

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

DENNIS “DUKE” NALON

Dennis “Duke” Nalon hasn’t raced a car at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in thirty years, yet he continues to be one of the more recognizable people at the track each May. He is genuinely cherished by the fans, many of whom were race-goers in the 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s.

Duke, who acquired the nickname for his smart appearance and impeccable manners as a schoolboy, won many titles during his twenty year career, including the 1938 American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern ‘big car’ championship and the 1941 AAA Midwest title.

At the time, the eastern championship was run on all dirt tracks, while the midwestern circuit was predominantly run on high-banked paved tracks. Thus, Nalon displayed his versatility as a driver by winning the 1938 eastern championship (with seven wins) and placing fifth in the midwestern version (one win) in the Floyd

“Pop” Dreyer No. 2 machine. In 1940, Duke was fifth in points in the east (five wins) and sixth in the midwest (one win). The next year, Duke finished sixth in the east (two wins) and clinched first in the midwest (nine wins out of twenty races).



Dennis “Duke” Nalon
Bruce Craig Collection

Despite his impressive credentials in midgets and the ‘big cars’, the predecessors of the today’s sprint cars, Duke Nalon’s name will always be synonymous with the famous Novi racing cars. They were temperamental machines which captured the public’s imagination because of their brute power, noise, speed and recur-

ring mechanical failures. The Chicago-born Nalon had already been an Indianapolis competitor for ten years when he accepted the opportunity to drive one of the cars in practice for the 1948 Indy 500. He soon became known as “the man who tamed the Novi” as he qualified the Novi at record speeds year after year. However, the cars often failed him, particularly in 1949 when it lost a wheel and slammed the third turn retaining wall. The huge fuel tank erupted and a river of burning fuel trailed the sliding car along the wall, then flowed down the track to the infield as other drivers steered through the blaze. Duke was able to crawl from the burning car, but he suffered burns which kept him hospitalized for weeks.

Nalon, who currently resides in Indianapolis with his wife Frances, announced his retirement in 1957, having driven in the “500” ten times between 1938 and 1953. He continues to be a “Champion”.