

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Lee Kunzman

by Jim Morrison

Lee Kunzman's relatively brief time in sprint and midget cars displayed a talent behind the wheel; the determination to overcome injuries that would have ended many other careers, and a love for the sport that continues today. Kunzman, a native of uttensburg, Iowa, started his driving career on the drag strip after watching a race at Cordova, Illinois. After a couple of years running in a straight line down a quarter-mile of asphalt, he attended a stock car race near his Mississippi River Valley home and switched to stock cars, winning championships at Hawkeye Downs in Cedar Rapids and with the Cedar Valley group.

Again, another form of racing competition lured Kunzman. After seeing a sprint car race, he moved to the open-wheeled cars, finishing seventh in points in 1967 in International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) competition and winning the 'Rookie of the Year' title. He finished second to Jerry Richert, Sr., in the points championship in 1968.

Kunzman and legendary Des Moines, Iowa, car builder Bob Trostle traveled to Arizona, California and New Mexico one winter. They ran fast and had a great time. "Right after that, I decided that if I was going to stay running cars, I might as well come to Indy," said Kunzman. "That was really where I wanted to go, anyway."

Debuting in United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint cars in 1968, Kunzman earned a ride in J.C. Agajanian's Indy Car for the spring race at Phoenix in 1969. After his first USAC win in a midget on August 13, 1968, in Davenport, he scored eight times in 1969 including a feature in the Houston Astrodome to start off the year. In 1970, he won the 'Night Before the 500' at Indianapolis Raceway Park just days before the crash that sidelined his career.

By the autumn of 1968, Kunzman caught the attention of car owners in the United States Auto Club - one of the premier auto racing sanctioning bodies in the world. USAC sanctioned the Indianapolis 500 and many of the world's best drivers battled in its midget and sprint car ranks for an opportunity to earn a ride in the world's greatest race.

While some toiled for years without a shot at the Brickyard, Kunzman passed his rookie test at Indianapolis in 1970 and made multiple qualification attempts. Each time, however, mechanical problems cut the effort short. "We were quick enough, but we just couldn't make four laps without breaking," he said. Kunzman suffered serious injuries less than a week later while racing a sprint car in a USAC race at the I-70 Speedway in Odessa, Missouri. His throttle stuck wide open during his heat race and Kunzman pounded the concrete wall. He missed the remainder of that season, recuperating from multiple injuries - including severe burns to his face and neck.

Many would have sought other ways to make a living. Not Kunzman. He not only returned to racing in 1971, he won his first race back in a midget at Cincinnati on April 25, and then finished 17th in that year's Indianapolis 500. His first sprint car win in USAC came on the famed half-mile fairgrounds track in Reading, Pennsylvania, on July 4, 1971. Though he waited another year for his next sprint car win, Kunzman notched five more in the final four months of 1972. Almost all of his wins were on high-speed ovals, including New Bremen, Eldora, Winchester, Williams Grove and Salem. He finished third in points behind Sammy Sessions and Rollie Beale, respectively, winning five features.

The next year, Beale and Kunzman fought a season-long battle for the

USAC sprint car national title, even though Lee missed several races to run in USAC's Championship division. Beale used three cars on the season's final day at Eldora Speedway. The Toledo racer flipped his primary car during a practice session and drove a team car qualified by "Duke" Cook in the first feature. While Kunzman won the first 50-lapper, Beale blew the engine in his backup car on the final lap. Beale borrowed the Mauri Amerling-owned sprint car driven by Sammy Sessions for the final feature of the season. Duane "Pancho" Carter, Jr., won the first sprint feature of his career while Kunzman finished far enough behind Beale to miss the championship by a mere 24 points. Still, Lee Kunzman's team, R.B. Racing Associates, won the car owner's title.

Kunzman's season closed badly, though, as he crashed while testing tires at the Ontario Motor Speedway in California in December. This time, it was two-and-a-half years before he raced again. Kunzman's first race after his injury was the California 500, at the same track where he received his injuries. This led to another shot at the Indianapolis 500. He concentrated on the Indy Cars, leaving sprints and midgets as just a part of his storied career.

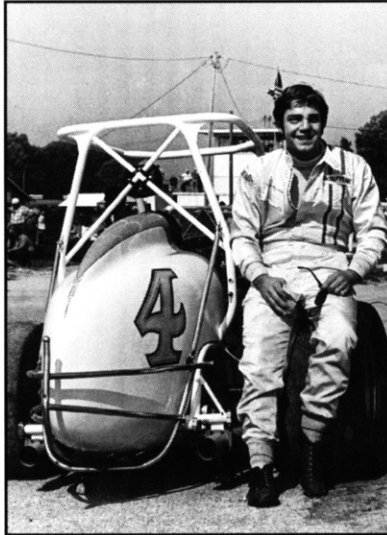
Even though Kunzman finished well at Indianapolis, it was difficult finding a ride. Not only did he have overcome doubts about his ability to again drive, it was the beginning of the era when drivers needed to bring sponsorship dollars with them to get a quality ride. Getting few good rides between 1976 and 1980, Kunzman finished seventh in the 1977 Indianapolis 500 in a three-year-old car. He then put together his own effort for 1979 in conjunction with '63 Indianapolis 500 winner Parnelli Jones and Vel Miletich.

He last made the Indianapolis 500 that year, placing 30th after completing only 16 laps. He failed to qualify the next season, again because of engine problems. The team's Offenhauser just couldn't keep up with the more powerful Cosworth engines. Kunzman led the race at Atlanta until blistering a tire with just a couple of laps remaining. He led at Michigan until an input shaft broke. The car was always strong, but did not finish many races. His best was a couple of second places.

The frustration was enough to convince Kunzman to end his driving career that season. He worked first as a salesman and then as manager of Primus Racing. He soon attracted the attention of owner Ron Hemelgarn in the mid-Eighties. Kunzman estimates Hemelgarn and he have put about 50 cars in the Indianapolis 500 in the last 22 years. Drivers have included the likes of former Indy 500 winners Tom Sneva, Gordon Johncock and Arie Luyendyk, and Paul Tracy and midget car racer Stan Fox. Fox, a former USAC national midget car champion, raced for Hemelgarn Racing several times, suffering career-ending head injuries in an accident at the beginning of the 1995 Indianapolis 500. With Fox unable to return, Buddy Lazier took the seat for the remainder of the year and again in 1996.

Lazier gave team manager Kunzman something he was unable to achieve as a driver -- a win in the Indianapolis 500. Four years later, Lazier again gave Kunzman another first in his open-wheel racing career -- a championship.

In 2006, a talented, courageous and dedicated Lee Kunzman returns with Hemelgarn to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for another run at the world's greatest race.



John Mahoney Photo

