

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

BILL UTZ

by Bob Mays

From horseshoes to horsepower, that is the story of Bill Utz. Coming from a family of horsemen, he plied his trade as blacksmith, shoeing the family's show horses, then branching out around the area of his hometown of Sedalia, Missouri, shoeing the equine population of Central Missouri.

In 1958, at age 23, Utz put down his blacksmith tools long enough to put together his first racecar, a 1936 Ford Coupe flathead. Racing at several Central Missouri tracks, Utz quickly learned his new craft and won the Sweet Springs track championship. He continued racing throughout the area, gaining more and more feature wins on the tough central Missouri super-modified circuit with the help of his friend and mechanic, Marvin Nicholson.

In the early 1960's, Bill began to branch out, and in '64, he won his first Knoxville Raceway championship, which boasted some of the hottest competition in the country. Names like Jerry Blundy, Kenny Weld, Earl Wagner, Johnny Babb and Jerry Weld took a back seat to the "Flying Blacksmith." Bill also won the track title at Bloomfield Speedway in Iowa that year. His ride was a roadster super-modified built by himself and Nicholson and owned by W. C. Gault.

It wasn't much easier at home, as Bill competed at Capitol Speedway in Jefferson City, Saline County Speedway in Marshall and the Missouri State Fairgrounds in Sedalia. Roy Hibbard, Ken Taylor, Tom Corbin, Russ Hibbard, George Lasoski, Ken Harper and Roy Carey were among Utz's chief opposition. But, by the end of his career, he recorded an amazing nine track championships at Marshall.

For the 1966 season, Utz and Nicholson constructed a car that could be used in sprint car competition as well as in the super-modified ranks. It was with this car that Bill scored his biggest victory. The Missouri Futurity was one of the premier races on the IMCA circuit. Run annually on the mile track at Sedalia since 1955, all the IMCA greats had won the event, including, Bobby Grim, Herschel Wagner, Johnny Poulsen, Pete Folse, Porky Rachwitz, Arnie Knepper, Bobby Unser, Al Unser and Harold Leep. Despite it being just his third full-up sprint car race, Utz qualified sixth and took the lead on the 36th lap when Bill Puterbaugh and Jay Woodside both encountered problems. Bill then led the final fourteen laps to win



Bill Utz

Bob Mays Collection

over Gordon Woolley, Benny Rapp, Grady Wade and Jerry Weld.

The next year Bill won his second IMCA event, this time on Sedalia's half-mile track. He also won his second Knoxville track championship over Joe Saldana.

Bill joined forces with car owner Dean Hathman in 1968. Utz made his first serious bid to branch out on the IMCA trail in the Hathman Chevy and finished 13th in the 1968 standings. In '69 he broke into the top ten of IMCA for the first time when he registered a sixth place in the final rankings.

Utz won track championships at both Jefferson City and Granite City, Ill., in 1970 while still running most of the IMCA circuit. He dropped to 13th in IMCA points, but did get back in the win column with another score on Sedalia's half-mile.

Utz and Nicholson built a new car in 1971, with Bill playing the role of car owner as well and wheelman. They concentrated on the central Missouri circuit and won on a regular basis.

Bill had fallen off the IMCA's radar screen for all intents and purposes until accepting a ride in Dave Van Patten's Cornbelt Chevy at Oklahoma City in June, 1973, and winning the race. A month later he was back in the seat of the Hathman Chevy and they decided to make a concerted effort to win the IMCA title even though they had spotted the entire field a half-season head start. Thad Doshier and Gene Gennetten were having solid seasons atop the standings, but Utz was downright spectacular. He won at Eldon, Iowa, Sedalia on the half-mile, and the following week he won his second Missouri Futurity. Utz then took two out of

BILL UTZ, cont.

three at Lincoln, Nebr., and ended the season with another win at Oklahoma City. It wasn't quite enough though, as he ended the season in third place behind both Doshier and Gennetten.

Utz was determined to nab the IMCA ring in 1974, but the competition remained stiff. Still, he won at Knoxville, Ill., Eldon, Lincoln (twice), and Topeka, Ks., in Hathman's Don Edmunds-Chevy, which had gained the nickname "Ol' Yeller," due to it's unique yellow paint scheme. Bill also won his third Missouri Futurity on Sedalia's mile track. Wood River, Ill., resident Larry Kirkpatrick kept the heat on, but in the end, Bill Utz was crowned IMCA champ for 1974. Bill also enjoyed an open competition win at one of his favorite tracks, the Springfield, Ill., mile in 1974.

Bill Utz did an outstanding job of defending his 1974 IMCA title by winning at Tampa, Fla., Knoxville, Ill., Des Moines, Iowa, and Sedalia. He took the 1975 championship over Jan Opperman and Ralph Parkinson, Sr.

Utz fell to a lowly fourth place in the final IMCA standings in 1976, behind Ralph Parkinson, Sr., Payton "Sonny" Smyser and Gary Scott. Bill won only one IMCA race, but

it was a big one, his fourth Missouri Futurity on the Sedalia mile. Bill scored his third IMCA championship in four years when he out-dueled Doug Wolfgang for the 1977 title. It would prove to be IMCA's final year for sanctioning a national sprint car series.

Bill continued to race until 1980, when he retired from the sport. It didn't take long, though, before Utz had come back as a track owner. He carved a small track out of the land behind his house and he staged mini-sprint races, starting in 1982. Promoting was great fun for himself and his wife, Joy, but Bill got the bug to return to driving. The 360-cubic-inch sprint car class was getting up a full head of steam on Sedalia half-mile fairgrounds in the early 1990's and Bill joined the field of competitors, debuting a new version of the "Ol' Yeller" #56 for the loyal central Missouri race fans.

Bill Utz has won over 300 feature races and 20 track championships during a career that has spanned, jalopies to sprint cars, across six decades. His biggest wins were on the mile tracks, with his four wins in the Missouri Futurity at Sedalia and a 50-lapper at Springfield, Ill., as standouts.