

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

GORDON WOOLLEY

Gordon Woolley was born in 1922 and, as a teenager, was attracted to motorsports. In fact, in 1946, Woolley rolled jalopies over at Waco (Tex.), earning ten dollars per flip from the promoter. Woolley won 17 straight features at the Suicide Bowl in Waco in a 1937 Oldsmobile owned by Jack Bagby. He then travelled Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Alabama racing jalopies.

Gordon raced late model stock cars and Modifieds at the Thunderbird Speedway in Crandall (Tex.) in 1959. It was around this time that Gordon saw his first sprint car race at the Joseph F. Meyer Speedway in Houston. He decided right then and there that a sprinter is what he wanted to drive. According to Woolley, "I had a friend in Florida named 'Flip' Fritch, down in Tampa, and I asked him, 'Can you help me get a sprint car ride? Because that's what I want.' I had been asking around for a ride and the owners would say, 'Where the hell is Wack-o?'"

Flip steered him to a sprint car for sale in Johnstown (Penna.) and said he'd loan him the money if Woolley paid him back. The lanky 6'3" Woolley left Waco in a '58 Chevy and \$2,500 in his pocket. Said Gordon, "It wasn't much more than a stretched midget."

On the way home, he entered a 50-lap sprint car race in Des Moines (Iowa), placed sixth in the feature and won \$50. Thus started the sprint career that saw him race regularly at Dallas and Waco against Jim McElreath and Johnny Rutherford. All three Texans graduated to the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) in a rather short period of time.

Married to wife Ann and with three daughters, Pam, Pat and Lisa, the self-employed auto mechanic (in the winter) began IMCA racing in 1960. And even



Gordon Woolley

(Unknown Photo)

though he was to become a regular at IMCA meets for years to come, Woolley was way too independent of a gypsy racer to be tied down to one circuit or one car owner. Reflected Gordon, "I never drove the same car all season except when I drove for Hector Honore."

Besides Honore (and his "Black Deuce"), Gordon's car owners have included, among others, Marty Brightman, L.A. Corley, "Fritz" Tegtmeier, Vic Valentine, Darwin Maxson, "Red" Sitton, Roy Thomas, Chet Wilson (and the "Offy Killer"), Art Alexander, Casey Newberry and Don Shepherd.

In 1960, the 175-pound Woolley finished tenth in IMCA points, behind Pete Folse, Emmett "Buzz" Barton, A.J. Shepherd, Jerry Blundy, Jerry Shumaker, Leroy Neumayer, Jim McElreath, Herschel Wagner and Harold Leep. He even notched one win at the Northwest Missouri State Fairgrounds in Bethany.

The next season, he slipped to eleventh in IMCA points after a serious accident in mid-season. He again claimed one win, this time in the Dave Beatson Chevy at the old Meyer Speedway in Houston.

In 1962, Gordon didn't win any IMCA features, but was consistent enough to place eighth in points, behind Johnny White, Folse, Jerry Richert, Leep, Rutherford, Arnie Knepper and Blundy. He drove the Chet Wilson "Offy Killer" that year. At Knoxville (Iowa) Raceway, Woolley drove a roadster T convertible super-modified and won on three occasions, earning him enough points to finish seventh. He also finished second to Jerry Richert in the second-ever Knoxville Nationals feature, ahead of "Tiger Bob" Williams, Jerry Weld and Greg Weld.

Defending IMCA champion Johnny White started 1963 with the 327 c.i. Sid Weinberger-owned number 1 machine and Woolley with the Chet Wilson Chevrolet. After he won at Tampa (Fla.) early in the year, Gordon switched to the Jack Colvin Chevy with Don Shepherd wrenching. In March, he won at El Centro in Imperial (Calif.) against the California Racing Association (CRA) in the ex-Elmer George, Colvin-owned K.E.Y. sprinter against Johnny Wood in the Bromme Offy and Bobby Unser. Said Woolley, "I really wanted to beat the CRA boys; I've never done well against them before."

