

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## DON BRANSON

Don Branson was born in Rantoul (Illinois) on June 2, 1920. He drove trucks for 13 years before getting the urge to race midgets just after the war at Macon (Ill.) in 1946. To support his wife Ruth and sons Donald, Wayne and Roger, Branson pumped gas and drove taxicabs in the off-season.

Branson moved to International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) 'big cars' in 1952 aboard the Merle Heath Offy. He won at Birmingham and Shreveport and finished eighth in IMCA points and fifth in National Speedways circuit points.

In 1954, Branson was still running IMCA with the Lyle Hyneman Offy, finishing tenth in overall IMCA points and fifth in National Speedways circuit points. He also won three races for Hector Honore in the famed "Black Deuce" while subbing for the injured Bobby Grim.

During his rookie season with the United States Auto Club (USAC) in 1956, Don finished fifth in Midwest points aboard the John Wills-owned Hoover Motor Express Special. He was also the 1956 USAC Florida Winter Sprint Car Champion.

In 1957, Branson claimed a September feature at New Bremen (Ohio) on his way to finishing fourth in the USAC Midwest points, piloting the Gus Hoffman Offy-powered sprinter. He also placed second in USAC's 1957 "Tangerine Tournament" of winter Florida midget races.

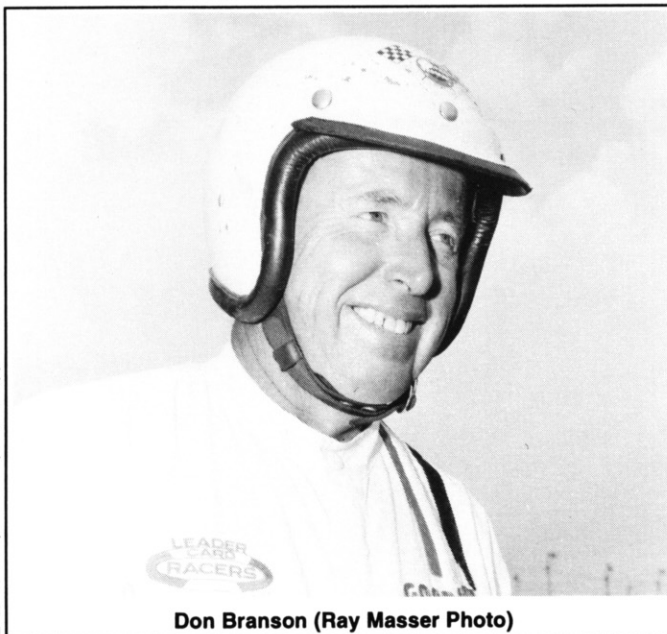
The next season, Branson garnered two wins, one in the Bill Cheesman Offy at New Bremen and the other aboard Hoffman's Park Lumber Special at Winchester (Ind.). He again placed fourth in the Midwest points.

However, 1959 was Don's big year at age 39, winning the USAC Midwest sprint car point championship over A.J. Foyt and Bud Tingelstad. He opened the season with a win at Birmingham in Lyle Hyneman's Offy and then took five straight in the Jud Phillips-wrenched Bob Estes Special from Southern California.

1959 also marked Branson's 'rookie' year at Indy and he finished a respectable 24th.

In 1960, Branson won five USAC shows in the Midwest and one in the East, finishing second in both regional standings to Parnelli Jones and A.J. Foyt, respectively. All of his wins were aboard the Offy-equipped Bob Estes Special. It was the last year for USAC's regionally-split schedule. He also finished fourth at Indy.

One year later, the Champaign (Ill.) resident dropped to eighth in the USAC sprint car national points, not winning a single feature



Don Branson (Ray Masser Photo)

during the Jones-Hurtubise-Foyt season of dominance.

1962 brought two USAC wins, the first at Salem, Ind., in Bruce Homeyer's Konstant Hot Special and the second at New Bremen in the Iddings Brothers Special. He finished seventh in points.

In 1963, Branson finished third to Roger McCluskey and A.J. Foyt in the national points, with three wins at Williams Grove (Penna.), Salem (Ind.), and Kansas City (Kansas). He also finished fifth in the Indy 500.

One year later, at age 44, Branson won the USAC sprint car national title over Jud Larson, Mario Andretti, A.J. Foyt, Johnny Rutherford

and Jim McElreath. He piloted the Jud Phillips-owned Wynn's Friction Proofing Special to wins at Phoenix, IRP (Clermont, Ind.), Terre Haute (Ind.), New Bremen and St. Paul. The amazing aspect of the championship is that "Grandpa Don" (and Roger McCluskey) suffered broken arms at Reading and had to sit out about two months.

In 1965, Branson placed sixth in points and won twice, once at Salem and once at Earl Bales' Eldora Speedway in Rossburg (Ohio). He only caught 19 of the 27 shows, though, as he was again concentrating on the National Championship schedule, where he finished fourth in points (and eighth at Indy).

Don Branson had told friends that 1966 was to be his last year as a driver, as he would join his sponsor Goodyear Tire as a racing field manager. He won in July at Eldora in the Jud Phillips-wrenched, Offy-powered Leader Card Special, in a fashion so dramatic that Larry Dickson commented, "Branson went by McCluskey like he was tied up. I just couldn't believe it. Just the way Branson went about it ... he made my hair stand on end."

In fact, Don had set fast time that day with a time of 17.81 seconds (101.067 m.p.h.), a new track record.

Unbelievably, the veteran Branson perished in the season finale on November 12 at the fog-shrouded Ascot Park (Gardena, Calif.). USAC newcomer Dick Atkins also lost his life in that crash. The final 1966 season points showed Branson in fourth.

History will note that five USAC regulars lost their lives in 1966 events: Branson and Atkins, Jud Larson and Red Reigel at Reading (Penna.) and Ron Lux at Tulsa.

During his career, Branson competed in 128 USAC championship events, winning six, including Langhorne (Penna.), Trenton, Sacramento, DuQuoin (Ill.), Phoenix and Springfield (Ill.). He also claimed 15 USAC midget wins, including the October 1966 "Hut Hundred" at Terre Haute, and 28 USAC sprint car feature victories.