

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## JOE JAMES

Joseph David James was born in Saucier (Miss.) in 1925, the brother of two-year-old Walter Pavy, to proud parents Annabelle and Walter James. In 1929, the two blond and blue-eyed boys would be joined by a sister, Annabelle. Tragically, father Walter was struck by lightning in 1931 and mother Annabelle died following an influenza outbreak in 1935, leaving the kids in the care of Annabelle's sister Sarah, or 'Aunt Sis' as she was known. The poor economy at the time in Mississippi made things tough on the James family farm.

In 1937, the James' took a vacation to Southern California and met up with their relatives, the Gardner's. The economic situation looked much healthier in North Hollywood, So, within three years, Walter James and his three children all moved out to the coast, although eventually father and daughter would move back to Mississippi.



Joe James

(Bruce Craig Photos)

During World War II, young Walt joined the Air Corps and young Joe joined the Navy. When the war ended in 1945, both boys drag raced hot rods along Sepulveda Boulevard and worked out of their backyard Van Nuys garage. Jack Kindoll, later of JFK Racing Equipment, and Richard "Red" Amick were their friends. Joe turned out to be a better than average mechanic, while Walt usually piloted their dry lakes speedster. During 1946-48, the boys moved up to track roadsters as charter members of the fledgling California Roadster Association (CRA). According to Walt, "Joe was better than I was, but I talked a better race, so I usually had the better ride."

In 1949, Joe James headed for the Midwest with mechanic Jud Phillips, bodyman Jack Dulin and an Ardun flathead 'big car', which was built in the back of the Bob Estes Lincoln-Mercury dealership. The old car was refurbished by Dulin, who added a \$35 Hiram Hillegass nose, widened the cowl, buckled on a new hood and added a rakish-looking headrest. The rag-tag Estes-backed team took on the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) stars and cars on the county and state fair circuit of the upper Midwest. To no one's surprise, they didn't fare too well, with the highlight being a fifth place finish in August at the Iowa State Fairgrounds behind Deb Snyder, Gene Aldridge, Cliff Griffith and Al Keller. By November they were back running with Art Pillsbury's Pacific Coast division of the American Automobile Association (AAA) at the old Carrell Speedway in Gardena (Calif.).

In early 1950, Joe ran AAA events at Carrell and at Oakland, before heading off to the AAA Midwest sprint car circuit, which consisted of such high-banked joints as Winchester (Ind.), Salem (Ind.) and Dayton (Ohio). Joe and the Estes team had real problems with their old sprint in May, June and July, and equally tough luck with their Indianapolis championship car. It wasn't until August of 1950 that things started to click on both the sprint and champ car trails, with 'top ten' and 'top fifteen' finishes becoming the norm. Late in the year, Joe returned to California for a show at Clovis. After the races that October day, brother Walt James was badly injured in the same highway accident that claimed the life of W.C. "Bud" Winfield. With Walt bed-ridden, Joe finished the year racing on both coasts, finishing 32nd in the East, 18th in the Midwest, and 10th in the West.

The 1951 season started with 'top five' finishes for Joe James and the Bob Estes team in California action, as they upgraded to an Offenhauser motor in the sprint. And, by mid-May, Joe tasted his first AAA victory at

Dayton. With his self-confidence up, Joe also qualified for his first Indianapolis 500 in the Bob Estes-owned, A.J. Watson-built champ car. Although he dropped out and finished dead last in the '500', 1951 was a good year for Joe in sprints and champ cars, and even midjets. He won at Salem in October aboard Duane Carter's Bob Pankratz-built 'Miracle Power Special' and he was becoming known as a high-banks artist. During this time, though, he parted company with Bob Estes, A.J. Watson and Jud Phillips. Still, he finished third on both the Pacific Coast (behind Troy Ruttman and Johnnie Parsons) and Midwest (behind Ruttman and Duane "Pappy" Carter) circuits.

Joe began 1952 running the Morales brothers sprinter in California. By April, he had moved into the well-financed Lee Elkins operation and he fit in well. Joe claimed sprint wins at Dayton in April and at Winchester in May, and at Springfield (Ill.) in June aboard a midjet. He also won at Terre Haute (Ind.) in June, Boonville (Ind.) and Cedar Rapids (Iowa) in August, and at Winchester in September. However, Joe James was never able to reach such success in the championship car division. At Indy in '52, he started sixteenth and finished thirteenth in the Ed Walsh Bardahl Special. He was in and out of several other champ cars that year with mixed success.

By October, "Little Joe" and Mike Nazaruk were teammates in the Elkins/McNamara sprinters. At Salem, Joe wrapped up the AAA Midwest sprint car title by finishing third in the race. He bested Gene Force, Pat O'Connor, Marlin "Red" Renner and Mike Nazaruk in points by posting six wins, four seconds and three thirds. He also ran fourth in the '52 Pacific Coast title behind Ruttman, Parsons and Gordon Reid.

On November 2nd of that Championship-winning year, Joe teamed up one last time with Bob Estes for a J.C. Agajanian-promoted champ car race on the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds at San Jose (Calif.). He timed second quick, and he was leading the race on lap 47 when a yellow came out. On the restart, with the mid-day sun in his eyes and mud on his goggles, Joe caught Nazaruk's wheel and flipped end-for-end four times, ending up in the catch fence. He was taken to a nearby hospital with a fractured skull and internal injuries, but he never regained consciousness and he was pronounced dead three days later. He was 27 years old and had led the only 27 laps of his championship car career that day.