

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

PARNELLI JONES

Rufus Parnell Jones was born on August 12, 1933 in Texarkana (Ark.). However, his family soon thereafter moved to Torrance, California, where "Parnelli" has made his home ever since. Parnelli Jones got bit by the 'racing bug' fairly early in his youth. Prior to 1958, he had already driven jalopies (motors supplied by Vel Miletich), super modifieds, midgets and NASCAR stock cars (sponsored by Miletich). It was in 1958, though, that Parnelli graduated into the California Racing Association (CRA). He finished sixth in CRA points that year, earning their "Rookie of the Year" title. Roy Prosser was the 1958 champion, followed by 1953-55-57 champion Nick Valenta, Ray Douglas, Parnelli's close friend Jim "Herk" Hurtubise, Wayne Weiler, Jones, Hank Henry, one-armed Allen Heath, Colby Scroggins and Ray Clark.

In 1959, Jones split his seat time in the Harlan Fike Plumbing Chevrolet between CRA and the midwest-based International Motor Contest Association (IMCA). In CRA action, Parnelli finished fourth in points, behind Chuck Hulse, Bud Sterrett and Heath. In IMCA competition, he finished fifth in points, behind Pete Folse (Sr.) in Hector Honore's "Black Deuce", Hurtubise, Harold Leep and fellow Californian Jack Rounds. Jones copped IMCA wins at the fairgrounds ovals in Cedar Rapids (Iowa), St. Paul (Minn.) and Hutchinson (Kansas).

The next year, Jones ventured farther east to race with the United States Auto Club (USAC), yet he still opened the CRA season in the potent Joe Pittman-wrenched Fike Chevy. Amazingly, his five wins in the first six point races allowed him to finish ninth in CRA points. In his first full season



Parnelli Jones
Ray Masser Collection

with USAC, the talented Jones captured seven wins and their Midwest title (while A.J. Foyt, Jr. claimed USAC's Eastern honors). Introvert Jones, in the Fike Plumbing Chevy, and extrovert Hurtubise, in the Barnett Brothers Sterling Plumbing Chevy, certainly opened the eyes of second place point finisher Don Branson and the other Offy-minded USAC teams that season.

In 1961, Jones captured USAC's

first national sprint car championship after their midwestern and eastern circuits were combined. Following a slow start, the chain-smoking Jones piloted the Fike Plumbing Special to a total of nine wins, including one stretch of five-in-a-row. Included in these wins was Parnelli's second straight "Joe James-Pat O'Connor Memorial" title victory at Salem. Hurtubise and Offy-defender Foyt followed P.J. in the points standings. Jones was also named the Indy 500 Co-Rookie of the Year in 1961, along with friend Bobby Marshman.

Jones successfully defended his national championship in 1962, defeating Roger McCluskey, "Herk" and Chevy-convert Foyt. During 1963-64, Jones raced sprinters only seven times (with four wins), having moved on to USAC Indy cars and stock cars full-time. He was USAC's 1964 Stock Car champion.

Rufus "Parnelli" Jones will long be known for his versatility, having wheeled and won in most every type of race car on most every type of surface (dirt, asphalt, banked, flat-track, oval, road course). His crowning achievement is no doubt his May 30, 1963 win in the Indianapolis 500 aboard the J.C. Agajanian No. 98. Following his retirement from driving, Parnelli continued to be ultra-successful as a businessman, owning and managing the Vel Miletich/Viceroy Indy car team, the Ontario Motor Speedway, and his own Firestone tire dealerships, among other efforts. Today, Parnelli's sons P.J. and Page are rising young USAC competitors.