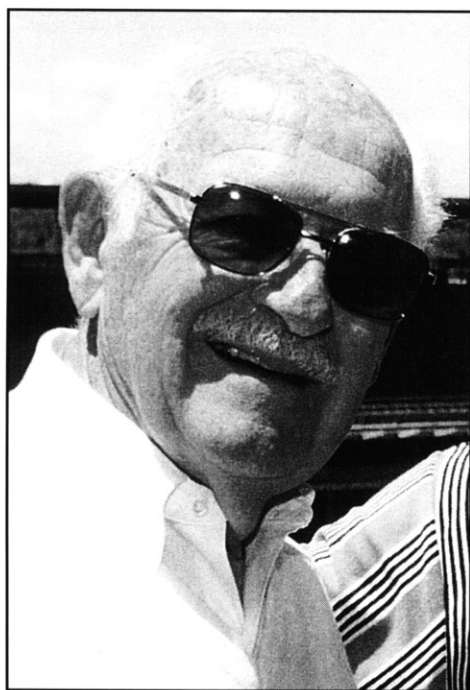


NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

J. GORDON BETZ



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by Pat Sullivan

In racing's food chain, the lion's share of glory nearly always goes to those holding the wheel. Sure, some credit is shared with the people twisting wrenches or those who cover the sport. Rarely, however, are those who officiate the proceedings given their just due. As is true in all sports, good officials are often invisible to the public, and when they enter the consciousness of competitors, it is usually at moments of great frustration and anger.

J. Gordon Betz knows all about this, in fact, he half-jokingly suggests that his upcoming induction into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame is only possible because he has finally "outlived his enemies."

Even at 84 years of age, Betz has an agile mind, a keen memory and the ability to form a clear and concise opinion. All these traits were honed from experience gained over a lifetime in the racing game. How long has Gordon been a part of the American racing scene? His father, J. Fred "Doc" Betz was the track superintendent at the Los Angeles Motor Speedway, the plush 1.25-mile board speedway in Beverly Hills, which opened for business in February of 1920.

By the time his father had accepted a position at Culver City Speedway, the die was clearly cast, and soon after the younger Betz secured his first job.

"I worked the pit window at Legion Ascot Speedway when it was outside the back straightaway," Betz recalled. "Then the idea was to put more fannies in the main grandstand and pay a 40 percent purse. Now the goal is to fill the pits and not pay taxes on it."

When youth are introduced to racing at an early age, most dream of jumping into the cockpit to capture the gold and glory. For Gordon Betz, his career took a decidedly different turn. In auto racing's formative years, the American Automobile Association (AAA) was king. And on the West coast the man who ruled over the AAA racing operations was Art Pillsbury, who served as mentor for young Betz. "He kind of blinked an eye at me being in the pits when I was only fifteen," Betz said. "I worked in the pits taking registrations until qualifications were over, and then I had to get my ass out of there and into the main grandstand."

What is clear, however, is that Pillsbury and others were taking notice, and they began to groom Betz for additional responsibilities. His first big assignment came in 1935 at Tucson, Arizona. At only 17, he was tabbed as chief steward for an AAA race.

By 1941, Pillsbury relinquished many of his on-track racing duties to Betz, who eventually took the reins over AAA West Coast racing operations. It was not an easy task. Many vilified the organization in its heyday; nonetheless it amuses Betz that "many of today's biggest critics weren't even alive when it was around."

Yet, Betz acknowledges that their officials "were hard nosed. There is no question about it. If you wanted to run outlaw, you couldn't run AAA. They were very tough on it. We wouldn't let anyone run a month before or within 500 miles of an AAA race. If you wanted to see an AAA race, you had to drive somewhere to see it. I was brought up on that, and I bought into it."

If you are looking for apologies for this approach to race management, you won't get them here. He feels we have become far too lax by allowing people to compete in some environments before they are ready.

"My feeling, and nobody gives a damn what I feel, is that they shouldn't let these fellas who have been riding in go-

karts go to the (Indianapolis Motor) Speedway and drive 210 m.p.h. It's a bit different to go down into the first turn at the Speedway than it is on a quarter-mile midget track or the eighth-mile track in the Armory."

Reflecting on his long and distinguished career, Gordon Betz has a simple explanation for his longevity. "I think the thing that helped me out a lot is that I worked hard to be fair. If you are fair, you can go a long way. I mean, there were times when I knew damn well I was wrong, but I did what I thought was right at the time. You have to treat the hot dogs the same as the little guy. You can't be thin-skinned, because it's rough, real rough. You have to work like hell and try to do your best and not get too concerned about how they feel."

Betz made the transition to the United States Auto Club (USAC) when the AAA bowed out of racing after the 1955 season. As a mover-and-shaker within USAC, he served on the Board of Directors from 1959-1972, and also did 18 years with the influential Automobile Competition Committee for the United States (ACCUS), spending 11 years as chairman.

In his last significant role as an on-track official, Betz was the chief steward for the inaugural California 500 at Ontario in 1970, which was won by Texan Jim McElreath. Still an interested onlooker and consultant seventy years after his first official role in the sport, Betz admits with a laugh that when he cuts a finger he "still bleeds the AAA or USAC logo."

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(Mind Over Media Publishing).

