

# AL GORDON

Al Gordon is being inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame in 1999 in honor of his outstanding achievements as a driver, including his having won the 1933 American Automobile Association (AAA) Pacific Coast championship.

Alan Gordon was a mail carrier from Redlands (Calif.), who had been bitten by the 'speed bug' in 1925 when he first drove Eddie Meyer's Model-T at Banning Speedway. Gordon started racing at the Ascot Speedway in 1927, although he claimed limited success in the L.D. "Dink" Sullivan and Willard Prentiss Specials, both Fronty Fords. The always colorful Gordon also ventured east and midwest in 1931, driving the Doug Harrison car known as the Lion Tamer Special.

It wasn't until 1932, when Gordon acquired the Harry A. Miller-built ride, the Thomas Mahoney Special, that Gordon began to excel at Ascot and in the AAA Pacific Coast Southwest series. He was finally running competitively with Ernie Triplett in William S. White's Red Lion Miller Special, Elbert "Babe" Stapp in Chad McClurg's Gilmore Speedway Special, Arvol Brunmier in Harvey Ward's Gilmore Speedway Special, Kelly Petillo, W.H. "Stubby" Stubblefield, Chet Gardner, Mel Kenealy, Wilbur Shaw, Rex Mays and a host of other greats. Mechanical woes plagued him, though, and he finished the season out of the top ten in points.

Al Gordon debuted at Indianapolis that year, where he and riding mechanic Horace John Booty crashed out of the race on lap three, wheeling Harrison's Lion Tamer Special. Gordon was uninjured, while Booty received multiple lacerations.

The following year, 1933, was Gordon's turn to shine in class 'A' competition at Ascot. The happy-go-lucky gin-drinker, who owned a Compton nightclub (Club Rendezvous) on Long Beach Boulevard, signed on with veteran owners Art Sparks and Paul Weirick in their blue Gilmore Special. Determined not to lose the ride in their famed "Poison Lil", Gordon drove hard and fast, and usually wound up in victory lane. The stocky ex-mail carrier rewarded them with the 1933 AAA Pacific Coast championship. It was especially sweet for Gordon as he defeated his bitter on-

track rival (since their Banning days) and defending champion Ernie Triplett, "the Blonde Terror". However, most fans didn't realize that Al and Ernie were friends off-the-track.

According to Triplett, "You can't run that way night after night, against a guy you hate. You have to trust the other guy."

Trailing Gordon in points in '33 were Mays in Paul Fromm's Hispano Special, Triplett (who missed some races due to an injury from an accident with Gordon), Petillo, Gardner, Kenealy, Herb Balmer, Carl Ryder, Shaw (who also missed some races due to an injury from another accident with Gordon), Stapp and Stubblefield. In addition to the title, Gordon also captured the all-time one-lap track record at Legion Ascot that year, turning the 5/8-mile oiled dirt oval in 25.47 seconds.



Al Gordon

Bruce Craig Photos

The 1934 season got off to a roaring start, with champion Al Gordon taking a slight lead in the points over Rex Mays. Triplett had 'retired' from Ascot competition, but on March 13, at the Imperial Valley Fairgrounds in El Centro, he made his season debut. Tragically, Triplett, Swede Smith and mechanic C.L. "Hap" Hafferly were killed in a vicious accident which also involved Gordon. Al miraculously escaped serious injury, walking away with only a bruised arm.

Gordon continued racing for Sparks and Weirick in sprints and champ cars, although he hit the wall driving for them in the Indy 500 after only 66 laps. Shortly thereafter, Gordon left the Sparks team despite some good finishes aboard "Poison Lil" in eastern and midwestern events. Gordon wound up winning the season-ending 250-lap event at Ascot in Bill White's rebuilt 'big car', the Bill Froehlich Special, in which Triplett had

lost his life. Gordon, the rowdy live-for-today partier, claimed he wasn't spooked by the car or by the tragedies at Ascot. Said he, "What difference does it make? We all have to die some time."

Mays wound up winning the 1934 title, followed by South Dakotan Floyd Roberts, Gordon, Petillo, Harris Insinger and George Connors.

At Indy in '35, Gordon and mechanic Frank Howard crashed out of the '500' on lap 17 while driving for White. Although neither was injured, Mrs. Gordon was reportedly in a state of near collapse as she was brought to the infield hospital.

On the coast, Gordon stayed in White's 'big car' car for '35, with Mays moving to the Sparks-Weirick Gilmore Special. Petillo was in Earl Haskell's Lion Head Special, while Roberts

wheeled the new Elwyn Holt Special. Insinger remained behind the wheel of Russ Garnant's Miller Special. Each Sunday afternoon's hot 100-lapper at Legion Ascot featured those five drivers fighting for the lead. Al wound up winning the American Legion's final show at Ascot on June 21, 1935, after a great battle with Mays.

Gordon's car owner, Bill White, took over the promotion at Ascot Motor Speedway following the Legion's absence. White's

big promotion was a 200-lap two-man Indy car race on December 15, with all of the country's top championship drivers (and mechanics) in attendance. Gordon and his mechanic William "Spider" Matlock were there, as was Rex Mays and mechanic Takio Harishima. Mays won the event, followed by Louis Meyer (with mechanic/brother Eddie Meyer) and Gordon. 35,000 people attended the event.

After a regular 'big car' race on January 5, 1936, White scheduled another 200-lapper for the championship two-seaters on January 26. Sadly, on the 127th lap, Gordon and Matlock crashed White's car tail-first through the south turn rail and rolled down the embankment towards the spot where heavy machinery was stored. Gordon, age 33, and his riding mechanic both passed away as a result of their injuries. Ascot would be closed forever following Mays' victory that day.