



national sprint car hall of fame

HAROLD "RED" LEMPELIUS

BY BOB MAYS

Harold Erwin "Red" Lempelius was born on September 3, 1922, to Carl Fredrich and Mathilda Hahn Lempelius in St. Paul, Minnesota. He also had an older sister, Mathilda Jane.

He started his racing career in the upper Midwest in the 1950's, racing throughout his native Minnesota, along with competition in Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota and Iowa. While he didn't distinguish himself as a driver, he was quite competitive.

After his driving career, Red came into possession of a Ranger-powered sprinter. He ran the IMCA circuit with Tommy Smith and Jimmy Wegscheider driving the car. For many years the Lempelius Ranger was one of the top cars on the IMCA trail. Red's cars were always officially owned by his wife, the former Irene Mary Reimer, making her one of the most well-known distaff car owners in the country.

In 1960, Red obtained an Offenhauser engine along with a new chassis built by Hiram Hillegass. At the time, Hillegass was the top car builder in the country. Lempelius hired a hard-nosed Navy veteran, Emmett "Buzz" Barton, to pilot the new race car.

Red had the car ready in mid-June and Barton piloted the vehicle to second place behind defending International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) champion Pete Folsie at the Greater Grand Forks Fairgrounds in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in one of its first races. As the fair season began to ramp up, Barton and Lempelius traveled to the North Dakota State Fair in Minot, and came away with a pair of thirds and one fourth.

The Irene Lempelius Offy's first win didn't come until September, but once the team broke through, it was 'Katie bar the door.' On September 3, starting far back in the field, in the final feature of the 1960 Iowa State Fair in Des Moines, Buzz Barton worked his way to the front of the field with two laps to go and won the race. Just two days later at the Nebraska State Fair in Lincoln, Barton was at his best. He took the Lempelius Offy from last to first in the consolation, got into a fist fight with another driver, and then came from last place to win the 25-lap feature. It was vintage Buzz Barton. To put a final period on the weekend, Buzz drove Red's car to fourth place at the Minnesota State Fair in St. Paul in between the victories at Des Moines and Lincoln.

Two weeks after the victory in the Cornhusker state, the team swept to two wins at another major fair, at the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson. This time, Barton decided not to give the other boys such a big head start. First he won the Australian Pursuit race, then, starting fourth, Barton took the lead on the eighth lap and romped home free in the opening feature. Barton easily won his second consecutive feature the next day.

Buzz Barton drove the Irene Lempelius Offy to victory again at the Oklahoma State Fair in Oklahoma City two weeks after his triumph at Hutchinson. In the three other features run at the Oklahoma State Fair in 1960, Barton finished second in two of them and third in the other.

Buzz Barton parlayed the second half of the 1960 season into a second place finish in the national IMCA standings for the year. He was edged out the championship by Pete Folsie, but finished ahead of A.J. Shepherd, Jerry Blundy, Jerry Shumaker, Leroy Neumayer, Jim McElreath, Herschel Wagner, Harold Leep and Gordon Woolley. All-in-all, it was a great season for the Lempelius team.

The 1961 season started in February at the Florida State Fair in Tampa and the Lempelius Offy took off right where it left off in 1960. Buzz Barton finished in the top five in every feature of the four-race series, with one victory. At the seventh annual Hawkeye Futurity, one of IMCA's marquee events, Buzz Barton charged from 15th starting spot to take the lead just 21 laps into the 50-lapper. Barton held on to win the 1961 Hawkeye Futurity.

Although no more wins would come their way in 1961, Barton and Lempelius recorded no less than eight second-place finishes during the remainder of the year, to again finish second to Pete Folsie in the IMCA standings. Behind Barton in the standings were, Harold Leep, Jerry Richert, Jim McElreath, Jerry Blundy, Herschel Wagner, Johnny White, Arnie Knepper and Newton "Buzz" Rose.

Harold Leep climbed into the cockpit for the 1962 season, and Red had his Offy percolating again in the Hawkeye Futurity. Leep wasn't about to spot the field like Barton had done the year before, and started in fifth position for the 50-lap event. Leep methodically worked his way to lead, then cruised home, giving Red Lempelius his second straight Hawkeye Futurity win.

The rest of the season found Leep constantly challenging for the top spot, winning features at Knoxville, Illinois; Mason City, Iowa; Sedalia, Missouri; Lincoln, Nebraska

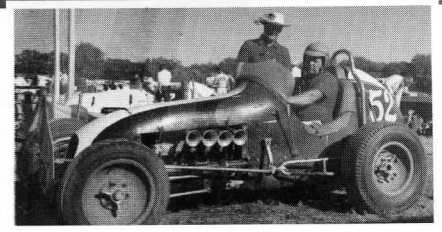


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(twice) and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. His seven victories put him in fourth place in the final IMCA standings behind Johnny White, Pete Folsie and Jerry Richert; and ahead of Johnny Rutherford, Arnie Knepper, Jerry Blundy, Gordon Woolley, Colby Scroggin and Herschel Wagner.

Red and Harold Leep got a late start on the 1963 season but they made up for it with a big win at St. Paul in the finale of the Minnesota State Fair. In victory lane, Leep announced that he was retiring, so Red called upon an old friend to fill the seat of his Offy sprinter. The very next day Buzz Barton blasted to victory at Lincoln in Lempelius Offy like he'd never been gone. Add to that a win at the Clay County Fair in Spencer, Iowa, and it was another successful, if short, season for Red Lempelius.

The year 1964, brought two more wins for Barton and Lempelius, at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Huron, South Dakota. These would be the last victories for Lempelius on the IMCA circuit.

Red continued to campaign his Offy for several more years with drivers such as Harry Kern and Lloyd Beckman, but the reign of the Offy had passed. With the advent of the small-block Chevy, Offenhauser-powered cars were becoming few and far between.

In the 1970's, following his marriage to Irene, Red was married to the former Elizabeth J. Newcomb.

By the 1980's, Red's son, Steven Harold "Spike" Lempelius, began a successful racing career, carving out many feature wins while carrying the same red, black and white color scheme and number 52, which always adorned the Irene Lempelius Offy. Spike also has two sisters, Peggy Jo and Barb.

Harold "Red" Lempelius, the World War II Air Corps veteran from 1942-46, passed away on March 15, 1994, and is buried in the Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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