EVERETT SAYLOR

Everett Saylor *Larry Sullivan Photo*

by Pat Sullivan

Before the Second World War - and well before the term "sprint car" had gained currency - there were two main organizations that sanctioned American short track racing for 'big cars': the American Automobile Association (AAA), and the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA). Yet, lurking in the heartland was another organization that produced tough wheel-to-wheel racing and even tougher drivers, the Central States Racing Association (CSRA). Originally an east coast operation, the CSRA found a home in Dayton, Ohio, and, aided by irrepressible public relations secretary Norman Witte, this sanctioning body carved out a powerful niche of its own.

In true outlaw fashion, the formula was nearly wide-open, thus the beasts that prowled the CSRA circuit nearly equaled the star power of the men who drove them. Adding to the luster of this series were the legendary haunts that comprised the racing calendar in any given year, the treacherous banks of Ft. Wayne, Dayton and Winchester, the nearly-mystical Jungle Park, the venerable half-mile at Sharon, Pennsylvania, DuQuoin, IL, Canfield, Ohio, Detroit, Mich., and the organization's spiritual home, the old fairgrounds in Greenville, Ohio. Thus, it is unfathomable that Everett Saylor, one of the brightest stars of the CSRA carried the relatively tame nickname, "The Flying Schoolmaster."

Racing was a radically different game in the 1930's. Perhaps inspired by an exhibition at a local fairgrounds, industrious youth well-versed in the art of tinkering with farm equipment often devised makeshift racing machines in their spare time. Gathering in any available clearing or participating in fly-by-night promotion was a tough proving ground. In the absence of on-demand information that we enjoy today, many of these same devil-may-care youth could talk their way into a race car, at times fabricating stories of their exploits from other locales.

Floyd "Pop" Dreyer must have entertained these thoughts when he met a young Everett Saylor. Legend has it that the Dayton area schoolteacher first approached Pop in 1935 before a midget race in Fairborn, Ohio, and asked to have a turn at the wheel. When asked about his previous experience, Saylor reported that he had been racing at Walnut Gardens, a dirt track that was located south of Indianapolis near the city of Camby. Without an available alternative, Pop Dreyer took a chance on an unknown commodity.

By 1936, Dreyer, a noted midget master, was prepared to enter 'big car' racing with Everett Saylor as his driver. The man to beat was defending champion Sherman "Red" Campbell, who piloted the vaunted Morgan Miller for Indianapolis businessman Ralph Morgan. Campbell would not be denied another CSRA title in 1936, but Everett Saylor served notice that he would be a force to be reckoned with in the future.

After watching the tailpipe of Campbell through the early season, the Saylor-Dreyer combination scored on May 19, 1936, at Ft. Wayne, then followed up with victories at Detroit, Winchester, Dayton, Jungle Park, Greenville and Canfield, in route to a runner-up finish in season points.

With his confidence brimming from a fine slate of wins in the CSRA winter events held in Savannah, Georgia, Saylor was set to make a full scale charge to the front in 1937. The new season started in fine fashion for Saylor. He picked up wins at Jungle Park and Greenville, before heading to the May 30 event at Winchester. While Saylor won again at Winchester, the victory was tainted by the death of his arch rival Campbell, who had been pitched from his car after running over the wheel of Carlisle "Duke" Dinsmoor on an aborted start.

That season proved to be one of domination for Saylor, who scored 14 features, seven runner-ups and two thirds in 25 races during that summer of glory. Along the way, the former school teacher posted three wins in three days at Dayton, Sharon, and the dirt track ensconced inside of the famous board track at Altoona, Pennsylvania. When the points were tallied, Saylor was crowned the '37 CSRA champion, having bested George "Joie" Chitwood by nearly 500 points.

When Pop Dreyer decided to sell his championship mount from the 1937 season, Saylor decided to make a change as well. Staying close to his Dayton home, Saylor joined the John Vance team. It was a combination that never seemed to gel, and before the season concluded, Saylor was back in the Dreyer stable. Unfortunately for Saylor, he was mired deep in the CSRA points by this time and had to scramble hard to finish fourth in the season standings.

At this point in his career, Saylor was a widely recognized star in CSRA circles. But, like all open-wheel drivers who toiled in the Midwest, there was a persistent pull to feel the exhilaration of powering across the field of bricks at Indy. For Saylor, this dream came true. Cincinnati car owner Dr. Mark Bowles had been a Dreyer customer for several years and undoubtedly had been a keen observer of the talented Saylor. Bowles secured Saylor to drive his red-and-silver number 47 machine for the 1941 Indy 500, and his confidence was rewarded when Everett qualified a respectable twelfth for the nation's grandest racing classic. Saylor's day only lasted 155 laps. Heading into the fourth turn, he spun and dipped to the inside apron, struck a parking barrier and, while tumbling toward the infield, struck a parked car. His injuries were serious, but he recovered in time to compete in the shortened '42 season.

With the 500 suspended due to World War II, racing everywhere was grinding to a halt. Eager to regain his form, Saylor enlisted the help of Pop Dreyer one more time, and the duo headed towards the Missouri bootheel for a May 31 contest at Cape Girardeau. There, it was soon evident that the race, barring mechanical woes, would fall into the column of either Saylor or Chitwood. It was also clear that track conditions, as was so often the case with fairground ovals, were unacceptable. With dust billowing, Chitwood reportedly suggested to Saylor that they stage the race. For whatever reason, this plan was scrapped and the front row for the feature event was comprised of Chitwood on the pole, with Saylor alongside. On the first lap, Saylor drove down the backstretch, but blinded by dust churned by Chitwood, missed the turn and plunged into a new Pontiac outside the track. He never had a chance.

Saylor was a gentleman driver and a champion in an era that claimed far too many great ones. He was only 32 years old at the time of his passing. Yet, his accomplishments in a brief period of time on a tough circuit have not gone unnoticed. When Everett Saylor is officially inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, it will be just days after the fiftieth anniversary of his last moments behind the wheel.

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