



Sam Hoffman

by Bob Mays

Samuel Andrew Hoffman was born on June 14, 1902, in Concord Township, near Sioux City, Iowa, to parents Paul and Dora Hoffman. He had one older brother, Harlan, and one younger sister, Dorothy.

Sam started his racing career in 1921, racing county fairs around Sioux City. He spent many years hacking around the dirt track circuit until being picked up by famous promoter J. Alex Sloan, to help fill out his fields when they came to the Sioux City area for International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) events. Hoffman probably could have gone full-time with Sloan, but he had a day job as a motorcycle cop in Sioux City and didn't want to give up the regular paycheck in return for being a racing vagabond.

In 1928 Hoffman teamed with Felix Morosco and, for the next three years, they had great success together. Driving Morosco's bob-tail Fronty-powered machine, Hoffman won at Belleville, Kansas; Benton, Illinois; Cedar Rapids and Spencer, Iowa; Duncan, Oklahoma; Lincoln, Neligh and Ord, Nebraska; Huron, Renner and Sioux Falls, South Dakota and many other speedways around the Midwest. One of their top prizes came at Pompano Beach, Florida, in the spring of 1928, when Hoffman defeated a top field of cars.

In 1930 Sam, his wife Avon and their little daughter Avon lived with his wife's café-owning parents, Andrew and May Mook, in Sioux City.

Leonard Kerbs offered Sam the seat of his powerful Fronty in 1931 and together they tore through the mid-states region. On June 21, 1931, the mile track at Ak-Sar-Ben in Omaha offered up one of the greatest fields in the history of dirt track racing. "Speed" Adams, Maynard Clark, Emory Collins, Johnny Gerber, Bert Ficken, Arch Powell, Bryan Saulpaugh, Gus Schrader and a host of other top gasoline jockeys pulled onto the track for an afternoon that would not soon be forgotten. Saulpaugh, in the Howe Hisso, set fast-time, followed by Gerber, Hoffman and Adams. In the feature, Hoffman was triumphant over Gerber, Schrader, Adams and Powell, respectively. Two weeks later, Sam came back to Ak-Sar-Ben and again came out the winner over Schrader, Clark and Collins, respectively.

He set the track record so many times at Riverview Park in Sioux City that the track owners may just as well have given him the keys to the place.

Hoffman moved to Omaha in 1932, when he was hired to drive the John Bagley Cragar. Bagley was employed by the Omaha Police Department and managed to get Hoffman hired on with the OPD. As a bonus for Bagley, he was able to keep Hoffman close by to help with maintenance on his fleet of race cars. The plan was for Hoffman to give big-time racing a try with the American Automobile Association (AAA) circuit aboard Bagley's powerful Cragar. Big wins at Benton, Illinois; Des Moines, Iowa; and Roby, Indiana, were among the highlights of Hoffman's AAA marks. Hoffman took the Bagley Cragar to Dupont Speedway in Denver, Colorado, and on to Legion Ascot in Los Angeles as well.

Sam traveled to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1933, in hopes of landing a ride in the premier event in motorsports. But he found the pickings slim, although he did drive in the race when he relieved Cavino "Kelly" Petillo. In 1934, Sam practiced in a Duesenberg owned by J.L. Mannix, but couldn't get it up to speed for a qualifying attempt.

During the Central Kansas Free Fair at Belleville in 1934, Hoffman hopped aboard Art Martinson's fast Miller and won the feature race, his first on the high banks. The next year he blazed to a track record of 23.08 seconds.

Hoffman discovered the new craze of midget car racing and, in 1936, he gained a ride in the hot doodlebug of Roy Warfield. For the next four years, Hoffman cleaned up in the midget ranks, winning just about everywhere he raced. He set the track record so many times at Riverview Park in Sioux City that the track owners may just as well have given him the keys to the place.

Although Hoffman concentrated on the midgets during this time, he was still in demand for "big car" rides, driving on occasion for Chelse Johnson of Lincoln, Nebraska, and the Lawhon Brothers from St. Joseph, Missouri.

During World War II, Hoffman moved to California and became a member of the California Highway Patrol (CHP). At the conclusion of the war, he took a few midgets rides racing at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena before calling an end to his racing career.



Photo Credit: Bob Mays Collection

There are a couple of things that stand out about Sam Hoffman's racing career. During two of the most dangerous decades of the sport of motor racing, he suffered very few injuries. Luck may have had a bit to do with it, but luck only goes so far. There is no doubt Hoffman was very much in tune with his racing machinery, knowing how hard he could push it, and knowing when to back off and bring the car, and himself, home in one piece.

The other notable attribute demonstrated time and time again by Sam Hoffman was his good sportsmanship and devotion to kids. As a policeman it was Sam's job to serve and protect on a daily basis and he used racing to that end. He developed a rapport with underprivileged kids by offering to let them help with the race cars. They would be assigned jobs, such as washing the car and doing minor maintenance and other chores. Once they successfully completed those chores they would be rewarded by accompanying Sam to the races and serving as pit crew. It is certain several of these kids discovered mechanical skills they never knew they had because of Sam Hoffman.

Renowned racing historian Beryl Ward of Concordia, KS, was once asked about Sam, and she was quick to answer, "Oh, yes, he was so tall and very cordial, and every time I saw him he always had a big wad of tobacco stuffed in his cheek. But he was really a very nice fellow, and a very good and clean race car driver. Every time he raced at Belleville or in this area he would get his car unloaded then immediately come and find (husband) Les and myself and say "hi." When he set that one-lap record at Belleville in 1935, Les thought that was just a magnificent effort. It made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck, what with the cars they had then, wire wheels and no roll bars of any kind. Sam was just a real fine person and an excellent race car driver."

After a long career in motor racing and an even longer career in law enforcement, Sam Hoffman, the man known to thousands of race fans as the "Flying Cop," passed away in 1965.

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