

National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

NORMAN “BUBBY” JONES

Norman Wilbur Jones was born on June 5, 1941, in Danville (Ill.), a “tough old river-bottom town.” He wasn’t called Norman for long, as his sister Myra pronounced “brother” more like “bubby,” and others mimicked the new moniker. According to him, “I’ll never really understand how a simple thing like that caught on. Guess the kids around there would rather have called me “Bubby” than Norman. And it’s stuck all these years.”

He was obsessed with motorcycles as a teenager, and in the early 1960’s, he was the scourge of amateur motorcycle racing in the region. However, just as he was about to pursue a career of it in 1964, his family had other ideas. Said “Bubby,” “They thought it was too dangerous. Meanwhile, my brother-in-law (Myra’s husband Keith Turner) owned an old modified and his driver had been hurt in a crash. So, instead of racin’ bikes, I became a race car driver. Five nights a week, drivin’ an open-wheeled racer all over Illinois, and suddenly everyone was off my ass and all for the new deal. Just as if it were the safest thing around.”

At the same time, Jones was a barber, cutting hair in the shop of Larry “Boom Boom” Cannon, who moonlighted as a top super-modified and sprint car driver in the midwest. Jones recalled his days as a barber-by-day and racer-by-night, “Yeah, nine to five and six days a week. Although we were drivin’ five tracks during a week—Danville, Lincoln, Little Springfield, Granite City and Champaign—it was just budget racin’ and there wasn’t no money to speak of. I had to work.”

“Bubby” teamed up with Johnny Egan, Sam Harris, and then with his friend Larry Henry and they ran the circuit in the mid-1960’s in Henry’s Chevy number 24 car, racing against some of the top Illini racers of the day, including Gene Henson, Jerry Blundy, brothers Larry and Steve Cannon, Chuck Lynch, Jim Moughan, Johnny Myers, Wib Spalding and Bob Carrigan. Of course, at some shows they were battling the likes of Don Nordhorn, Dick Gaines, Bobby Kinser, Tom Bigelow, Calvin Gilstrap, Gordon Woolley and Sheldon Kinser.

Jones’ big break came in 1967, when his boss and fellow competitor Cannon took off for the greener pastures of the United States Auto Club (USAC). That left the potent Wink Bridges-owned Tri-R Construction number B-4 car without a driver. And Jones ably filled the void. According to Jones, “Wink Bridges was a helluva boss. He put a couple of thousand in the bank and turned his shop, car and trailer over to me. All he said was, ‘take ‘er and go racin’.’ Yeah, and we did ‘er up pretty good. Actually, I think he made money on the deal. We won a mess of races.”

Jones won the Little Springfield track championships in 1969, ’70, and ’71. He won the Danville titles in 1969 and ’70 and the Granite City honors in ’70. More importantly, though, Norman “Bubby” Jones finally tasted the life of an outlaw, taking the B-4 car to such historic super/sprint stops as Lima (Ohio), Eldora (Rossburg, Ohio) and Knoxville (Iowa) in the late 1960’s. Said the laid-back driver, “We did pretty good at the Nationals one year. Then there was Eldora. First time there, I stuffed the car, but pretty quickly I figured out that place. Let me say right here and now, Eldora is the best dirt track ever built and I mean that.”

By 1971, the strain of having a full-time job and being a full-time racer was too much. He decided to make the safe, conservative choice ... until trucking company magnate and sprint car owner M.A. Brown, whose home track was West Memphis (Ark.), called him with an offer he just couldn’t refuse. “Ole Bub” was going full-time outlaw racing with M.A. Brown and Chuck Amati, the “one-armed bandit.” According to Jones, “He (Brown) was just a nice person who loved racin’ worse than anybody I’ve ever known. And he was a load of fun. We sure looked forward to the times he could travel with us. Before long, I had the front-line car with Bill Anderson as mechanic. M.A. called that ‘our car.’ Then he took the second sprinter, wrenching it himself, and called it ‘his car.’ Most of the time Rickey Hood drove M.A.’s rig. Sometimes I think that was M.A.’s biggest thrill of all—trying to beat me and Bill. There was a real competition there and it gave us some extra good times and a lot of laughs. As I said, working with M.A. was just plain fun.”

