

Willard "Bill" Holland

by Donald Davidson

While undoubtedly best known for winning the Indianapolis 500 in 1949 and being on the losing end of the infamous "EZY" signal controversy at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1947, the fact remains that Bill Holland was absolutely one of the most successful sprint car drivers ever.

Piloting, more often than not, white number 29 sprinters owned by Ralph Malamud, the Philadelphia-raised Holland was runner-up to Joie Chitwood for the 1940 American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern sectional title; won it in 1941; and in 1946, compiled the most impressive record of any driver on the circuit. There was, in fact, no such thing as the Eastern championship in 1946, AAA having decided, for that one year only, to include all 'big car' (now sprint car) events in with the National Championship. Although Ted Horn has historically been credited with the 1946 title (which never existed), Holland had by far the most impressive record and enjoyed the unique distinction of actually ranking fourth in the 1946 AAA National Championship standings without ever having driven a Championship car! He won 16 sprint car features that year--15 in the East and one in the Midwest--and was runner-up 10 times.

The son of Willard Holland, a pre-turn-of-the-century major-league baseball player (shortstop, Baltimore, 1889), Bill, who was also Willard--not William, as mistakenly reported throughout his career--inherited his father's athletic abilities. Young Bill was born on December 18, 1907, and excelled at skating, both on ice and on roller skates, even trying out for the 1932 Olympic games. Skating was to play a major role throughout his life, both as a performer and as the proprietor of several rinks.

The name Bill Holland first began to emerge in 'big car' results in 1937 and on July 30, 1938, at Mineola, New York, he registered his first win. He scored three more in 1939, nine in 1940 and seven in 1941. In 1947, by which time he was contesting for the National Championship in true championship cars, he won nine more sprint features in the East; one in the Midwest. His old friendly rival, Ted Horn, became his closest adversary in the championship cars as well, season champion Horn winning three races to runner-up Holland's two (Milwaukee and Langhorne).

Four more sprint wins came Holland's way in 1948 and another three in 1949, as he began to curtail his activity in this type of racing.

In the meantime, he had become a major star at Indianapolis. Making his debut in 1947 as teammate to Mauri Rose on Lou Moore's pair of brand-new sleek front-drive Blue Crown Spark Plus Specials, Holland was seemingly well on his way to winning the first time out. Late in the race, with Rose about half-a-lap back and with plenty of time in hand over the rest of the field, master strategist Moore attempted to have both of his drivers slow down. Holland heeded the pit signals; Rose did not. Rose eventually caught and passed his teammate, Holland even waving him by, believing that Rose was merely un-lapping himself. Holland was furious when he realized he had effectively given the race away but managed to calm himself down with the philosophical conclusion that to quit the finest team at the track would be foolish. Instead, he stayed with Moore, finished second to Rose again in 1948, won in '49 and placed second to Johnnie Parsons in the rain-shortened race of '50.



L.A. Ward Photo

In November of 1950, Holland made the mistake of appearing at a non-AAA-sanctioned stock car event in Miami and taking part in a two-car match race. AAA did not look upon this favorably. It mattered little that he had placed second, second, first and second in the last four 500's, respectively; AAA placed him on a one-year suspension and ruled him ineligible for 1951. He appealed the decision, lost it, complained to the media about AAA, and thus earned himself a second year of suspension.

So what did he do while on the sidelines? He made a deal to run with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), placing seventh in the sprint car standings for 1951 and third in '52. He also ran a few National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) races. Promoter Bruton Smith remembers to this day, with reverence, that the always dapper and professional-looking Holland was the only driver to show up wearing a uniform.

By 1953, all was forgiven and Holland was back at Indianapolis. He did not finish that year, but he had turned in the second-fastest qualifying speed. During the summer, he returned to AAA sprint cars and won three more features in the East, while also making a few Championship and stock car starts. He failed to qualify for the 500 in 1954, and while he was unable to win any sprint features, he did place third four times.

His career was winding down and he began announcing periodic retirements, none of which seemed to last for very long. In 1959, at the age of 51, he drove a Mercury-powered sprinter in the grueling Little 500 at Anderson, Indiana, and finished seventh.

It had been a truly remarkable career with his top-three finishes in AAA sprint car features alone estimated to have been in excess of 150.

Holland continued to appear as an always-welcome guest at Indianapolis for the next many years, but fell victim to declining health in the late 1970's. He passed away in Tucson, Arizona, on May 20, 1984.