

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

ERNIE TRIPLETT

Ernie Triplett was a motorcycle racer from Paris, Illinois, who turned to four-wheeled race cars because their competition offered more money than the two-wheelers. He received his apprenticeship at California's Banning Speedway, but soon graduated to Ascot in 1926. However, it was at Oakland on April 12, 1928, that the daring 21 year old youngster took a giant step toward becoming one of the most successful West Coast drivers of all time. The "Fronty" Ford driver won his first American Automobile Association (AAA) event. That freshman year, the "Blond Terror" also won at Ascot, Banning and San Jose.

One year later, young Ernie was given a ride at Indianapolis. Although his Duesenberg lasted only 48 laps, he made it. As a matter of fact, Triplett's Indy record never equalled his dirt track feats. It was those dusty heroics that landed Triplett a role in the James Cagney/Joan Blondell movie "The Crowd Roars" which was filmed at Ascot.

In 1930, the "Belvedere Badboy" had a good machine under him for his weekly bouts at Ascot. His tramping up and down the coast produced some legendary wins, but not the coveted championship which was won by friend and rival Francis Quinn. In 1931, the American Legion Speedway introduced night racing. Under the lights, the 5/8 dirt bowl ringed by darkness, the racing seemed to thrill the huge crowds more than ever. Yet no driver thrilled them more than Ernie Triplett. He ran his string of victories to 14 at Ascot, some of which were 100- and 150-lappers! He owned everything at San Jose and Bakersfield, too, with other wins at El Centro and Phoenix. The Pacific Southwest AAA title belonged to the smooth-driving Triplett. Others in the 1931 points parade were Chet Gardner (2nd), Hartwell "Stubby" Stubblefield (3rd), Francis Quinn (4th), Elbert Achilles "Babe" Stapp

(7th), Wilbur Shaw (13th), newcomer Rex Mays (30th) and novice Ted Horn (34th).

In 1932, aboard the "Red Lion Special", he won races at every track on the West Coast circuit and again he dominated the American Legion Speedway. By mid-season, everyone realized Triplett would be champion again. He was followed by Les Spangler (2nd), Shaw (3rd), Gardner (4th), Stapp (7th), Stubblefield (15th) and Mays (21st).



Ernie Triplett
Bruce Craig Collection

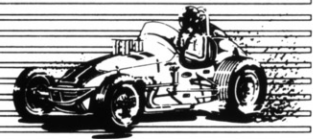
1933 brought change to Southern California. American Legion Stadium became Legion Ascot Speedway. Class B point standings were initiated for drivers assigned to less expensive and inferior cars. The Pacific Southwest AAA Championship title became the Pacific Coast AAA Championship title. And car owners Art Sparks and Paul Weirick decided they had seen their beautiful Miller "Poison Lil" trailing Triplett once too often. They hired a chunky, rowdy nightclub owner named Al Gordon as their new driver. From the first night on, 1933 was like no other season. Gordon didn't win, but he gave Triplett and Shaw plenty to think about. It was the Triplett-Gor-

don duels that fascinated the huge crowds. The fans never took their seats during the chilling wheel-to-wheel battles that often lasted an entire race. No one would ever believe that these two drivers, bouncing off the guard rails and each other, could possibly be friends. However, that's exactly what they were, off the track. "You can't run that way night after night, against a guy you hate," Triplett told a reporter. "You have to trust the other guy."

Early in the new 1934 season, Gordon and Triplett were locked in a duel at El Centro, California. It was very similar to their stirring battle at Ascot. This time the track was dusty. Defending "Class B" champion Swede Smith struck a stalled car at the head of the front stretch. A pit crewman, named Hap Hafferly, dashed onto the track to help Smith from his smashed racer. In a split second, Gordon and Triplett emerged from the dust, roaring toward Smith. Al swerved around the wreck, but Ernie smashed into the motionless cars. Triplett's car roared into the air, flipping countless times. The crewman and Smith were killed instantly. Ernie was found outside the track still strapped in his Miller. He was rushed to the hospital, where he died a few hours later.

Ernie Triplett is survived by his wife Lillian, who currently resides in Homeland, California.

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