

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

LA VERN NANCE

Born in Boone (Okla.) on May 12, 1923, LaVern Nance was the oldest of eight children. The slow-talking, ambitious young man went to work at age 15 when his father died. He drifted around the Southwest working as a laborer, spending 14 hours a day in the hot fields picking cotton by hand. When he was 20 years old, he was dragging his homemade street rod down Carnegie, Oklahoma's main street when he accidentally bumped into his wife-to-be Marvell, an energetic beauty who was destined to play a major part in the development of the Nance racing fortunes.

Shortly after their marriage, Nance put down his cotton-picking bag and hitchhiked to Wichita (Kansas), the Aviation Capital of the World, thinking anything would be better than the backbreaking days in the searing Oklahoma cotton fields. The Second World War was on and he managed to sign on with Beech Aircraft, building aircraft parts for the defense effort. Soon he was appointed foreman over forty women riveters. His firm, yet easy-going, manner eventually landed him a lucrative plant superintendent job over-seeing 800 workers.

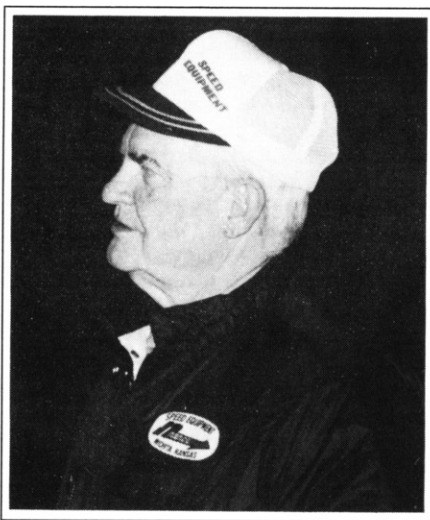
Financially successful, yet restless for some new challenge, Nance quit his job and launched his own small business (Nance Machine & Paint Company) with partner Marvell in 1950, fabricating glider seats and painting parts. Marvell ran a lathe with one hand and painted parts with the other. She also took care of the company books and, at night, took care of the four Nance children. LaVern worked at her side and scoured the Wichita aircraft plants, including Cessna, Beech, Gates Learjet and Boeing, looking for contracts to keep his fledgling company alive.

LaVern Nance's date with racing destiny came at about the same time, witnessing drivers such as Harold Leep and Rick's father Bill Mears race their jalopies at the Carl Johnson promoted CeJay stadium in Wichita. Local racer D.A. Clem owned a front-wheel-drive midget, which young Nance secretly yearned to drive. Nance did a considerable amount of free machine work for the car, hoping it would open the door for a ride which never came. In the late 1940's and early '50's, Clem and Nance followed the Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas midget circuits, often running three to four nights a week with such greats as Lloyd Ruby, Jud Larson and Cecil Green.

In the ensuing years, Nance fielded a series of roughly-hewn super-modified race cars, powered mostly by six-cylinder Hudson engines. These cars had stock frames, cut-down stock car bodes and a single roll bar in back of the driver's head. Since there was no such thing as store-bought racing parts in those days, Nance picked up valuable experience machining parts for his cars. With drivers Grady Wade, Roy Bryant, Jay Woodside, Orville Beckel, J.D. Cox and Harold Leep, Nance cars ran up an impressive string of victories winning the local 81 Speedway championship and several Kansas titles. In 1967, Nance and Leep teamed to win 32 super-modified features on dusty Midwest bullrings.

Sprint car fever bit Nance in the early 1970's and, together with his oldest son Carol, he put together his first sprint in 1972. It was a meticulously-constructed black beauty which was successfully driven by Missouri's Eddie Leavitt. The Nance Speed Equipment was officially 'off the ground' in 1973.

As his interest in sprint car racing grew, Nance began selling quality racing parts, in addition to his 'bread and butter' aircraft parts. This parts business continued until the Nance operation became a 100% auto racing parts manufacturing facility. Carol Nance founded his own company and took over the aircraft parts business.



LaVern Nance (Steve Koletar Collection)

The Nance Speed Equipment Company was strictly a family operation. Marvell ran the retail store and was the company treasurer. As keeper of the purse strings, she told LaVern when he was pumping too much money into his own 'toys' (i.e. - his own sprint cars). She knew the racing business inside out and could discuss the intricacies of racing parts with the most knowledgeable customer.

The machine shop, an inconspicuous facility located on an obscure dirt road, was the responsibility of youngest son Allen, who did his teething on a Dzus fastener. If a chunk of metal needed to be mailed, drilled, turned, taped, punched or cut, the young Viet Nam veteran was just the man to do it. Youngest daughter Sharon took care of the stock and mail orders, while son-in-law Dwight Diefenbach made the upholstery for the Nance cars. Daughter Diane also contributed to the business truly completing the family portrait.

