

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

JIMMY BRYAN

James Ernest Bryan was born on January 28, 1926 in Phoenix, son of that city's fire chief, R. L. "Pete" Bryan, and his wife Pauline.

Jimmy was a strong man physically, standing six feet one inches tall and weighing 220 pounds, with 18-inch biceps. He was ruggedly handsome, wore his hair in a crewcut, and was known as "the Cowboy" because he always wore shiny black boots, Levi's, a western shirt and a Stetson hat.

In high school, Bryan excelled in track as a pole vaulter and he loved water-skiing, swimming and diving. At age fifteen he started riding part-time in rodeos as a bronco-buster.

Prior to World War II, Jimmy and his friend Bobby Ball started driving hot rods (track roadsters) at the Thomas Speedway.

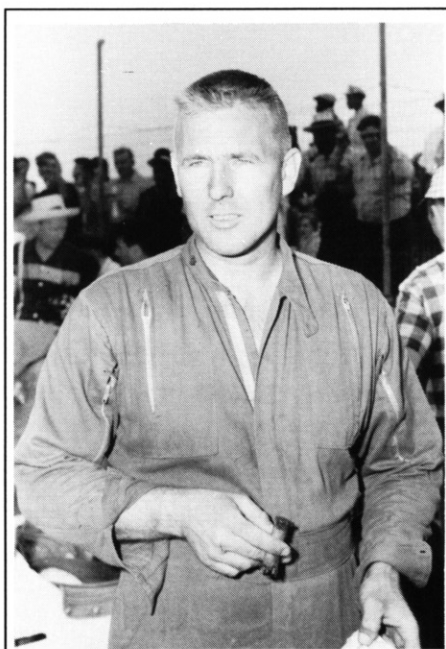
Following his Air Force service in World War II, Jimmy (and Bobby) continued racing the roadsters, Bryan winning at Prescott in 1946 and claiming the Arizona Roadster Championship in '47. That same year Bryan and Ball caught the bug to race midgets. Naturally, with his size, it was not a great fit for Bryan, but he did finish third in points.

In 1958, Bryan did more travelling with his midget, venturing into California and even racing with Bill Vukovich at Fresno. In '49 he finished fifth in the United Racing Association (URA) midget division points and the '50 season was not a great one for the Arizona Cowboy.

In 1951, after failing to qualify for the Indianapolis 500, Jimmy made his way east to race sprint cars on the dirt tracks there. In the fall of that year, Bryan captured the Ted Horn Memorial race at Williams Grove Speedway (Mechanicsburg, Pa.) aboard the Leitenberger brothers' Offy. The practical joker surprised the favorites Tommy Hinnershitz (on the outside,

no less!), Otis Stine, Duane "Pappy" Carter (Sr.), Ernie McCoy and Bill Schindler by taking the win. The rest of the season was spent winning races (even a 100-lap midget main) and the 25-year-old finished seventh in the American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern point standings.

Bryan made his first start at Indy in 1952, finishing sixth. He also placed third in the AAA Eastern region and ninth in the Midwestern region. He also was sixth nationally in midgets and 15th in National Championship points.



Jimmy Bryan (Ray Masser Photo)

In 1953, he was fifth in the Eastern Championship and ninth in the National Championship. He even had a string of three feature wins at Terre Haute (Ind.). It was the last year that he would compete in sprint car races.

One year later, Bryan's chief mechanic friend

Clint Brawner convinced Jim to drive the Al Dean Van Lines Special. Together, from 1954 through 1957, they made one of the most potent open wheel racing teams in history.

In '54, Bryan won five of twelve 100-mile dirt championship races, including the last four in a row and clinching the AAA National Championship. He also placed second at Indy that year.

The following season, Bryan won six of ten champ races, however he finished poorly at Indy and was second in the National Championship point race.

In 1956, he reclaimed the National Championship title with four wins in eleven starts and he placed fourth in the national Stock Car points.

Following a third-place finish at Indy in '57, Bryan won two of the remaining 12 champ car shows and again clinched the National Championship. He also won the 1957 "500 Miglia di Monza."

In 1958 Bryan was with a new team, George Salih and Howard Gilbert, and they combined to win the Indianapolis 500. Afterwards, he semi-retired, announcing he was done with the dirt tracks ("too dangerous") and vowing to spend more time with his wife Luella and daughters Stephanie and Cynthia.

The following year he raced just once, at Indy. However, he had a disappointing finish, as he did a year later. The veteran dirt track racer was clearly frustrated at the turn of events. So, after Indy in '60, Jimmy announced that he was getting back into racing full-time, making his dirt track debut at his favorite Langhorne (Penna.) track. He would drive the Leader Card Special, subbing for Rodger Ward who wouldn't race the dangerous 'Home. Sadly, on the start of the dirt championship car feature on June 19, 1960, Jimmy Bryan crashed and was fatally injured at age 34.