

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

BOB SLATER

by Bob Mays

Bob Slater was born in Kansas City, Missouri, on December 8, 1924. Like many young men who served their country in World War II, Slater came home in 1946 and promptly began racing motorcycles. In 1947, midget cars were the all the rage in Kansas City and Slater soon switched from motorcycles to midgets.

Racing at such venues as Olympic Stadium and Riverside Stadium in Kansas City, Playland Park in Council Bluffs, IA, and Riverview Park in Sioux City, IA, "Slats," as he came to be called, quickly moved up the racing ladder. Some of Slater's early rides included the Art Smith Ford V8-60 and the Elmo Begun V8-60.



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By 1950, Slater was getting rides in Offenhauser-powered midgets and winning regularly for owners like Frank Dashner, Lee Sloan, Vito Calia and Tom Randol. It was with Randol, in 1951, that Slater put together his best midget car racing season, winning the Kansas City Midget Auto Racing Association (KCMARA) championship over such stalwarts as Vito Calia, Wayne Selser, Guy "Mac" McHenry and Jerry Kemp. That same year, Slater started racing sprint cars. Slater drove the "Bud" Wilson Offy, the Jimmy Campbell Offy and the Merle Heath Offy in International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) competition in 1951 and early '52.

Slater and his old midget racing pal Randol had something up their sleeve for the IMCA boys in 1952. Randol purchased one of the few Kurtis-Kraft sprinters ever built and installed Slater as crew chief/driver. When they came to the July Fourth event at Lincoln, NE, the car was so new it hadn't even been painted. The paint, however, was the only part of the car that was not ready as Slater took it to a new record for 25 laps in the feature event, defeating Bobby Grim, Jimmy Campbell, McHenry, Larry Wheeler and 1949 Indy 500 winner Bill Holland in front of 18,000 fans.

Another win followed at Sedalia, MO, on the mile before sweeping three features at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines. With 27,000 fans in attendance for the finale, Slater blasted a

top-notch field, leading Grim, Lawrence "Red" Hoyle, Don Branson and Johnnie Pouelsen to the flag. The next day back at Lincoln, he thrilled 22,000 fans by charging his blue and gold Randol Offy to the win over Campbell, Branson, Hoyle and Hank Nykaza. It was Slater's fourth win in a row. Additional wins at Huron, and Rapid City, SD, Salt Lake City (twice) and Shreveport, LA, gave Slater eleven wins for the season, and placed him fifth in the final IMCA points for 1952 behind Deb Snyder, Jimmy Campbell, Bill Holland and Bobby Grim. In addition to the great year Slater had in sprint cars, he once again was the KCMARA Midget champ, winning five features at Riverside in North Kansas City.

For 1953, Slater purchased Bill Holland's Offy sprint car. After several early season races, Slater managed a big win in a 50-lapper at Des Moines in May in the old car. Slater felt the car had plenty of horsepower but thought he was at a disadvantage in the handling department. He discarded the old rail frame and built a space frame for the car. Some of the people who provided help building the new sprinter were George Oakley, Lee Sloan, Cecil Taylor, Bill Mansell, Frank Creasman and Norm McClure. The car was emblazoned with the name "Mary Lou," on the side, for Bob's wife, Mary Lou Slater.

He quickly sent a message to the rest of the IMCA circuit by winning right out of the box at his old midget haunt, Riverside Stadium on June 26. When the 1953 fair circuit arrived, he quickly picked up wins at Fond Du Lac, Wisc., Algona, IA, Belleville, KS, and twice in Jackson, MN. Then, in the first of two days of racing at Lincoln, Slater defeated Grim, Dick Ferguson, Campbell and Wayne Selser. The second day Bob edged Ferguson, Vito Calia, Campbell and Bill Jim. Both days 17,000 raucous fans roared their approval.

Two more wins came at Spencer, IA, and Topeka, KS. At the end of the season, although Deb Snyder had the IMCA title wrapped up, Slater was still in contention for the National Speedways, Inc., championship. National Speedways, a promotional arm of IMCA named its own champion each year, counting only races that it promoted during the season. Going into the final weekend at Shreveport, Slater was leading, with Bobby Grim right on his heels. On the first day, Slater shelled the engine in his car and watched helplessly as Grim copped the feature. For day two, he jumped into Jimmy Campbell's car and garnered enough points to win the NSI crown over Grim, Campbell, Dick Ferguson and Mac McHenry. He was second in overall IMCA points.

By the start of the 1954 season, it was obvious, that Bob Slater and Bobby Grim had become the young titans. The rivalry came to a head on Memorial Day at Belleville. At the start of the feature event, Grim took the lead with Slater in pursuit. As the pair started lap nine of the 20-lap race, Slater pulled even with Grim and for the next three laps they ran wheel to wheel. Going into turn one on the twelfth lap they tangled, with Grim flipping and dislocating his shoulder in the process. Slater's car suffered minimal damage. The wreck, however, put Grim on the sidelines for several weeks.

One week after the incident, Slater found victory lane again, leading flag to flag for the 50-lap win in Des Moines. Slater picked up additional wins during the summer at Urbana,

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IL; Fort William Expo, Ontario, Canada; Wausau, WS.; Davenport, IA; Sedalia, on both the half-mile and the mile, and twice more at Des Moines and Topeka. The ten wins were enough to propel Slater to the IMCA national championship for 1954. His closest pursuers were Grim and Marvin Pifer.

To start off the 1955 season, Jimmy Campbell asked Slater to drive his car at the opening season races in Tampa, FL. Slater won two of the four features at Tampa, getting off to a great start in defense of his IMCA title. Due to the traditionally light IMCA schedule in the spring, Bob took advantage of American Automobile Association's new policy of granting temporary permits to run some of their early season events. Slater drove the Ray Erickson Offy in AAA with fair success.

The newest event on the IMCA calendar was the Hawkeye Futurity to be run at Des Moines on June 5, 1955. Bob Slater was back in his own familiar Offy sprint car and was determined to win the inaugural event. At the start of the 100-lapper, "Bud" Randall in the Ennis M. "Dizz" Wilson Offy took the lead, with Slater in hot pursuit. By the fifth lap Slater had taken the lead and was pulling away in the high groove. As he entered the first turn on lap seven, Slater's car seemed to push and he caught the wall with his right front tire. His car, heavy with fuel, bicycled, and then barrel-rolled. Just five years after his first sprint car ride, and eight years after beginning his auto racing career in midget cars, the life of the defending IMCA champion was tragically snuffed out.