

National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

WILLIE DAVIS

William Vance "Willie" Davis, Jr., was born on September 5, 1930, in the Chinatown district of Los Angeles (CA) to parents William and Winefred Davis. The youth had his first experiences with automotive competition by watching Troy Ruttman, Walt Faulkner and Manny Ayulo race roadsters at Saugus (CA) in 1946. He then started participating in the California hot rod craze of the mid- to late '40's when he built and campaigned hot rods on the dry lakes before turning to sprint cars. He teamed with Clem TeBow in 1949, with whom he had raced on the dry lakes and the drag strips, and together they ran cars at the old Carrell Speedway under the Western Racing Association (WRA) and California Roadster Association (CRA) banners.

In the early to mid-1950s, Willie Davis continued his dry lakes racing at Bonneville (UT) with the Bob Estes Special, wrenched for Culver City (CA) midget owner Bill Murphy, helped Art Bisch win the 1956 CRA title, and wrenched for R. D. Whittington (late father to Don, Bill and Dale) on his sprint and dirt championship cars. In the late 1950s he worked with Ernie Ruiz and his Travelon Trailers team and Davis had his own automotive shop in Burbank (CA). In 1961 he built his first sprint car and in '62 he toured the Midwest with his car, even giving Johnny Rutherford his first United States Auto Club (USAC) - legal ride at Reading (PA).

In 1963 he loaded everything up for the Midwest, maintaining Clem TeBow's USAC C&T Automotive sprinter driven by Chuck Hulse of Downey (CA). Hulse racked up one feature win at New Bremen (OH) and four seconds with the California car that year and finished the season fourth in points.

Willie worked on the Bob Wilke-owned Leader Card championship crew under A.J. Watson from 1964 until '68, and he often campaigned Watson's sprint car when A.J. had championship car commitments. At the time it was A.J., Willie and Ronnie Ward working in Watson's Glendale (CA) shop.

Willie built and owned his own car in 1966 and it made its debut at the Terre Haute (IN) fairgrounds in August with Al Unser (Sr.) driving. It was campaigned on a limited basis until 1967. That year, "Bud" Tengelstad, Al Smith and Mike Mosely all drove for Willie, placing his "Willie Davis Special" #24 in USAC's season-ending 'top fifty'.

The following season, 1968, Willie teamed up with driver Gary Bettenhausen of Tinley Park (IL), whom Davis had one year earlier told to "go back and learn how to drive a sprint car." According to Davis, "The kid's going to make a hell of a sprint car driver. I've spent years working with experienced drivers who don't have what Gary does now. Sure, he gets a little wild out there. He's got some things to learn. But, I'll tell you, he really wants to win. Just like his father. That's important. He impressed me a lot."

And so, Gary and Willie won seven times that year, at Terre Haute, Pittsburgh (PA), Stafford Springs (CT), New Bremen, Knoxville (IA), Terre Haute again, and at the legendary Reading (PA) Fairgrounds. In fact, Al Smith even won one for Willie at Al's hometown track in Dayton (OH). All in all, Willie's second place in owner points to champion Ray Smith, with driver Larry Dickson, wasn't bad, but he wanted to be 'number one' as much as Gary.

In 1969, Willie and Gary added two friends to the mix, Pat Santello and Bernie Gerthoeffer from Syracuse (NY), and their combined efforts provided 'the right stuff'. The "City of Syracuse Special" landed in victory lane another seven times, at Reading, New Bremen, Terre Haute, the Erie County Fair in Hamburg (NY), Cincinnati (OH), Winchester (IN) and Syracuse. Together, they claimed the USAC sprint car championships in both the owner and driver categories. Willie was also active that year as Championship car chief mechanic.

"The Larry and Gary Show" continued in 1970, with Dickson in Kenny Lay's number two machine and Bettenhausen in Willie's "City of Syracuse Spl.", with the number on the tail tank. Gary won seven more at Eldora, Clermont (IN), Odessa (MO), Nazareth (PA), Toledo and Salem twice. In fact, one of the Salem wins was in the prestigious annual "Joe James-Pat O'Connor Memorial" classic. However, Dickson won ten and claimed the title back, leaving Gary and Willie both second in their respective standings.

1971 brought another fierce battle, this time with the Indianapolis-based Davis picking up Thermo-King sponsorship for his blue DOHC Ford sprinter. Gary B. drove it hard, picking up wins at Eldora, Salem, New Bremen and Terre Haute, and with them the all-important USAC sprint car title. Willie was again 'King of the Hill'.

Roy Richwine's Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg (PA) and Toledo provided the win sites for the Thermo-King number one sprinter in 1972, as Gary only made eleven starts. Davis finished the season 14th in car owner points.

The next season wasn't much better, as Billy Shuman's win at the Indiana State Fairgrounds was Willie's only triumph on the '73 USAC sprint car calendar. Davis would up tenth in points with his Thermo-King car as Shuman, Merle Bettenhausen, Lee Osborne, Sammy Sessions, Steve Chassey and even Larry Dickson all took turns subbing for Gary Bettenhausen who make 18 starts in 41 races. It was around this time that the team was involved in an I-70 highway accident that killed their truck driver, Billy Brown, and badly bruised Willie. Race driver Bettenhausen and mechanic Larry Journey were uninjured.

Gary Bettenhausen piloted Willie's number 24 to a pair of wins in six starts in 1974 in the "Hulman Classic" at Terre Haute and at New Bremen, while



Willie Davis

(Bruce Craig Collection)

Johnny Parsons (Jr.) scored one at Winchester for Willie. Twelfth in points was Willie's reward. The next two years produced just one win each season for the veteran Bettenhausen/Davis combination, with the "City of Syracuse" coming home first at Terre Haute in '75 and at New Bremen in '76.

From 1976 until '96, Willie went to work for a variety of motorsports people, including friends Pat Santello, Galen Fox, Tony Bettenhausen, A. J. Watson, Grant King and even "Smokey" Yunkick in Florida (1986-89). In fact, Willie "Cork" Davis was Gary "Schmuck" Bettenhausen's crew chief in 1980 when Gary finished third in the Indy 500 in the Armstrong-Mould entry. Since 1991, he has been back with Tony Bettenhausen, heading up the Bettenhausen machine shop.

Willie lives today with his wife Mary in the Indianapolis area, where he has lived full-time since 1970, except for this stint in Florida. Mary had five children from a previous marriage: Steve, David, Jimmy, Dee and Jeanine. Willie also has a sister Christie.

A look at the 1996 USAC all-time sprint car entrant list of feature victories lists Steve Stapp (49), Willie Davis and Sherman Armstrong (34), Ben Leyba (32), August Hoffman family/Dynamics (31), Don Siebert and Dick Hammond/Gohr Distributing (30), Paul Leffler (29), A. J. Watson (27), John Vance/Aristocrat Products (26).