

I.M.S. Photo

Jackie Holmes

In the immediate post-WWII era, every man who took to the high-bank tracks of the Midwest carried a gold embossed card in his back pocket that certified him as one of the bravest souls in the land. Among this group, Jackie Holmes was one of the toughest of them all.

Born on September 4, 1920, John Holmes, better known as Jackie, resided close enough to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to hear the roar of the cars, and he

soon found all the key places to catch a glimpse of the motorized chariots as they flew by.

When America entered WWII, Holmes could not accept sitting idly on the sidelines. Following his first year at Arsenal Tech High School, he lied about his age and enlisted in the U.S. Navy. His adventures on the high seas ended when his ruse was discovered and, instead of visiting the exotic locations shown on movie theatre newsreels, he was soon relegated to washing dishes in the Naval Armory back home in Indiana.

His Navy experience certainly failed to slake his thirst for glory, so soon he was tooling a ragamuffin Ford V8-60 midget car around the vacated Indianapolis Speedrome on Sunday afternoons. With victory in hand, Holmes was present when the Speedrome opened for good after the war, and grabbed a win in the consolation race. However, his racing fortunes decidedly headed north when he joined forces with former motorcycle ace Floyd "Pop" Dreyer. The innovative Dreyer decided to use a Ford-Ferguson tractor engine as the basis for a new midget car project, and this bit of experimentation produced immediate dividends. Tabbing Jackie Holmes as his pilot, the team was an immediate hit at the Terre Haute Fastrack winning five in a row. They dominated the action at Raceland, a now long-forgotten track near Fortville, Indiana, and also scored wins at Kokomo and at Knob Hill in Lafayette.

Midget car racing also led him to sunny Florida in the winter. While there, he also got a chance to handle Ralph "Speedy" Helm's iconic Hisso-powered sprint car at an International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) race at Tampa's Plant Field. He found sprint cars to his liking, and this led to further outings in the bigger iron with groups like the Midwest Dirt Track Racing Association (MDTRA). He had found his home. Still joined at the hip with Pop Dreyer, he felt prepared to take his chances with the American Automobile Association (AAA) and test his mettle at Winchester, Salem, and Dayton, or in essence, those places of lore that have oft been called the "hills of death". Dreyer was prone to try anything, and with the parsimony of a businessman who had survived the trial of the Great Depression, there were few items that Pop did not fabricate himself. With Holmes alongside, Pop had a man who could put his theories to the test.

Holmes was unable to crack the starting field at Dayton on June 15, 1947, in the Nott number 7 but in the first AAA race at Salem, Indiana, one week later he finished second in Dreyer's car to Tommy Hinnershitz. With his late start, Holmes had no chance at a season title, but he did himself proud by notching eight top-five finishes and finishing in the fifth position in season points.

In 1948, Jackie and Pops made a valiant attempt to crack the field for the Indianapolis 500, and while both left the Brickyard disappointed, there were plenty of challenges in front of them. Try as they might, no one was going to stop Travis "Spider" Webb on the AAA sprint car trail that year. The tough-as-nails driver was armed with the Johnny Vance Special, and when he nailed

down the first three races in the fresh campaign, the title was a foregone conclusion. For his part, Jackie Holmes never quit digging. He would post one quality finish after another, and to add an exclamation point to his fine runner-up finish in the final standings, he claimed the season-ending race at Winchester on September 5 after a spirited duel with Webb.

Jackie had served notice, and while some still felt the scrappy driver with the distinctive striped shirts had come from nowhere in 1948, insiders knew that he was the real deal in '49. Everything, it seemed went wrong for Spider Webb early in the year, but if Holmes thought he had a straight shot for glory, suddenly a new force arrived on the scene – a lanky kid from California named Troy Ruttman. "Rutt" showed up for the first time on the AAA sprint car trail at Salem on May 22. Equipped with Emmett Malloy's beautiful sprinter, Troy took the main event but it came after a duel with Holmes that left spectators breathless, promoters giddy with excitement, and officials anxious. It proved to be a memorable time. The competition between these men became so intense that officials grew weary of consulting with them, and an Indianapolis attorney actually petitioned the AAA to have the two banned from competing against each other.

Jackie outlasted Troy one week later at Winchester and, in a manner consistent with the age, he would take the green flag at the Indianapolis 500 the next day in Pat Clancy's unique six-wheeled car. In what had now become his trademark, Holmes continued his steady performances all summer long. He won again at Dayton on June 19, and all told he posted 15 top-five finishes. Troy did his part; he won a total of seven events, including the last four events in succession, but it wasn't enough to unseat Jackie from the top spot in the '49 standings. Then, as today, racing marriages are fragile and when Holmes and Dreyer parted ways, for all intents and purposes, the magic was gone. Jackie made the starting grid at Indianapolis again in 1950 and with a pair of runner-up finishes to his credit he was able to finish in the top-ten in season points. Nonetheless, in an era where driver's careers were short, more often than not involuntarily, the end was near. An accident in Mark Light's car at Winchester on July 1, 1951, resulted in medical complications that necessitated an eight-month hospital stay. When restored to health there would be an occasional ride or two, however, his final tour in a sprint car race came at Salem on July 4, 1953.

Until his death on March 1, 1995, Holmes maintained a television and radio repair shop that, once again, put him in position to hear the cars rumble around the Brickyard. While many who passed through his door had no idea of his racing past, Jackie was secure in the knowledge that he had made an indelible mark in the sport.

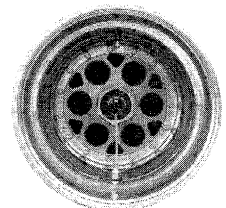
In truth, the men who raced in Jackie's Holmes age were different. A story told to racing writer and historian Terry Reed perhaps sums this up best: It was July 24, 1949, and Jackie is heading towards the Midwest AAA championship. After just a glimpse of the action at Salem, Jackie's second wife threw up the white flag and demanded to retire to the family Cadillac in the parking lot. While escorting his wife outside the track, cars driven by Tommy Mattson and Erling "Chick" Barbo flew over the fence, and in an astonishing moment, both men would perish. It was the final straw. With the blood now drained from her face, Jackie's wife turned to him and demanded that he end his career immediately. There was no choice to be made. Holmes looked back toward the racetrack and then slowly turned to his wife and said, "So long."

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