In August, Woolley finished fourth in the Knoxville Nationals in the Colvin Chevy behind winner Greg Weld, Jerry Weld and Dick Fries. It was also during August that the two-time IMCA winner was also trailing both White (7 wins) and Folse (6) in IMCA points. However, on August 8th, Woolley won at Perry (Mich.) and then quit the Colvin team to drive for Sid Weinberger, who had lost Johnny White to the United States Auto Club (USAC) circuit. Picking up where he had left off, Woolley won two nights later in the 1,400-lb., 500-horsepower Weinberger car with mechanics Dick Etchison and Joe Booth.

Gordon Woolley used the change to his advantage and he promptly won the 1963 IMCA title over Folse, the USAC-bound White, Jerry Daniels and Blundy. That year, on the IMCA fair circuit, Woolley won ten times: seven for Detroit-area building contractor

Weinberger at Ionia (Mich.) on August 10th, Wausau (Wisc.), Des Moines, Lincoln (Neb.), Topeka (Ks.), Muskogee (Okla.), and Nashville (Tenn.); twice for Jack Colvin at LaCrosse (Wisc.) and Eldon (Ia.); and once for Chet Wilson at Tampa. He became the first non-Miller, non-Offy-powered IMCA champion in history and he won \$10,555 in purse winnings in 37 IMCA races.

At this point in his career, Woolley averaged 60,000 miles a year on his Chevy. He was known as a driver who preferred the dirt tracks to the high-banked asphalt tracks, and the lanky Texan with black boots and a scarlet driver's suit generally carried his yellow helmet more than he did a wrench. But he was most known as a 'real racer', one who raced anywhere and everywhere with anyone and everyone. According to Gordon, answering the question as to why he only competed once with USAC, "I got out of the car to go and get a drink of water, and when I got back, the owner had another driver sitting in it."

Woolley was offered USAC rides, however, as George Walther offered him the opportunity to test the Dayton Steel car at Indianapolis in 1964. According to Woolley, "My chance didn't work out. I guess I wasn't supposed to race at Indy. A lot of guys I knew never got a chance to take the rookie test. I know I could have raced if I hadn't hurt my eye."

Gordon finished the '64 IMCA season 13th in points, with one win at Knoxville (Ill.) in the Thomas Offy. He finished third in IMCA points the next season behind Richert and Jim Moughan, yet ahead of Tom Bigelow and Rollie Beale. He had wins at Tampa, Cedar Rapids (Ia.), Grand Forks (N.D.), and Sedalia (Mo.) in Hector Honore's "Black Deuce", and he won a CRA show at El Centro in March of '65 in Clarence B. "Pop" Miller's car.

In 1966, Woolley was sixth in IMCA points behind Richert, Moughan, Bill Puterbaugh, Jerry Daniels and Beale, with one win at Minot (N.D.) in the W.R. Hoback sprinter. In '67, Gordon won at Oklahoma City (Okla.) and finished 12th in points in just 16 IMCA starts.

He climbed back to fifth in 1968 IMCA points behind Richert, Lee Kunzman, Blundy and Ralph Parkinson (Sr.). He drove the Herman Bellmire Chevy to a single victory at Des Moines. He also set IMCA records that year at Sedalia (1-lap; 35.78 seconds) and at Des Moines (30-laps; 12:28.21 minutes).

Gordon raced off-and-on with IMCA in the years from 1969 until his retirement from sprint cars in 1972, however he also raced midgets during that time and was injured at Sedalia. Woolley made his last sprint car start at the Devil's Bowl Speedway in '72. He was named a charter inductee into the Knoxville Raceway Hall of Fame in 1979, yet he continued racing stock cars back in his native Texas into the Nineties. In fact, Gordon was the '82 stock car champion at the Heart-O-Texas Speedway in Waco. According to Gordon, "I raced every kind of car there was. I'd go get a ride anywhere if there was a chance to make some money. I loved it. I wouldn't have done anything different."