



Photo courtesy of: Heintzelman Family

# Ralph Heintzelman Sr.

by Todd Heintzelman

It was a long time coming for Ralph Heintzelman Sr.'s induction into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. Now, the late Pennsylvania mechanic and car builder has earned the greatest recognition for his accomplishments in the sport.

His was a short-lived but brilliant career. Heintzelman, who passed away at the age of 81 in 2019, helped numerous Hall of Fame drivers throughout his life but most notably Jan Opperman and Lynn Paxton. He also was the mechanic on cars driven by Mitch Smith and Kramer Williamson, along with Dick Tobias and Jim Nace.

Many of the drivers he worked with are already enshrined and now, posthumously, he joins them in Knoxville, Iowa.

Heintzelman, who was born on June 22, 1938, in Mt Pleasant Mills, Pennsylvania, was one of many people who helped put Pennsylvania sprint car racing on the national map.

It started for Heintzelman in the small community of Beavertown, which is located about 20 minutes from Selinsgrove Speedway in north central Pennsylvania. He worked at a service center across the street from a speed shop owned by his friend and sprint car driver Barry Camp.

He helped Camp with his operation in 1969 and then local businessman Dick Bogar hired both men in 1970. Camp left the team and Bogar hired Californian, Jan Opperman, for the next season.

Bogar's cars were never the prettiest on the race track, but thanks to Heintzelman's incredible skill building and working on the cars, they were usually the fastest. In 1972, Opperman won 44 of 95 races he entered with an additional 22 podium finishes and 79 top five finishes. Among those victories was the Western World at Manzanita Speedway in Arizona.

He won 26 features in 1973, which earned Bogar and Heintzelman the Selinsgrove Speedway track championship – the only track title of Opperman's career. Also in 1973, Heintzelman guided Opperman and the #99 to an unheard defeat of USAC at Williams Grove Speedway. They also won at Eldora Speedway in Ohio against USAC in March of 1974.

Opperman said in the book "Dialed In" by John Sawyer, "the 99 was the best sprinter I ever drove. He said of Heintzelman, "he'd shorten the frame, straighten the frame, build anything you needed, and it was always ready to race."

Not long after that Eldora win, Opperman moved on and Heintzelman teamed up with Paxton and the winning continued. In his first year with Paxton and the Roy "Shorty" Emrich Chevrolet Team in 1974, the team won track championships at Port Royal and Penn National and the overall KARS (Keystone Auto Racing on Speedways) championship. They won the Tuscarora 50 at Port Royal as well.

In 1975, Paxton raced the famous Al Hamilton sprinter with Heintzelman spinning the wrenches. Heintzelman stayed with Paxton after he and Hamilton split. With help from Maynard Boop in 1976, Heintzelman and Paxton won 15 races at Port Royal and the track championship.

In 1977, Boop became sole owner of the operation. Despite numerous different drivers in the car, the No. 1 was a force in the Central Pennsylvania region with Heintzelman as the mechanic winning the KARS title again, along with the Florida Winternationals and Tuscarora 50.

He eventually went into business for himself as an auto mechanic and built race cars for drivers around the country. At times, half the field at the famed Central Pennsylvania tracks had cars built by his hands.

In 1979, Heintzelman helped Jim Nace before a fire destroyed his shop in January 1980. He didn't rebuild it.

The lure was still strong and the competitive fire still burned. He eventually worked on race cars again and spent several years working on a pro stock at Selinsgrove Speedway driven by his son, Ralph "Peanut" Heintzelman.