Jones had great years, from 1971 through ’76, driving all over the country for owner M.A. Brown of McKenzie (Tenn.) and sponsor Bruce Cogle of Thomasville (Ala.) in the Jack Elam-built cars with Billy Anderson wrenching,



“Bubby” Jones (Donated by Larry Henry)

including six USAC starts in ’72. And he added plenty of new win sites to his resume in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Mississippi, and even at the Riverside Speedway in West Memphis, a slam-bang bullring which “Bubby” never liked much. In ’73, Jones finished second to Knoxville rim-rider Earl Wagner at Keith Hall’s Western World Championship at Manzanita Speedway in Phoenix (Ariz.), and second to “Ohio Traveller” Rick Ferkel in the Pacific Coast Nationals at Ascot Park in Gardena (Calif.) while both were on oversized drag “humper” tires. In ’74, Jones was third at the Western to Ferkel and Rick Goudy, and one year later there he was third to Ron Shuman and Ferkel. With all of his travels, Jones missed Joe Shaheen’s Little Springfield and he returned whenever he was home. He recently recalled, “I remember the ‘strikes.’ We were always striking about something. We’d be milling around in the parking lot and Joe Shaheen would come out. He’d talk about whatever we were griping about—usually money—and then we’d all groan and go right back in. There’s be no change, and the next thing you knew, we’d be ‘on strike’ again.”

During those years, he developed a genuine friendship, despite a real rivalry on-track, with fellow outlaw racer Jan Opperman. Remarkd Jones, “‘Opp’ was probably my best drivin’ friend. He was truly serious about his Christian program and never was a phony like some people said. He taught me a lot but I could never be like him and never tried to be. The biggest thing we did was to kinda educate people. We went around the country, quite often blowing off some local hotshots in the process. Just the way Opperman did to me in Granite City that night. Next thing you knew a bunch of those local hotshots were runnin’ with us and shows like Knoxville’s Nationals and the Western became major deals.”

The respect was mutual, too, as Jan once said of Jones, “When I am on the same track with ‘Bubby,’ I figure if I am going to win, he will be the one I’ll have to beat.”

1976 was a bittersweet year for many of the midwestern outlaws. Opperman, who had run the Indianapolis 500 in ’74, Jones, Roger Rager and Larry Kirkpatrick all decided to join USAC in hopes of gaining better access to Indy rides. On May 1st of the Bicentennial year, long-haired Opperman won USAC’s pride and joy sprint car event ... the Hulman Classic at Terre Haute aboard “Speedy Bill” Smith’s car. Norman “Bubby” Jones, ex-barber from Danville, was third. It was a great day for outlaw racers everywhere. Unfortunately, the joy didn’t last long as Kirkpatrick died in early July following a sprint car accident at West Memphis.

Jones ran fourth at the Knoxville Nationals in mid-August, before hitting another high note later in the month when he won his first-ever USAC dirt champ race in the Ted Horn 100 at the DuQuoin (Ill.) State Fairgrounds. It was a big win for “Bubby,” wife Joni, and children David, Gina and Tony. He was driving the Roger Beck-owned, Wayne Weiler Farms/Bruce Cogle Ford-sponsored entry.

Two weeks later, at the Hoosier Hundred dirt champ car race on the Indy mile, Opperman, aboard Bobby Hillin’s Longhorn Racing Special, was severely injured in a high-speed accident also involving Johnny Parsons, Jones, Spike Gehlhausen, Bruce Walkup and Chuck Gurney. Jones took the news of the severity of his friend’s head injuries hard.

In October, while Jan was home in Montana recovering, his outlaw friends “Bubby” Jones, M.A. Brown and Billy Anderson were celebrating their long-sought win in the open-comp Western World Championship. It was for Jan, too. Jones defeated Ron Shuman, Fred Linder, Ferkel and Joe Saldana.

