



# national sprint car hall of fame

KNOXVILLE, IOWA



## earl Cooper

by Larry L. Ball, Jr.

Earl Phillips Cooper was born in the central Nebraska community of Broken Bow on December 2, 1886, the youngest of three children born to Eli and Anna Cooper. At the age of five, Earl's family moved to San Jose, California. As a teenager, Earl found work as a mechanic at a local garage owned by C.H. Letcher, later a prominent dealer in San Jose. In 1904, Earl and Letcher had prepared a one-cylinder Cadillac for a five-mile race at San Jose's Agricultural Park. Owing to Earl's age, he was only 17 years old, Letcher decided to race the car himself. Earl, desperate to race, borrowed another one-cylinder Cadillac owned by a San Jose woman, and entered the race. Letcher took the lead from the start and was leading at the 3.5-mile mark when, to his shock, Earl passed him and went on to the win. The next morning Earl reported to work at the garage. Letcher was not pleased, and declared, "No boy could turn a trick like that on me and continue in my employ." Earl was fired. Not discouraged, Earl found other work as a mechanic and continued racing on dirt tracks throughout California. Eventually, he hooked up with riding mechanic Reeves Dutton and began to dominate what was known in California as the "Grapefruit Circuit."

In 1911, Earl made his AAA debut driving a Maxwell in the Portola Road Race, which was a race through several cities of Alameda County, California, with the start/finish line in Oakland. The 10.9-mile course was described as "torturous" for the driver. After the dust settled on the nine-lap event, Earl had finished second. This is impressive considering the fact that Cooper was a man of slight build. He was said to weigh-in at 120 pounds, and appeared better suited to be a bank teller than a race car driver.

earned the invitation to join the team through a remarkable string of West Coast victories in what Harry Stutz called an outclassed Maxwell. Of his four AAA starts in 1912, Earl had one win with a victory at Tacoma (Road Race).

In 1913, the "Racing Earl of California," as he was being called in the California press, was about to become known across the country. Earl made six starts with AAA that year and had five wins and one second-place finish. In addition, Cooper made laps at Indianapolis driving in relief for fellow Stutz teammates Charles Merz and Gil Anderson. The second-place finish came in his season opener at San Diego. Earl Cooper then went on to win twice at Tacoma, once at Santa Monica, and twice at Corona. Interestingly, Cooper's wins on the 3-mile-diameter oiled-dirt circular Grand Boulevard in Corona happened simultaneously. That is, one race, of 250 miles, was for cars with engine displacement up to 450 cubic inches. Cars with unlimited displacement went 51 miles more. When Cooper won them both, he was credited with two wins in the AAA books, and his first national championship was ensured. AAA starter and fellow Hall of Famer Fred Wagner said of Cooper during the 1913 season, "Earl Cooper is our most meteoric driver. Last year he was practically unknown except on the Pacific coast... Cooper is a great judge of pace. In this respect, he has few equals. Add to this brains and gameness and you have an excellent three-point suspension for fame." Even those that weren't racing fans came to know Cooper as a result of his appearance in the Mack Sennett film "Speed Kings" with Mabel Normand, Fatty Arbuckle, and fellow drivers Teddy Tetzlaff and Barney Oldfield. Earl was riding high, but then it all went horribly wrong. On November 22, while driving an exhibition for school children

at the San Jose fairgrounds, Cooper lost control and slammed through the fence. Many papers reported that, according to the hospital, Earl was not expected to survive.

Due to his injuries, 1914 saw Earl make only six starts in AAA. One of the six was his first start in the Indianapolis 500, which ended with an 18th place finish when he broke a wheel on lap 119. The success of 1913 was not repeated. Earl's only victory came on the 2-mile dirt oval at Tacoma in July.

With the 1915 season came an expanded schedule. Cooper made 14 starts with AAA and collected five wins, four second-place finishes, and his second national championship. It was during this season that his diversity as a driver became most apparent. Of Cooper's five wins that year, the first was the San Diego road race, second was the Elgin road race, third was a 500-miler on the new 2-mile cement oval at Minneapolis, and the last two came on dirt ovals at Phoenix and San Francisco. Three of Cooper's four seconds came on board tracks.

