



Frank Riddle

George Franklin "Frank" Riddle had racing in his blood. He was one of sprint car racing's most accomplished drivers and certainly one of the best ever to come out of Florida.

Frank began his racing career at Phillips Field in Tampa driving a 1935 Ford coupe against the likes of "Pancho" Alvarez, Homer Claytor and Pete Folsie. He won his first race on March 3, 1951, setting a new track record while defeating Al Keller, who also lived and raced around Tampa at the time.

It took him awhile to get back to victory lane, and Riddle's second victory came on July 4 of '51 and, from this point on, his course was set. Frank was hooked on racing, and the fans soon came to be hooked on Frank Riddle. Throughout the decade of the fifties, Riddle continued to run stock cars and modifieds throughout the Southeast, winning races while honing his skills and talents.

Born February 24, 1929, in Jacksonville, Florida, Riddle moved with his family to Tampa where he attended local schools. An adventurous sort, Frank joined the Merchant Marine at age 17 where he served two years and was honorably discharged. It was also during this time that he met Margaret Scalise. The couple quickly fell in love and they were married in 1948. Following his father's footsteps, Frank joined the Seaboard Coastline Railroad as a fireman. He quickly advanced to engineer, and over the next nine years his job, racing career and family grew much stronger - and much larger. Frank and Margaret Riddle had five lovely children.

For 1962, the Florida racers had a new racetrack to tackle. Tampa's Golden Gate Speedway opened and supermodifieds began racing there weekly. This introduced a whole new world of racing to Frank. The action on the slightly-banked third-mile paved oval was fierce and he was soon part of the scene with these winged V-8 powered speedsters. It was at this time that Frank also began to travel a bit, taking his talents to such Southeast ovals as West Palm Beach and Pensacola in Florida; Macon, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi and Mobile and Birmingham, Alabama. The races ranged in distance from 50 to 300 laps and Frank proved that he was up to the task of pacing himself and taking good care of his equipment. He managed to win at every track. During this period he was racing the very fast, but somewhat primitive, supers two or three-times a week against top-notch competition.

By 1967, sprint cars had supplanted the supermodifieds at Golden Gate and Frank was offered some of the best rides available. He had already gained some experience and a good reputation running with the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) at the annual Florida State Fair races at the Plant Field half-mile dirt oval. In 1969, the Tampa Bay Area Racing

Association (TBARA) was formed. When he was not off chasing a checkered flag elsewhere, Frank was a club regular. His success on both dirt and pavement with his fellow Tampa Bay racers netted him an astounding 95 feature victories in 20 years, second on the all-time list behind one of Florida's other legends, Wayne Reutimann, who ran his total number of wins with TBARA up to 97.

There was little doubt that Frank Riddle's specialty had transitioned to long-distance pavement races, a direct contrast to what most people associate with sprint car racing. Despite being a tall slender man, Frank had the stamina and mental alertness to take care of himself and his mount in these endurance type events and it paid off handsomely. He won his share of 100, 200, and 300-lap feature wins in the Southeast and set many track records along the way.

In addition to racing, he continued to work on the railroad, run his used car business and raise a fine family with Margaret.

One of Riddle's desires was to race in the very competitive Midwest and, when the opportunity presented itself in 1978, he jumped at the chance to run in the annual Little 500 at Anderson, Indiana. Five-hundred laps on the banked quarter-mile at Anderson is a sight to behold with 33 cars and a packed grandstand to witness one of the wildest sprint car events in the country. It would not take Riddle long to get the hang of Anderson nor the grueling intensity of 500 laps. In his first try at the "Little Five," Frank qualified Marty Houston's number 11 fifth and finished fourth, completing 467 laps. The next item on Riddle's Anderson "bucket list" was a victory. Incredibly, in just his third try at the tricky event in 1984, he qualified on the pole and won the event. Just for good measure, he repeated the feat the following year. In fact he was the fastest qualifier in five consecutive attempts through the early eighties.

Needless to say, Frank had good car owners, including himself, for six years. He also had good equipment for the annual 500-lapper and his results in sixteen runs on the Hoosier pavement saw five top-ten finishes, with nine starts in the top-ten spots. A stat that perhaps tells even more about his mental and physical ability as a race car driver is that he only

crashed three times. This is an amazing feat when one considers the amount of traffic one encounters during the course of 500 laps around the tight confines of Anderson Speedway.

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In addition to his runs at Anderson, Frank took a shot at the always competitive United States Auto Club (USAC) sprint car circuit in 1980 at age 52. Armed with a pair of blue and yellow J.W. Hunt Produce-sponsored number 11 cars, one for pavement and the other for dirt, he registered a best finish of third behind winner Tom Bigelow at Hartford, Michigan, on August 23. He ended the season 12th in points and was crowned the circuit's oldest-ever Rookie-of-the-Year.

In the early Eighties, Frank and Margaret moved from Tampa a bit north to a small farm in nearby Thonotosassa. His lifelong work ethic never slowed and family members say his hard work on the farm contributed to his ability to stay in shape and run the long-distance races without tiring. He retired from the railroad in 1987 but his racing endured, competing on both dirt and pavement until he finally conceded to retire in 1997 at age 68.

In Riddle's storied career, he won more than 200 open-wheel features in his 48-year career and was inducted into the Little 500 Hall of Fame in 1996. Frank Riddle passed away on March 14, 2007, at age 78. "He was a great father," explained daughter Sharon. "But he loved racing, loved racing people and loved being around them. I think he was happiest when he was his own car owner as it seemed to relax him a little bit. He simply loved being loved."

By Carlton Calfee
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