

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## WALLY MESKOWSKI

by Joe Scalzo

The sprint car races sanctioned by USAC in the Midwest and East during the early and middle Sixties may never be equalled. They featured quite possibly the greatest group of evenly matched drivers ever to race Sprints together, and, more than that, the car owners, mechanics, and builders that the races attracted were the very best going. Indeed, two of them - Don Shepherd and Wally Meskowski - became as well-known as the drivers. Mario Andretti, one of the period's major forces, spoke about Shepherd and Meskowski this way: "I always thought that people watching the races in those days were watching the wrong guys, that instead of watching the drivers, they should have been watching Shepherd and Meskowski. When I was driving Wally's car, and Bobby Unser was driving Shepherd's, Bobby and I used to get in each other's way a lot. And whenever that happened on the track, Wally and Shepherd were sure to have an argument in the pits, Wally sticking up for me, Shepherd sticking up for Bobby. They never came to blows, but at Eldora once, Shepherd walked clear down to our pits to bawl Wally out. Wally stood there, calmly listening to Shepherd. And behind his back he was holding a wheel hammer."

Andretti was one of nine future Indianapolis winners who passed through Wally Meskowski's finishing school. He seems to have enjoyed better relations with him than certain others, for Meskowski was a combative and confrontational car owner. (Meskowski, like Smokey Yunick, was a maverick, and presumably hot-tempered. Yet his friend Ted Halibrand says that the reason people mistakenly assumed Meskowski was in a bad mood all the time was because they didn't really know him.) Meskowski's tough-guy demeanor set the style for the time. He wasn't physically big, but he had a loud, angry voice, and he also had his "assembly line." This amounted to drivers lining up to try his car and Meskowski barking "Get in, get out, get in, get out," as he inspected and rejected each one in turn. Those drivers Meskowski hired - none of them stayed for very long, because he was so demanding - were all a special type, were all stand-on-the-gas chargers. Those were the

only kind he tolerated. Even they deferred to him, some of them calling him "Mr. Meskowski." "If they get tough with me," he once said, "I just give 'em some of their own toughness back."



*Wally Meskowski (Bruce Craig Collection)*

He meant every word of it. One 1965 afternoon at Indianapolis Raceway Park, he and A.J. Foyt violently disagreed about how a Meskowski car was performing. Accounts vary, but at the peak of the disagreement Meskowski was strapped in the car himself, wearing a borrowed helmet, and furiously gesturing for a truck to push him off. To demonstrate to the world that *nothing* was the matter with his car, Meskowski, a non-driver, had guaranteed he could lap within one second of Foyt's best time.

Meskowski's daughter, Joy Meskowski Astone was there that day. "I was the one who made my father stop," she recalls. "I was 11 years old and scared to death. I was close to hysterics, in fact, but even that didn't stop my father. A.J. stopped him. A.J. had known me since I was small, and he said, 'No, we're not going to upset her,' and my father finally got out of the car."

Don Shepherd, Meskowski's nemesis, was at IRP, too. "The funny thing," he says, "is that Wally might have gone out and actually done it, might have lapped faster than Foyt. Wally and I were closer than a lot of people knew. And we were a lot

alike. We used to chew out our drivers. We didn't care who they were. We knew none of them were perfect. We were just trying to get them bleeped off enough so they'd go out there and drive like they should." (This system of manipulating drivers used to be called "the needle." Although it is easy to ridicule and deplore, it happens to be the system which produced Unser, Andretti, Foyt, Johnny Rutherford, and so many others.)

"Don't make my father out to be mean," Joy Meskowski Astone says. "His bark was worse than his bit. He built his own cars, and he worked on them, and he knew them so thoroughly, that he didn't like drivers telling him there was anything wrong with them. He could tell a driver exactly how to run a racetrack. Bill Vukovich, my brother-in-law drove for my father at New Bremen, Ohio, in 1967. It was Bill's first Midwestern USAC Sprint race. He wanted new tires and my father said he wasn't going to buy any because they didn't need them, and Bill said they didn't have a chance. My father set the car up to run one car width off the groove and told Bill to drive there. Bill won the race on worn tires. He and I still talk about my father. And, of course, the older he got, the mellow he got."

Meskowski, who was 64, came to a terrible and undeserved end. In March of 1979, the motorhome he was a passenger in got struck broadside by a truck and trailer semi near the Texas-Louisiana state line (Meskowski was employed at the time as a fabricator on one of the Indy car teams, and was returning home to Indianapolis from a race at Texas World Speedway.) Critically injured and paralyzed he hung on for 10 months, then died in Indianapolis.

The funeral was a sad but revealing affair. Throughout his career Meskowski had scolded and pushed his drivers, but five of the six pallbearers were drivers - Rutherford, Jim Hurtubise, Gary Bettenhausen, Johnny Parsons, and Jack Howerton. All but Bettenhausen had driven for Wally Meskowski during one season of another, and all must have profited from the experience.