

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Ray Tilley

by Bryan Householder

When the top central Pennsylvania sprint car drivers of all-time are being discussed, there are several names that are always mentioned. One of the first of those names is that of Ray Tilley. Tilley was one of the first stars of weekly sprint car racing on the mid-state circuit in the Keystone state.

In fact there are many who would tell you that Tilley, more than any other driver, was responsible for weekly sprint car racing in central Pennsylvania. That would probably be a true statement. More than anything else, it was Tilley's remarkable 1966 racing season that prompted promoter Jack Gunn to open up his rules to allow sprint cars for the 1967 season.

In 1966, Gunn promoted racing at the Williams Grove and Selinsgrove Speedways. That same season, at the wheel of Bud Grimm's potent Ford powered 'bug', Tilley won 21 races at Williams Grove, and another 14 at Selinsgrove.

The success of the Tilley/Grimm team proved to Gunn that the 'bugs' had evolved to the point where sprint cars were the next step. Thus, Tilley and Grimm pretty much paved the way for weekly sprint car racing on the central Pennsylvania tracks.



Al Consoli Photo

As with many other drivers of his era, Ray Tilley began his racing career in the flathead coupes that were popular in the 1950's. However, his start is a bit different than most. In 1955, the Pennsylvania native was serving his country in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. One weekend while home on leave, Ray Tilley went with his older brother Ron to the races at the now long-gone Hilltop Speedway near Myerstown.

Ron allowed Ray to drive his race car that day, and Ray liked it so much that when he went back to Myrtle Beach he talked a local garage-man into teaming with him to race there. That team lasted until the end of the '55 season. For 1956 two local businessmen asked Ray to drive their car. That season he won more than 20 features. Most came at Myrtle Beach, where he was the track champion, but he also won at Morehead City, North Carolina, and on the old half-mile dirt track in Rockingham, North Carolina.

Ray only raced a few times in 1957, and then didn't get back behind the wheel until he came home in '59. He spent a couple of

seasons racing the Class A flatheads (now known as super sportsman) at Silver Spring Speedway, where he won 11 races.

At the time he was driving for a pair of brothers named Forry, who owned a car numbered 4A. But Tilley really wanted to race at Williams Grove, and took a ride with "Shorty" Martz in his number 71 car to race there. The Forry's meanwhile teamed with a man named Moore, and converted their car to compete with the overheads at the Grove, and Tilley went back to their ride.

By the end of that 1962 season he had scored his first win in what was to become central Pennsylvania's sprint car circuit. That win came at Susquehanna Speedway.

In 1963 some changes on the local circuit put Tilley into one of the area's top rides. Multi-time winner and champion Johnny Mackison, Sr., retired after the first race of the season. His ride in a Luke McCoy-owned car went to his team-mate Roger Sowers, but Sowers and mechanic Davey Brown, Sr., didn't click. Brown suggested Tilley for the car. Sowers went back to his own number 83 car, and Tilley took over the number 1 machine. He won seven races at Selinsgrove, four at Williams Grove and two more at Susquehanna.

The next year Brown was building a new car, but Tilley was in the process of changing jobs, and thought his new job would not allow him to continue racing. Brown hired Dick "Toby" Tobias to take over the number 1 car, and when Tilley found he would be able to race he hooked up with Tobias' old ride in John Regester's number 6.

Unfortunately, the new Regester car stretched the rules a bit, and ended up being legal only at Port Royal. Tilley drove that bug on Saturdays only, and won 12 races. He also raced a modified at the Reading Fairgrounds that season.

At the end of the 1964 season, driver Neil Haight was injured at Langhorne's Race of Champions. When it became apparent that Haight wouldn't be able to race at the start of the '65 season, Haight's longtime car owner, "Bud" Grimm, called Tilley. Thus was formed the team that would dominate central Pennsylvania racing for the next five years.

In 1965 Tilley won 47 races, 17 at Williams Grove, 16 at Selinsgrove, 9 at Susquehanna, two each at Port Royal and Bedford, and one at Hagerstown. The '66 season was nearly as good with 42 feature wins. As mentioned there were 21 at Williams Grove, 14 at Selinsgrove, four at Hagerstown, two at Port Royal, and one at Susquehanna.

That is when the rules changed in central Pennsylvania. After two dominating seasons by the Tilley/Grimm team, Gunn decided to open the rules at his tracks to allow full sprint cars. Some of the other tracks didn't follow that year, but by the end of 1968 all the local tracks had converted to sprint cars.

The big heavy Ford engine Grimm used in his cars presented a bit of a challenge when the conversion to sprint cars first came about. During the 1967 season Tilley's win totals dropped considerably. He won just four races at Williams Grove, although he did win ten times at Selinsgrove. Those were the only two tracks where his car was legal for the entire season. By the end of that season Grimm had changed to a smaller engine that didn't weigh as much as the old engine.



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Ray Tilley, Continued

For 1968 that simple change put the team back on track. Tilley won 25 races that year, ten at Selinsgrove, five at Williams Grove, seven at Susquehanna, and three at Lincoln.

Things got even better in 1969, as Tilley won 27 times. There were 13 wins at Selinsgrove, eight at Williams Grove, three at Hagerstown, two at Susquehanna, and one at the Reading Fairgrounds. But, at the end of the 1969 racing season, Tilley's racing came to an abrupt halt.

Racing in the Race of Champions at Langhorne, Tilley suffered serious head injuries that pretty much put an end to his racing career. Even then he was on top when things went bad. Running a modified stock car on the asphalt mile, Tilley had won the pole position and led much of the race before settling into a steady pace. He was running third when mechanical failure caused the crash that left him hospitalized for a number of weeks.

He sat out the whole 1970 racing season, then started '71 with Grimm. However Grimm had just gotten married and quickly decided to step away from racing. Roy Morral was quick to offer Tilley a ride, and it appeared at times that he had regained his old form. It wasn't really so, however.

On his last night of racing Tilley had come from deep in the pack to lead a big 100-lap feature at Jennerstown, then under caution with 30 laps to go, his goggles fogged up, and when the race restarted Tilley followed the pace car into the pits. He said he knew

he didn't really have it anymore, and had promised his family he wouldn't race again.

"I remembered hearing 'Smokey' Yunick say that you could tell when a driver was washed up. He said when a driver was all hunched up over the wheel he didn't have it anymore. That's what I felt I was doing then, so I stepped away."

Ray Tilley raced what is now central Pennsylvania's sprint car circuit for just eight years. In that time, he won at least 181 feature events, and ten track championships, four each at Williams Grove and Selinsgrove, and two at Susquehanna. He also made several strong showings without a roll cage in the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) races in Florida and at the Allentown Fairgrounds. In fact, in the final IMCA series at Allentown, Tilley was the champion of the three-race meet, although he didn't win a feature.

More than any other driver, Ray Tilley is responsible for weekly sprint car racing in central Pennsylvania; he also had a very remarkable career. He continues to live with his wife Ruth in Pine Grove, Pennsylvania. His family also includes sons Bryon, Thurmond and Roger.