

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

PAT O'CONNOR

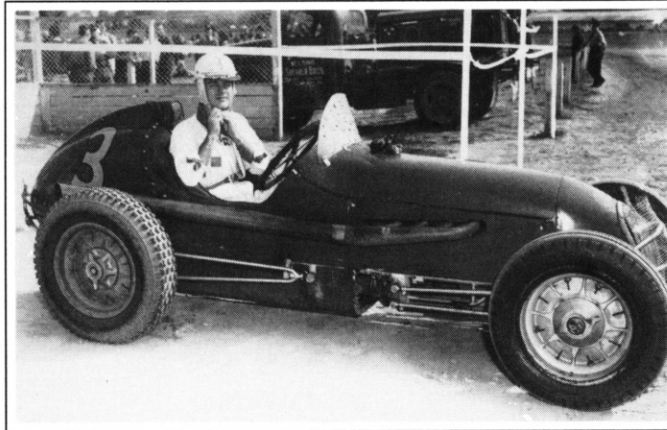
Pat O'Connor was born in North Vernon (Ind.) on October 9, 1928, and started racing in May of 1948. His first race came in the 'roadsters' at Columbus (Ind.) and by August of that year the new car salesman had scored his first feature win.

In 1951 the handsome and clean-cut O'Connor placed second in the Mutual Roadster Association in Indiana and Illinois, having accumulated a total of nine feature wins over the years. He had also moved up to the American Automobile Association (AAA) Midwest sprint car circuit, and in 1952 he placed third on that circuit driving a stretched midget powered by a V8-60 Ford engine with a supercharger. He loved driving Dayton (Ohio), Salem (Ind.) and Winchester (Ind.), known as 'the Hills', and he called the trio of pavement tracks his "secret weapon".

The 1953 season opened at Winchester and the well-spoken, nattily-attired gentleman from North Vernon narrowly won the race over another car salesman, Californian Bob Sweikert. O'Connor was aboard the red Charley Engles Offy and Sweikert was in the Iddings Offy. Two weeks later O'Connor won again, over Sweikert and Mike Nazaruk. Back at Winchester, O'Connor won yet again, beating Nazaruk, Larry Crockett and Sweikert. However, at the Dayton 100, O'Connor suffered a 'Did Not Finish', which meant the results of the season finale at Salem would determine the championship between O'Connor and Sweikert. Indeed, Pat beat Bob by two car lengths to record his first of three Midwest crowns. After the race, Sweikert shook hands and said, "You drive awfully hard, Slim." The champion responded to his friend, "That's your fault." In 1954, both gentlemen changed cars, with O'Connor going over to the Hank Lammers black Offy and Sweikert moving to the Lee Elkins maroon and gold number 73 machine. Sweikert's teammates were Nazaruk and LeRoy Warriner. The smooth driving O'Connor again won the Midwest championship (over Eddie Sachs) to become the first driver to earn the title more than once. Included in his wins was the prestigious "Joe James Memorial" at Salem. O'Connor was quoted

once as saying, "I wish Sweikert wouldn't drive so fast." Sweikert retorted, "That works both ways."

The following season got off to a bad start with Larry Crockett losing his life at Langhorne (Penna.) and Mike Nazaruk suffering a similar fate there a couple of weeks later. In the Midwest, Sweikert was winning big in his own car and he won the 1955 AAA Midwest title, followed by Sachs and O'Connor.



Pat O'Connor (Bruce Craig Collection)

1956 saw O'Connor win his third title, now United States Auto Club (USAC) sanctioned, after a year-long battle between himself, Sachs and Elmer George. Pat won the season-opening race at Birmingham (Ala.) aboard the Bob Estes-owned Dale Estes number 9 Special and followed it with wins at Salem, DuQuoin (Ill.) and Dayton. On June 17th, Sachs beat O'Connor at Salem. The runner-up finish for Pat was hollow, though, as his good friend and rival Bob Sweikert perished in that race. Coincidentally, Pat became one of the first drivers to utilize a roll bar in USAC competition in '56.

Going into the last race of the 12-race point season at New Bremen (Ohio), he could still lose out to challenger Sachs but he was not to be denied as he made a clean sweep of the program, winning the fifty-lap feature event which was his tenth start of the series. Interestingly, Pat also claimed one USAC Eastern sprint car circuit win at Heidelberg (Penna.) in his only Eastern start which gave him 20th in that circuit's point standings (won for the

sixth time by Tommy Hinnershitz). Pat finished second to Don Branson in the three-race February USAC Florida Winter series, picking up the win at the Medley Speedway in Miami.

He had shown well in the championship cars and led during the early stages of the 1956 Indianapolis 500, and won his first national championship race at Darlington (S.C.) on July 4, 1956.

Firestone took Pat O'Connor to Italy in early 1957 to test tires on the high-banked, two-mile-long oval at Monza. O'Connor's Indy roadster bounded all over the banking and he averaged better than 170 miles per hour. Later, somewhat apologetically, O'Connor admitted that he had to drive harder, though not faster, in a sprint car at Salem, Winchester and Dayton.

Following Monza, astonished European road racing teams begged him to join them, as did the American factory stock car racing teams. However, he came back home to run Indy, finishing eighth. He went back to Europe for Monza, although he failed to finish due to a leaking fuel tank. When he returned to the states, he found Elmer George, Andy Linden and Rex Easton in a wild battle for his Midwestern title. Pat raced the sprinters a couple of times, again claiming Salem's "Joe James Memorial" and finishing sixth in points, although he seemed to have lost his determination following Sweikert's death.

In 1958, Pat decided not to run the sprinters at all until after the May 30 Indianapolis 500-mile classic. In that race, on the first lap, Ed Elisian and Dick Rathmann lost control together and started a 16-car wreck. Pat O'Connor's burning roadster flipped side-over-side, then slid along on its back before righting itself. The five-foot, ten-inch Hoosier hero was killed instantly.

In addition to his 'big car' successes, Pat started 43 championship car races during his career, beginning at Indianapolis on September 26, 1953, and he won two (Darlington in 1956 and Trenton in '57). Pat was survived by his first wife Harriet and their son Rob and his second wife Analise and their son Jeffrey.