

Photo: Bob Mays Collection

2020 National Sprint Car
Hall of Fame Inductee

BILL CUMMINGS

Driver

by Kevin Triplett and Bob Mays



William C. ‘Bill’ Cummings Junior was a hero to Central Indiana racing fans as he grew up on Indianapolis’ near west side, two miles from Indianapolis Motor Speedway, where he found glory in 1934. Cummings spent his life in the city of Indianapolis, then died and was laid to rest there.

Bill Cummings the son of a race car driver, began his racing career on motorcycles but switched to racing Big Cars during 1926. The following year, Cummings began to experience some success as he raced the ‘Deluxe Taxi’ Frontenac Ford Big Car on the dangerous Hoosier outlaw circuit with such legends as Frank Sweigert, Ira Hall, Francis Quinn, Bill McCoy, and George “Bennie” Benefiel on Hoosier tracks such as Sunflower Park - located between the towns of Brazil and Terre Haute - and Jungle Park, which was north of Rockville and

billed as “the fastest oiled track in the world”.

By 1929, Cummings was a consistent winner as he drove a factory supported Frontenac on the Hoosier circuit that included the Linton race track, Huntington Motor Speedway, and George Rogers Clark Speedway in Vincennes. Bill began to expand his travels to tracks in Dayton and Hamilton, Ohio, and as far away as St. Paul, Minnesota. He captured the 20-mile race for the “National Dirt Track Championship of the United States” at Louisville, Kentucky, at the end of September after he was injured in a crash at Roby Speedway in Hammond, Indiana, in early August.

In 1930, Cummings got his shot at the big time and in his first race in an AAA championship car he started from the pole position and won at the one-mile circular Langhorne Speedway in Pennsylvania behind the wheel of the car that Michael

Ferner identified as Karl Kizer’s “Century Tire Special” 91-cubic inch Miller.

Cummings closed out his rookie AAA season in 1930 with a win on the New York State Fairgrounds “Moody Mile” in Syracuse. With two wins to his credit as a rookie, Cummings finished third in the 1930 AAA championship. With his aggressive driving style, Bill Cummings had quickly become an established racing star.

During the winter of 1930-1931, Cummings traveled the West Coast circuit and raced on big dangerous high-speed tracks that included Bakersfield and Legion Ascot Speedway where his nickname “Wild Bill” first came into popular use. Cummings drove for the team of Paul Weirick and Art Sparks and finished eighth in the 1931 AAA Pacific Coast Southwest Big Car championship.

For the 1931 AAA championship

season, Cummings drove East coast car owner Floyd Smith's 'Empire State Gas Motors Special' a Miller-powered Cooper front drive creation. The car was one of three originally built in 1927 with Buick factory support by Earl Cooper.

Cummings started the 1931 Indianapolis 500-mile race from the middle of the front row but retired early with a broken oil line and finished poorly. Over the course of the season, Cummings scored three second-place finishes and one third place to go along with two top-ten finishes to wind up 10th in 1931 AAA points. Cummings returned to the West Coast over the winter to close out his 1931 season. Bill won the 40-lap Thanksgiving Day feature at Legion Ascot Speedway ahead of Bryan Saulpaugh and Chet Gardner, then followed that up with a second-place finish behind Saulpaugh in the Legion Ascot 100-lapper on December 20.

Cummings opened 1932 on the West Coast behind the wheel of one of three new Miller 16 valve DOHC Miller Big Car.

Cummings won the coveted pole position for the 1933 International 500-mile sweepstakes with an average speed of 118.53 MPH for his ten-lap run.

In the 1934 Indy 500, Cummings worked his way through the field and took the lead on lap 72, and then battled Mauri Rose for the win the rest of the way. Cummings completed the race one minute and 54 seconds faster than Louis Meyer's winning time from the previous year's 500 to set a new speed record for the 500 miles of 104.863 miles per hour which earned him membership in the Champion Spark Plug 100-MPH club. The four-cylinder Miller marine engine was the first four-cylinder engine to win the 500 since Gaston Chevrolet's Frontenac in 1920.

Cummings' results for the rest of the 1934 AAA racing season were not spectacular with a pair of top ten finishes despite starting from the pole position at Syracuse and Springfield Illinois. The Boyle Miller engine broke a crankshaft in practice and Cummings missed the

Cummings strapped in at Legion Ascot in 1933.

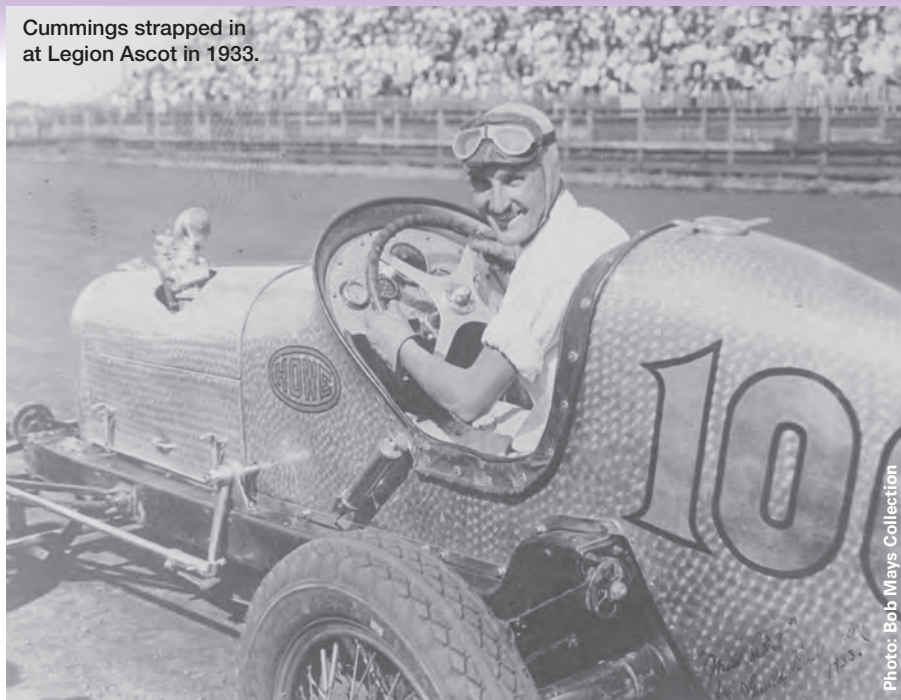


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season finale at Mines Field but the 600 points earned at the '500' were enough for Bill Cummings to be crowned the 1934 AAA National Champion and the right to carry the number '1' through the 1935 season.

After his win in the '34 Indy 500, the best he could do on Indy's bricks was a third-place finish in 1935. He scored four top-tens and two poles in nine trips to the Indy 500.

On Monday night February 6, 1939, as he drove his passenger automobile along State Route 29, now known as Southeastern Avenue, Cummings dropped the car's right

front wheel onto the soft shoulder. The car veered, plunged through the wooden guardrail on the bridge approach near Adina Boulevard and traveled an estimated 50 feet into the waters of Lick Creek.

Three men pulled the unconscious Cummings from the water and saved him from drowning. When he arrived at Methodist Hospital ten miles away, he was admitted in critical condition with a concussion. Cummings died on Wednesday morning February 8 at age 32, survived by his widow, Leota, and 10-year-old daughter, Earlene. 🏆



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