Jones finished the USAC sprint car season, after starting just half of the 36 events, in 16th place in points aboard M.A.’s Bruce Cogle Ford mount. Above him in points in tenth was the injured “Opp,” while behind him in 23rd was “rookie of the year” Rager.

Finally, to cap it all off, on November 25, “Old Bub” stepped into Doug Caruthers’ USAC midget and walked off with J.C. Agajanian’s Turkey Night Midget Grant Prix at Ascot.

Early in 1977, Jan tried coming back to racing too soon at Salem (Ind.). He realized it was a mistake and he requested that Jones replace him in the Donnie Ray Everett-wrenched Longhorn Racers stable of cars for the season. Hillin concurred and Jones crawled into the various cockpits with ease.

Jones won seven USAC sprint car races, including three at Eldora, two at the paved high banks of Winchester (Ind.) and one each at Terre Haute and Indianapolis Raceway Park. He finished fifth in points behind Sheldon Kinser, Bigelow, “Pancho” Carter (Jr.) and Billy Cassella. He finished seventh in USAC dirt champ car points, but the highlight of his season was starting the Indianapolis 500 for Hillin’s team. He finished 21st, due to mechanical failure, in the Bruce Cogle Ford machine. Hillin also gave Jones the opportunity to drive other national championship trail races, although the cars were never top-flight. In addition, “Stormin’ Norman” won USAC midget events that season at Eldora and in the famed Hut Hundred at Terre Haute in 1977.

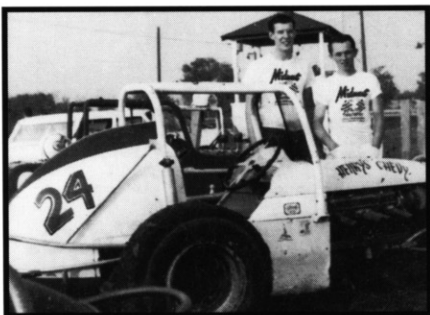
In ’78, Jones started the USAC sprint car season driving the Bob Elder Cadillac-sponsored machine of Walter Knepper, but by mid-June he had been hired by loyal USAC car owner Don Siebert of Siebert Olds fame, with Jim McQueen as the chief mechanic. “Bubby” won two USAC sprint car features at Eldora and Terre Haute for Siebert, whose plan was to go after the sprint title in ’79. Jones finished third, tied with Jim McElreath, behind “Pancho” Carter and Garry Bettenhausen in the dirt car points in ’78. He also ran the Trenton (N.J.) “mini-Indy” race.

Norman “Bubby” Jones took command of the 1979 USAC sprint car racing season, scoring four wins at Don Smith’s Terre Haute Action Track, three times at New Bremen (Ohio), twice at Earl Baltes’ Eldora Speedway, and once each at the Indiana State Fairgrounds and the Santa Fe (Hinsdale, Ill.) Speedway. With all of his wins on dirt and the final show of the year on the Winchester pavement where the roadsters were expected to prevail over the uprights, Jones needed a solid showing on the Eldora dirt in the penultimate round to seemingly clinch the title for Siebert. However, disaster struck when Jones crashed violently on Eldora’s first lap, taking teammate Bob East out with him. According to “Bub,” “I screwed the deal up. It was dumb. It was all my fault. We were four-tenths of a second faster than anyone else and I tried to win it all on one lap. I was gonna show ‘em.”

Jones had a great year, including another win at Little Springfield, this time in a USAC midget, but the frustration over losing the sprint car championship to Greg Lefler was disheartening. Combined with the bitterness and frustration that many grass-roots dirt track drivers were feeling over the on-going USAC/CART (Championship Auto Racing Teams) Indy car feud at the time, Jones felt a complete change in his life was in order. So, after running a couple World of Outlaws (WoO) races with mechanic John Singer, Jones packed up and headed to southern California, where old friend Larry Henry and others were living and where Ascot Park and the California Racing Association (CRA) would be a new challenge.

