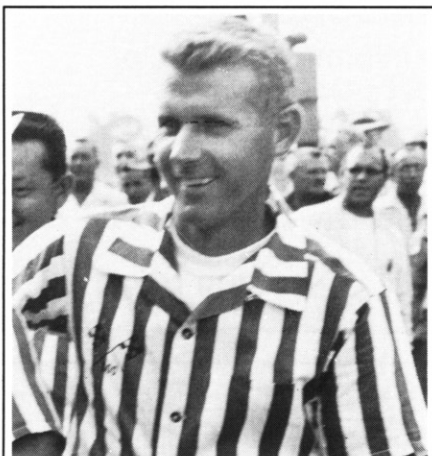


NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

A.J. WATSON

A.J. Watson built his first Indianapolis-type car in 1948, although his early efforts generally proved less than successful. His first chassis made the 500-mile classic in 1950, with Dick Rathmann the driver. Early in that decade he felt fortunate if he placed one of his cars in the field each year. By 1955, Watson was chief mechanic on the Indianapolis 500-winning car of John Zink and driven by Bob Sweikert.



A.J. Watson (Bruce Craig Photos)

The "Watson Era", though, truly began at the Speedway in 1956 when Pat Flaherty won the Memorial Day classic in one of A.J.'s John Zink Specials. His cars were successful for nearly a decade because they were generally lower, narrower and 200 pounds lighter than the then-state-of-the-art (Frank) Kurtis Kraft roadsters. A.J. Watson-built chassis won the "500" in 1956, and 1959 through 1964. In fact, in 1964, A.J. had twelve cars on the starting grid.

A.J. Watson wrenched Zink's sprint-

er with Jud Larson aboard in 1956, the same year that Flaherty won the Indy 500 for John in a Watson champ car. By 1958, A.J. Watson of Glendale (Calif.) was the owner/mechanic on the Ed Elisian sprint car on the United States Auto Club (USAC) Midwest circuit.

Watson finished second in the 1959 USAC Midwest car owners point standings, with A.J. Foyt (Jr.) wheeling his Watson Special number 33 sprinter. The Foyt/Watson team was runner-up to the team of Don Branson and car owner Bob Estes. The following year, Watson was fourth in Midwest points and won the Eastern car owners title with Foyt again, this time sponsored by Dart-Kart.

In 1961, the year USAC created a national sprint car title, Watson finished a disappointing eleventh in owners points. A.J. Foyt piloted the Watson Special number 9 sprinter to a single win at Salem (Ind.) and fourth in points for Watson in 1962. Don Branson wheeled the Leader Card Special for A.J. Watson in '63 to two wins and a third place finish in points.

Jud Larson took control of the Watson Special in June of 1964 and proceeded to victory lane a total of four times during the remainder of the season. Larson was second in driver points while Watson finished in fifth place in owner points that year. Joltin' Jud stayed with Watson the following year, collecting seven wins. Larson ended up in fourth, Watson in fifth in their respective point battles. In 1966, partly because of Watson's

absence from the team on the road, Larson exited the ride shortly after winning the season opener at Reading (Penna.).

In 1967, A.J. Watson's Leader Card sprinter entered victory lane on the USAC trail with such name drivers as A.J. Foyt, Bobby Unser, Mike Mosley and Mario Andretti. A.J. Watson finished seventh in car owner points with his number 2 machine. The following season saw Watson gather two wins with Mike Mosley in the Leader Car Special. 1969 and 1970 were not good years for Watson and his Offy as they did not score one win during either season.

Few teams in the history of motorsports have endured as long as the A.J. Watson/Leader Card Racers combination. It was Labor Day weekend of 1958 that Ralph Wilke's father hired A.J. with Rodger Ward as driver. Since the separate Dirt Championship car series was introduced in 1971, Watson and Wilke have gained two titles, two runner-up finishes and a fourth place in the seasonal standings. Winning the titles for Watson & Leader Card Racers were George Snider in 1971 and Bobby Olivero in 1979.

A.J. Watson lives in Speedway (Ind.) with his wife Joyce and he was elected to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame in 1981.

