

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Francis Quinn

by Larry L. Ball, Jr.

January 20, 1924, a new race track opens in southern California: a 5/8-mile speed plant known as the New Ascot Motor Speedway. Ascot's opening season featured a "who's who" in auto racing: Ralph DePalma, Fred Horey, Peter DePaolo, Fred Frame, Leon Duray, Frank Lockhart, Elbert "Babe" Stapp and Ernest "Cannonball" Baker. Another driver was at Ascot in 1924, an unknown twenty-one-year-old hailing from Washougal, Washington. This young man had honed his skills on Washington dirt tracks between 1919 and 1923. He would be considered an "also ran" for the first nine weeks of Ascot's first season. Then, almost without explanation, this young man began to drive the wheels off Cecil Ballanger's "Ballanger Rajo Special" number 46. The young man was suddenly competing for "King of Ascot" laurels, and in six years would win the American Automobile Association (AAA) Pacific Southwest Championship. The young man's name: Francis Quinn.

When Quinn started racing in southern California, he, like a number of drivers with under-funded teams, drove a "Fronty". While the "Fronty" was considered inferior to the expensive Miller Motor Speedsters designed by Harry A. Miller, drivers like Quinn, Triplett, May and Buxton proved otherwise. During the time Quinn was wheeling Ballanger's Rajo, Quinn was also keeping busy as a car builder. He would build the "Schmidt Special", and work on designs that would become the "Dayton Thorobred Special", each utilizing the Miller engine. Both cars would bring him success.

Races for the Pacific Southwest Championship were held on mile ovals at Bakersfield, El Centro and Phoenix, and 5/8-mile ovals at Banning, Tucson, San Jose and Ascot. The Ascot fans thought the other tracks to be inferior and referred to the Pacific Southwest Championship simply as the "Ascot Championship". With thousands of fans and regular attendance by movie stars of the day, Ascot was easily the most glamorous dirt track in the country. In 1928 the Pacific Southwest Championship would go to Jack Buxton. Buxton was chased by Charley Gelston, Ernie Triplett, Bill Spence and Quinn. Although Quinn finished fifth in the 1928 standings, his reputation was made when he shattered DePalma's one-lap Ascot record by more than a second. In 1929 the Pacific Southwest Championship went to Mel Kenealy, with Quinn a close second. Gelston and Triplett were third and fourth, respectfully. For the first half of the '29 season, Quinn seemed to be lagging far behind the leaders in the Dayton Thorobred Special with a 191-cubic-inch Miller. Whatever problems he was having during the first half of the season seemed to be remedied by the second half. He would catch Gelston and Triplett, then press Kenealy for the championship. With a fifth place finish in 1928 and a second in '29, anything but a championship in 1930 would be a failure. Quinn would not be disappointed.

By '30, one of the greatest rivalries in racing history would be in full swing. Quinn was known by his fans as "The Bald Eagle". This moniker was the result of his only racing accident, and a minor one at that. In 1927, Quinn spun on the backstretch at Banning, hitting the infield fence. One of the boards left Quinn with a gash in the upper part of his forehead. After the wound healed, the hair never grew back leaving a bald spot. The Los Angeles press began calling him "The Bald Eagle" and the name stuck with the fans. Quinn's competitors jokingly referred to him as "Skillet Head". Quinn's main rival was "The Blond Terror", Ernie Triplett. Thousands of fans would flock to the race tracks of the Southwest to see these two rivals do battle. The most legendary of these battles would be at Ascot, where it all began. While Quinn and Triplett were thrilling fans with weekly one-two finishes, a publicity writer at Ascot made up quotes for the papers that turned the rivalry into a feud. The writer would quote Quinn as saying, "If Triplett doesn't move over and let me pass I'll push him over." Then the writer would quote Triplett as saying, "If he starts that I'll show him the rough stuff I learned on the eastern tracks." Of course neither driver

said these things, but each believed the other did. Tempers were only calmed when the writer finally confessed to the drivers what he had done. But the rivalry remained.

Quinn started the 1930 season in his "Dayton Thorobred Special", but would end the season in Russ Garnant's "Gabhart Special". Quinn got the ride in Garnant's car after Jimmy Sharp, the regular driver, broke his arm in a crash at Bakersfield. Sharp returned before his arm was fully healed and crashed to his death at his next race in Oakland. Quinn was named the permanent driver and became the "Speed King" at the most famous dirt track in the country. More and more celebrities thronged to Ascot, and, to capitalize on the popularity, producer Howard Hawks chose Ascot as the site for his film "The Crowd Roars". Quinn, Triplett, Wilbur Shaw, "Babe" Stapp, Ralph Hepburn and "Stubby" Stubblefield all appeared in the film that starred James Cagney. By the end of the 1930 season, Quinn would be crowned champion at the Alexandria Hotel in Los Angeles. He was awarded the Dick Dodd Memorial Championship Trophy and the cash prize from the AAA Western Regional office. Thanks to the popularity of James Cagney and "The Crowd Roars", the whole country knew what it meant to be Pacific Southwest champion. Quinn was followed in the '30 campaign by Kenealy, May, Triplett, and Wilbur Shaw.

Shaw, who would eventually become a three-time Indy 500 winner, would later be quoted as saying, "To win the Pacific Southwest championship is tougher than the National title because the competition is so fierce. Never in my racing days had I seen anything like this."

For a number of years Quinn had attempted to take his rivalry with Triplett to Indianapolis, but was denied for medical reasons. It was said that he had been diagnosed with an abnormally large heart. His 1930 Pacific Southwest championship gave him an opportunity to run the 1931 Indy 500. The '30 championship made it impossible for AAA officials to deny his pleas. He also received support from fellow drivers who said they raced against him, and didn't think he had a heart! Quinn went to Indianapolis and qualified the Tucker Tappet Special" owned by James Wade. Quinn started the 1931 "500" twenty-first, only to be sidelined after completing three laps due to a broken axle. He would not have another opportunity.

Quinn spent the 1931 Pacific Southwest championship trying to work the bugs out of his latest creation. The "Francis Quinn Special" was a Miller Marine of his own design, costing him \$6,000. This was a fortune considering the average American income in 1931 was \$1,428. By November, the '31 championship was no longer in doubt. Triplett won by a large margin over Chet Gardner, Stubblefield, Quinn and the "Whittier Shiek" Arvol Brummier. Quinn vowed to work on the new Miller during the off-season and give Triplett a run for the '32 title. Sadly, Quinn's rivalry with Triplett would end on December 13, 1931.

The 1931 season closed with a 100-lap race on the Oakland milescheduled for December 14. Everybody was going to be there, including many Eastern AAA drivers such as Mauri Rose, Ralph Hepburn and Louie Meyer. A crowd of 15,000 was expected to see the great sweepstakes. Quinn was going to be there, too. Confident that the bugs had been worked out of his Miller number 1, Quinn and mechanic Claude French headed north with the Miller in tow. Near Merced they learned that the race had been rained out, so they turned around and headed home. About five miles north of Fresno, a truck hit Quinn's Model-A roadster head on. The Ford was demolished and Quinn died on the roadside. French received minor injuries. Quinn's Miller was incredibly undamaged. Manslaughter charges were filed against the truck driver, but later dismissed when the Quinn family expressed a desire not to prosecute. Francis Quinn, who was born on March 22, 1903, to farming parents Francis M. and Bertha Quinn, was just 28 years old. He is buried at the Evergreen Cemetery in East Los Angeles. His tombstone simply reads, "Francis Quinn - Our Champion."



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