“Bubby” climbed into Ken & Don Kazarian’s Gas Chem Special in 1980 and Ascot would never be the same. Said Jones, “Different—that’s the only way to describe Ascot. Totally different. Anybody who thinks he could’ve come in there and made a good living beatin’ Dean Thompson and others like him would only have been kidding themselves. I had a lot to learn.”

(Norman “Bubby” Jones Bio Continues Below)



“Bubby Jones (Donated by Larry Henry)

Jones learned quickly, though, and his CRA record speaks volumes about his abilities as a sprint car driver. He won eight times in ’80 at Ascot, including the Don Peabody Classic and twice in the CRA/NARC (Northern Auto Racing Club) Civil War Series, and once at Santa Maria in the Kazarian’s Stanton-built car with Ray Scheetz wrenching. He won three times at Ascot in ’81, including once in a CRA/NARC Civil War shootout, and three times at Santa Maria, twice at Chula Vista, and once at Manzanita. The next year, he won 12 shows at Ascot, including the Peabody Classic, two at Denver (Colo.), two at Chula Vista, and claimed singles at Santa Maria and Manzy. According to the Danville native, “I’ve got a lot of respect for Dean Thompson. I’ve got a lot of respect for the Brommes. I figure if Dean beats me, I know I’ve given 110 percent. I know how good he is. He intimidates people so easy. He knows his capabilities.”

Jones won the coveted Kraco 1983 CRA point championship after taking 11 more wins at Ascot, including another CRA/NARC Civil War Series round, three at Manzanita, three at Santa Maria, and one at El Centro. He claimed his second CRA championship the following year, with 12 wins at Ascot, including the prestigious ’84 Don Peabody and Pacific Coast Classics, and one at Bakersfield.

According to the late Ben Foote of Ascot Park and Agajanian Promotions, “To have a driver of ‘Bubby’s’

national stature settle in with us on a permanent basis did a lot for our overall image. That he succeeded is a tribute to both his skill and courage. It was also great for ‘Deano.’ He was likewise a superb racer and yet, driving almost exclusively in California, some outsiders may not have taken ‘Deano’ seriously. That he and ‘Bubby’ tangled, on an equal basis, through so many great races did wonders for Thompson’s credibility.”

In 1985, Jones won one at Ascot Park in the Gas Chem car, then won two rounds of the CRA/USAC Challenge Series in Frank Lewis’ car, one at the 81 Speedway in Wichita (Ks.) and another at Ascot Park. It was the same year Dean Thompson retired for the first time, Jones’ chassis-building business ended and the Gas Chem car was taken permanently off the track. In ’86, he bagged eight more at Ascot, including another Peabody Classic, and followed it up with another Ascot win in ’87 and one at El Centro. Then “Ol’ Bub” retired ... for the first time. Said he, “I was totally burned out. Not so much burned out on racin’, but on people. There was too much crap goin’ on. Too much greed. When the last car owner parted company with me, I just said the hell with it.”

Why did “Bubby” come back? Two reasons, boredom and the fact that it was long-time friend Larry Henry who was putting a new number 24 sprint car under him. Norman “Bubby” Jones came back triumphantly in 1990, finishing third to Steve Kinser and Lealand McSpadden at his beloved Eldora and then winning at his and Larry’s Vermilion County Fairgrounds home track in Danville on the CRA Midwestern Tour. Jones wrapped up the tour by finishing second to McSpadden at Knoxville.

He also notched his final sprint car win at Ascot that year. And, in 1991, Jones won one more CRA feature in Manzanita’s Pacific Nationals.

Following his retirement as a sprint car driver, Norman “Bubby” Jones helped the Kazarian family develop and promote the brand new, state-of-the-art Perris (Calif.) Auto Speedway in March of 1996. For his efforts, Jones received the ’96 National Sprint Car Poll “Promoter of the Year” honors. He continues to live in Glen Avon (Calif.) with his wife Patty watch his son Tony follow in his footsteps in Sprint Car Racing Association (SCRA) races at his Perris Auto Speedway.



“Bubby” Jones (Photo by Dan & Vickie Mahony)