



Tommy Nicholson

by Donald Davidson

As he was to put it himself so eloquently in June of 1978, upon accepting the newly created position of United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car and midget car division coordinator, Tommy Nicholson first became "infatuated" with motor racing when he attended an event at Langhorne, Pennsylvania, in 1935.

He was 15 years old at the time.

It wasn't long before the exuberant youngster became "involved," serving as a messenger at the local tracks for the American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern states supervisor, who just happened to be the retired 1912 Indianapolis 500 winner, Joe Dawson.

In addition to running messages for Dawson and for the angular Marshall "Shorty" Pritzbur, Tommy also worked as a crew member at dirt track races. He eventually formed a bond with the mild-mannered 1937 Central States Racing Association (CSRA) champion, Everett Saylor. It was during these days that Tommy first became acquainted with Russ Clendenen, a Dayton, Ohio, resident who "crewed" for Saylor. Clendenen eventually became a very prominent AAA and USAC official, and not only a colleague of Nicholson, but destined to be a very close friend over a period of several decades.

By 1941, Saylor had switched to AAA and was to compete in that year's Indianapolis 500. He hovered around tenth position for almost 400 miles until crashing out of turn four at lap 155, sustaining some injuries. Nicholson and Clendenen had both gone along as crew members. Tommy later reminisced that on the morning of the race, his anxiety level had been "through the roof" and that he couldn't stop polishing the wheels and bodywork.

After serving with the U. S. Navy in WWII, Tommy returned to the tracks in various capacities. Upon the exit of AAA at the end of 1955, and the subsequent formation of the United States Auto Club to fill the void, he became a charter member of the new organization.

He began working as an official under Winton "Wint" Davidson, and in 1958, he was named USAC Eastern zone supervisor. Even after the Eastern and Midwest sprint circuits were joined together to form the first USAC national sprint car circuit in 1961, Tommy continued to serve as the chief steward for the East Coast events.

This pretty much continued until 1978, when he and his wife Lucy uprooted and moved to Indianapolis in order for him to accept the new role of overseeing both the sprint and midget car divisions from out of the USAC headquarters on West 16th Street in Speedway. He remained there until retiring in 1983.

Tommy was a tireless and passionate enthusiast, whose detailed written race

reports of the 1960s were always impeccable, and his Monday lunchtime "debriefing" telephone calls from Pennsylvania were a joyous potpourri review of all of the disputes of the weekend, "who had done what to whom," and which old-time drivers had shown up as visitors.

And, as he was to demonstrate on numerous occasions after his move to Indianapolis, he was a hilarious storyteller.

To say that he had somewhat of a salty tongue would be a major understatement. He also had a tendency to be politically incorrect with great regularity, and yet he seemed to be innocently oblivious to all of it, blessed with the uncanny knack of having it all sound completely natural! He would hold court in the USAC office, telling expletive-laced stories about Mike Nazaruk or Eddie Sachs or Bill Schindler or life in general to the point of having his co-workers helpless with tears rolling down their cheeks. The amazing thing was that even the most easily offended of ladies within the office never seemed to be offended.

How was he able to do that?

One classic took place when it came to light that Tommy had a sister who was a nun. That one took everybody by surprise.

"What?" asked a co-worker in disbelief. "You have a sister who is a nun??"

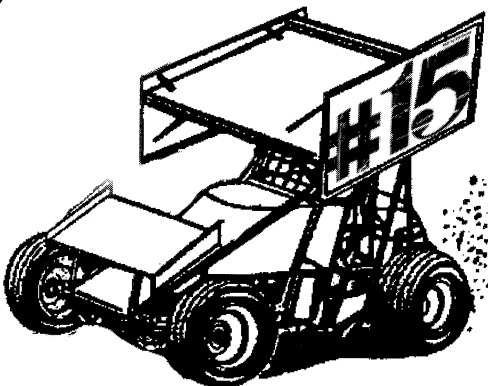
"Oh yeah," confirmed Tommy. "My mother raised us to be very religious."

"No kidding? Really?"

"Yes sir," he assured, "When I was a kid growing up, I used to pray like a son of a bitch."

And so it would go.

Tommy Nicholson, who passed away on May 24, 2004, was an excellent official and he left behind a ton of memories.



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