Cooper failed to reach victory lane through an 11-race schedule in 1916. He did, however, place second three times; twice at Santa Monica, and once at the original Ascot. His only other top-five finishes came on the board track at Des Moines, which were a third and a fifth. It is important to note that Stutz had officially withdrawn from racing after 1915. Cooper was allowed to take one car after signing a contract saying he wouldn't race east of the Rocky Mountains (clearly the Des Moines race violated this agreement).

Just as he did in 1915 Earl bounced back in 1917. Still driving his faithful Stutz as an independent his six-race schedule produced four wins. Cooper won on the dirt at Ascot, the boards of Chicago and Tacorna, and the cement of Minneapolis. The result was his third national championship in five years. Unfortunately, Cooper would not see another national title.



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In 1918 Cooper ran three AAA races. All three were races run on July 4th at the Tacoma board track, with the best finish being a third place. Cooper then announced his retirement. "I'm saying good bye to speed," he told the press. Apparently, the retirement was not complete as Cooper spent most of 1918 running outlaw races. Cooper, along with Gaston Chevrolet, Barney Oldfield, and Louis Disbrow ran events mainly on western dirt tracks. All but Oldfield would return to AAA in 1919. Interestingly, it is unclear if any of the drivers were in any way punished by AAA for their defiance.

Cooper, still claiming to be retired, ran two AAA events in 1919. He broke a valve at Santa Monica, and finished 12th at Indy. It seemed to be the end of Cooper's career. He didn't run any AAA events in 1920. Then, in October of 1921, Cooper returned. Joe Thomas broke his arm in an accident during practice for the 150-mile San Joaquin Valley Classic at the Fresno board track behind the wheel of a Duesenberg. Cooper jumped in the car, and, after 150 miles, Cooper was the winner beating Jimmy Murphy in a close battle.

In December of 1922, Cooper's retirement officially came to an end. At the age of 36, Cooper was part of the new Durant-Miller team. Earl had his debut with the team on December 3 running the boards at Beverly Hills. After starting fifteenth, he ran second. Earl was very optimistic about 1923. He would run nine AAA events in '23, with his best finish being second at the Kansas City board track.

In 1924, Cooper showed up at Indy with a Miller sponsored by Studebaker. Cooper thought this car might be the best chance he'd had to win the 500 in some time. He wasn't wrong. Cooper was leading after 400 miles. A tire blew, and he had to pit. He returned second, and worked his way back to the lead with 30 miles left in the race. He blew another tire just as he was passing Joe Boyer, and the pit stop forced him to settle for second. Following Indy, it appeared that Jimmy Murphy would run away with the title, but then the popular Murphy crashed to his death at Syracuse. Suddenly, Cooper was in a position to catch Murphy and win a fourth national championship. After a win

at Fresno in October, and a second later that month at Charlotte, Cooper could win the title with a win on the boards at Culver City in December. Unfortunately for Earl, he broke a valve on the 20th lap to end his day. He finished second to the late Jimmy Murphy in the championship standings.

Perhaps inspired by his near championship in 1924, Cooper ran a full schedule in 1925. In May, Earl won the Southern Speed Classic at Charlotte, but that would be his only win. He would add two third place finishes and three fifth place finishes, for fifth in the championship standings.

1926 was Earl's last full season in AAA. He finished second on the boards at Fresno in a non-championship race in April. Then in May, Cooper started on the pole of the 500 only to drop out on the 73rd lap due to a broken transmission. July 5th would be Cooper's last win of a major event. He won the Independence Day Classic on the boards of Rockingham Speedway in New Hampshire. His last AAA win would come in late August when he won a 25-mile preliminary at Charlotte. Everyone was certain that Cooper would now retire for good.

Cooper just couldn't stay away. In 1927 he attempted Indy, but did not qualify. He made two more races at Rockingham, but had miserable results. There was one high point in '27. Earl made his way to Monza to run the Italian Grand Prix. Bringing a Miller to the famed Italian speedway, the 40-year-old Cooper stood on the podium after finishing third.

After 1927, Earl Cooper finally retired for good as a driver. Cooper did, however, stay involved with racing. He worked as team manager for Marmon and Studebaker. Also, Cooper and his good friend, and long-time riding mechanic, Reeves Dutton, built race cars. He later served as a steward on the Mobil Economy Run. After a stint with Union Oil, Cooper finally withdrew from racing altogether.

Earl Cooper was the first driver to win three national championships, and holds the record for the most total AAA championship points scored (13,530). Earl Cooper died on October 22, 1965, in Atwater, California, at the age of 78.

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