch Offies. This period marked one of the extraordinary periods in Cherry's driving career, because with an underpowered car he won CSRA's Silver Crown title and finished second in their Gold Crown division.

While running with CSRA, Tom learned of NASCAR's new Speedway Division, the southern group's open wheel class. He soon won 100-mile races at Langhorne and Heidelberg, Pennsylvania. While competing with NASCAR in 1953, he made a two-way run on the beach at Daytona in the No. 38, posting a record-setting 139-mph speed on his north run. His overall time was a tick slower than Elzie "Buck" Baker in a Cadillac, but faster than Glen "Fireball" Roberts' Ford.

After the Speedway Division competition, Tom climbed into a stock car to run the beach. Starting 13th in an unfamiliar car, he eventually ran ninth in the NASCAR Grand National 160-mile race on the beach in the 57-car field!

By this time, Tom Cherry Automotive Engineering was selling racing equipment and building engines for racers all over the country. Stock car racing was enjoying terrific growth during this period, and Tom supplied many engines to racers in the southeast.

For his ability to convert the Ford flathead engine into a powerful racing engine, Tom became known as the "Muncie Merc master".

A race in which Tom really left his mark was the Little 500 at Anderson's Sun Valley Speedway. He ran the race from 1950 to 1956, and his performance was simply dominating. He still holds the all-time record for laps led at the Little 500, pacing 1,957 circuits, over 700 more than any other driver.

He won the event in 1950, '52, '54, and '55, and today is one of only two four-time winners of race (along with Bob Frey, who has five wins). His performance in the 1954 and '55 events will never be forgotten, not matched. Tom led an incredible 491 laps in 1955. That's 986 of 1,000 laps!

Following the 1956 season Tom retired from driving, and soon afterward sold his speed shop business. He focused on a new venture, All American Racing Club (AARC). He sanctioned sprint car races throughout the midwest, with occasional dates in the east and in Canada. AARC ran co-sanctioned shows with URC and CRA at times, and also sanctioned the Little 500 for a short period.

By the early 1960's, Cherry retired from racing and opened an automotive repair shop in Muncie, where he would spend the rest of his life. The 1960 inductee of the Hoosier Auto Racing Fans (HARF) Hall of Fame died on July 6, 1990, following a long illness.



Tom Cherry

(Bruce Craig Photos)