Lots of sweat and hard work have given Nance sweet victories along the way, but his life has not been without tragedies and setbacks. The Nance family was shaken by the tragic death of their oldest daughter Charlotte. Half his machine shop burned down, the result of a treacherous magnesium fire which started in a lathe. Another time, half of the plant burned when a large exhaust fan shorted out and paint fumes ignited. But each time that adversity struck, the Nance spirit prevailed and he rebuilt his business to compete in a highly competitive field, which included the likes of Lee Osborne, Dick "Toby" Tobias, Jim Culbert, Hank Henry, Grant King, Paul Leffler, Floyd Trevis, Charles Altfater, Grant King, Roger Beck, Wally Meskowski, Don Maxwell, Bob Trostle, Steve Stapp, Don Tognotti, Don Edmunds and Gary Stanton among others.

In an effort to find out what designs worked best, Nance ran his own personal experimental 'company car' at selected dirt track races. The prototype parts, many lightweight and made of exotic materials, eventually found their way into mass production if they proved their worth in actual competition. The presence of aviation giants in Wichita attracted skilled metal craftsmen from all over the world, giving Nance ready access to machinists and metallurgists familiar with close tolerance work and well-versed in the latest lightweight alloys and fabrication techniques. Nance also had 'down the street' access to heat treatment plants, plating shops, foundries, raw material suppliers, metallurgical testing laboratories and forging plants.

Nance built a super-light, all-aluminum sprint car frame, which he raced against the best in the country with success. He also constructed an all-aluminum Pikes Peak hill climb car using the expertise of fabricator Larry Foley. LaVern Nance became a noted authority on the use of magnesium, aluminum, titanium and other 'trick' lightweight metals which make race cars lighter and faster. Among the items which were developed by Nance, or in which Nance made a significant contribution towards their development, are the in-board brake, splined axle, splined wheel, shifter rear-end, in-out box and aluminum hubs.

When Ted Johnson formed the World of Outlaws (WoO) sanctioning body in 1978, it was "the best thing to happen to sprint car racing in a long time. Now they're talking about 60 to 80 races a year. That's gotta be good for us, 'cause they're gonna need alot of frames and parts to run that often."

In their ad in the '78 World of Outlaws Annual, Nance Speed Equipment offered itself as the "Engineer of the Light Weight Aluminum Race Cars and Component Parts". And according to champion car owner Karl Kinser, "LaVern Nance helped us out on our car that first year with the Outlaws with parts and things."

On the WoO circuit, Sammy Swindell broke Steve Kinser's streak of three WoO crowns by wheeling the white number 1N in Nance Speed Equipment sprinter to the 1981 title. He had 28 wins in 71 races.

Sammy Swindell won a second straight World of Outlaws title in '82 for LaVern Nance with an incredible 14 wins, 31 'top five' and 42 'top ten' finishes in the 47-race season. Swindell and Nance used seven chassis during the campaign. Two records were also established. Sammy toured the half-mile Eldora Speedway at 14.984 seconds (120.128 miles per hour) and the Syracuse mile at 27.824 seconds (129.385 m.p.h.).

Nance's cars won the 1980-81-82 "Busch Bash", the 1980 "Western World Championship" at Manzanita Speedway, the 1981 Chico (Calif.) "Gold Cup", the 1981 "Pacific Coast Championship" at Ascot Park and the 1982 "Syracuse Super Nationals". Syracuse was always a crown jewel for LaVern and Nance Speed Equipment because he was a master at aerodynamics on the mile tracks. "Air's free and we're just trying to make it work for us."

Besides those previously mentioned, among the drivers who have wheeled Nance's 'house car' have been such respected outlaws as Jan Opperman, Jimmy Sills, Jack Hewitt, Mike Peters, Eddie Leavitt and Al Unser (Jr.) The Nance super-modifieds have been equally successful with similarly-talented drivers, such as 1981 National Championship Racing Association (NCRA) champion Herb Copeland.

During the mid-Eighties, Nance Speed Equipment turned out 80 to 110 cars per year, plus supplying the bolt-on components and replacements parts. LaVern always prided himself on service, and it was not uncommon for a Nance chassis to have a lifespan of 8-10 years. In fact, it is fitting tribute to LaVern Nance, who sold off the family business in 1993 and then joined Halibrand as an R&D engineer, that cars that he personally built and serviced are entered in tonight's "Pennzoils Masters Classic" for "Legends of Sprint Car Racing".