



Photo courtesy of: Ross Family

Walter Ross

by Dennis Mattish

Walter T. Ross was born in Northern Ireland on December 16, 1934. When Walt was 14, his family pulled up their roots and moved to New Jersey. It wasn't long before Walt witnessed his first races at nearby tracks in Newark (Rupert Stadium) and Pennsylvania. That was when his lifelong love affair with the sport of auto racing began.

After graduating from high school in 1954, Walt enlisted in the Army and served two years in Okinawa, Japan. While stationed there in 1955, he became a naturalized American citizen. Following his tour of duty, he moved to Citrus Heights, California.

Walt began his racing career in 1957 after purchasing a 1941 Ford jalopy for \$200. The following year, Walt had a night to remember when he set fast time and won his heat and the main event against a strong field of jalopies at Roseville, California, Speedway.

In 1959, Walt found success in the business community when he opened his Carmichael automotive towing and repair shop, which was also the perfect place to house his race cars.

By the mid-1960s, Walt had graduated from jalopies to Hard Tops and then to the powerful supermodifieds, racing at such tracks as West Capital in Sacramento, Roseville, Chico and Carson City, Nevada. He won several races as both car owner and driver. Ross also dabbled with NASCAR and USAC Stock Cars.

On April 28, 1972, Ross was driving a Supermodified at All American Speedway in Roseville, California, when he was run into, causing him to flip. The crash left him paralyzed from the waist down. Two weeks later and while being visited in the hospital by his daughter, Sheila, Walt started to get his feeling back. Over time, he was able to make a full recovery. It was that scare that convinced him to retire from driving and focus entirely on being a car owner in the Sprint Car ranks. He began his new endeavor in 1973, with the Northern Auto Racing Club (NARC).

Over the years, many greats cut their teeth driving for Walt, including Mike Andreetta, Hank Butcher, Leroy Van Conett, Phil Pedlar, Lem Tolliver, Rick Horton, Rendy Boldrini, Garry Rush, Terry Crousore, Dave Bradway Jr., Victor Mencarini and Rick Ungar.

However, the most famous of Walt's drivers was the legendary Gary "The Preacher" Patterson. During a three-year period, the pair dominated several NARC, California Racing Association (CRA) and open competition shows in California and across America in the famous blue number 56 Sprint Car called "Herky." Walt chose the name "Herky" because he admired former Indianapolis 500 winner Jim Hurtubise who always ran with the 56 number. To this day, the Ross car has always been number 56. The Ross/Patterson combination set many track records, the most memorable being the qualifying record set on the half-mile Calistoga Speedway in 1975 that would stand for 10 years to the day.

The 1976 season was a good one. The team started out winning four out of the first five NARC races. Walt was not interested in racing for club championships, so they headed to the Midwest to race with International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) and in the Knoxville Nationals. On returning to northern California, they won four more main events, including the Calistoga Classic. Even after spending over a month on the road, they still finished

fourth in the NARC final standings behind Johnny Anderson, Jimmy Boyd and LeRoy Van Conett. All four of these drivers are in the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame.

On March 26, 1977, Ross and Patterson ventured to southern California to race at Ascot Park against the very tough CRA drivers. They not only beat a strong field of cars that night, but they almost backed it up the following week when they started 14th in the main event and finished a close second to the legendary CRA driver, Dean Thompson.

Because of his love of the sport and with the little guy in mind, Walt had joined the NARC board of directors in 1974. He loved working with and had great respect for longtime NARC president, Louie Vermeil, stating that it was because "he had NARC Sprint Car racing in his heart." Because of Walt's loyalty, Vermeil chose Walt to succeed him as President in 1985, thus becoming only the second president in the club's long history.

Unfortunately, not long after taking over the reins of NARC, Ross was diagnosed with ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig's disease). Despite it's debilitating symptoms, he courageously carried on his duties as president and was responsible for several new rule changes, including a spec tire rule that would soon become commonplace in sprint car racing.

Walter T. Ross' greatest characteristics were his readiness to help a man in need, both on and off the racetrack. He was a true sportsman and a legend in his own right. As a car owner on the NARC circuit, he won 17 career feature events to rank fourth on the club's all-time lists at the time of his passing (November 22, 1987). He also had CRA and open competition wins.

Walt is a now a four-time hall of famer after inductions into the West Capital Raceway Hall of Fame (2001), Motor Sports Press Association Hall of Fame (2007), Calistoga Speedway Hall of Fame (2013) and now the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame (2022).