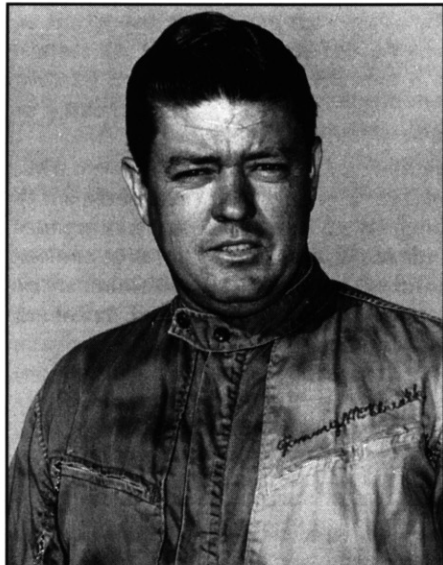


# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## JIM McELREATH

by Justin Zoch



Jim McElreath

Ken Coles Photo

Texan Jim McElreath has been waiting a long time for his induction into the elite standing of the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, perhaps longer than most. McElreath, you see, was involved in the creation of the Hall long before it ever became a reality in 1990.

"I was on the board before they built the thing and went around the country and had the meetings and all," said the veteran racer from Arlington. "When we broke ground on the building, I was up there for that. I've just felt like I've been a part of it for a real long time and always had thoughts of being inducted into it and now that I am in, I'm just going to enjoy it very much. It's going to be a big deal."

Born on February 18, 1928, McElreath had a spectacular career that began when he was a 17-year-old youngster running modified stock cars at Devil's Bowl in Dallas and ended when he hung up the helmet for the final time in 1995. He has had other occupations throughout his life and has conquered the brick trade and is an accomplished sheet metal fabricator, but McElreath will forever be remembered as a race car driver.

Recalling his fifty years in the sport, Jimmy Earl McElreath has a head full of memories and stories. His favorite from the sprint car days centers on the 1961 Little 500 at the tiny Anderson Speedway in Indiana. "I just ran it one time and won it by seventeen laps over the second-place car," he recalled. "That is just a real long haul doing five hundred laps around that little quarter-mile. They start up three wide and you've just got cars around you the whole time. When I won it that was the first time an Offy had ever won it. They said that an Offy couldn't win it because they were too rugged and vibrated too much. They were wrong about that."

In 1960, McElreath convinced his Fort Worth friend and fellow Devil's Bowl modified competitor Johnny Rutherford that they should go on the road. According to 'Lone Star J.R.', "We had a '51 Ford pick-up with an Oldsmobile engine and a camper on the back. Man, we hit the road."

For most of the year, McElreath and Rutherford struggled, running "supermodifieds all over Indiana and Ohio, and whatever midget races we could get into." Late in August at Oskaloosa, Iowa, Jim got a ride on the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) circuit. Jim drove the Hank Hanestad Chevrolet and the Ennis M. "Dizz" Wilson machine to a seventh in IMCA point standings behind Pete Folse, Emmett "Buzz" Barton, A.J. Shepherd, Jerry Blundy, Jerry Shumaker and LeRoy Neumayer. Rutherford picked up an IMCA ride with Merle Heath at LaCrosse, Wisc., one show later, and finished 22nd in points.

In 1961, Jim, the father of Vicky, Shirley Anne and James Irvin, opened the season teamed with Hank Hanestad and they won the traditional California Racing Association (CRA) lid-lifter at El Centro. He also finished fifth in IMCA points behind Folse, Barton, Harold Leep, and Jerry Richert, driving Dizz Wilson's orange "Big Iron" (a.k.a. "Pig Iron") Offenhauser. At the same time, Rutherford was in Wilson's red car and Newton "Buzz" Rose was in "Old Yeller". Besides winning the Little 500 at the Sun Valley Speedway in Anderson, Jim claimed IMCA wins at Lakeside in Kansas City, Kansas, Hawkeye Downs in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the Missouri State Fair in Sedalia, and twice at the Minnesota State Fair in St. Paul.

That same year, Jim finished sixth in his first sprint car start with the United States Auto Club (USAC), which had just combined their Eastern and Midwestern circuits into one national championship.

As was customary in those days, success in the sprint car ranks railroaded one straight to the Brickyard, and McElreath would find himself starting in fifteen Indianapolis 500's from 1962 to '80. Clearly he saw a dramatic change in equipment during his tenure at the Speedway. "I went in 1962, and we were still running the roadsters. Around 1964, we started going to the rear-engine cars," he said. "The biggest change was the rear-engine cars and the wings on the back of them. Now, they've got the aerodynamics on the bottom of the car and that just sticks them right on the ground."

McElreath considers his sixth place "Rookie of the Year" run in '63 as his highlight at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, but his brightest spot in the cockpit of an Indy car came in the 1970 California 500 at the new Ontario Motor Speedway when he took A.J.

Foyt's Sheraton-Thompson ITT Special Coyote Ford number 14 car to victory over Art Pollard.

However, as with any racer, when McElreath looks back over his career, he is not immune to regret. Although every driver has races that simply slipped away unexpectedly, the list of racers that can honestly say that they had a shot at Indy's milk and let it slip is considerably shorter. "In 1966, I killed the engine in my last pit stop," he recalled. "They had a tricky little clutch in those cars back then and everybody was killing their engines in the pits. So, the crew was ready and they jump over the wall and they ran to the end and broke the starter cables off. I sat there for a minute and fifty seconds before I got it restarted. I went back out and wound up losing to [Graham] Hill by fifty seconds. That is my biggest regret."

Regrets are one thing, however, and tragedies are quite another. Both, unfortunately, have touched McElreath. His son, James, was a promising sprint car racer that grew up racing against friends Bobby Marshall and Wayne Rutherford, Johnny's brother, in Texas, Mississippi and Alabama. He, too, graduated to USAC and even raced against his proud dad on several occasions. "He started racing when he was 16 in 1970 and then racing really became a full-time job," recalled the elder McElreath. "In 1974, he won two local championships and then they wouldn't let him run the modified class the next year. The next year, he started in USAC with the dirt cars and then went to the sprints the next year. He won the Hulman Classic (at Terre Haute, Indiana) in 1977 and a few other USAC races."

However, at the end of that season, James went to one last race at Winchester, Indiana, before he returned home to Texas to marry his fiance Toni, the sister of friend and fellow Texas racer Bobby Marshall. However, James wouldn't make it home as he exited the speedway in the first turn and was killed. "I just can't describe to you what kind of loss that was," Jim said. "My mother asked me if I was going to quit racing then and I said 'No, I don't think James would want me to quit.'"

McElreath continued to race regularly until 1983, then kept dabbling with sprints and modifieds through the 1980's and early '90s. Since '61, Jim drove USAC's championship cars on dirt and pavement, winning five events and finishing third in their National Championship in 1963, '65 and '70.

Since '71, when USAC started its Silver Crown (dirt championship car division), Jim had made 39 starts. He even won the inaugural race in 1971 at Jerry Fried's mile-and-an-eighth dirt oval in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, and finished second in points to champion George "Ziggy" Snider that first year. Jim tied with Norman "Bubby" Jones in 1978 Silver Crown points behind Duane "Pancho" Carter, Jr., and Garv Bettenhausen. McElreath was wheeling

## JIM McELREATH, cont.

the Galen Fox-wrenched Genesee Beer number 56 dirt champ car that year.

Jim also has driven USAC and NASCAR stock cars, running the 1964 Daytona 500 with such other open-wheelers as Johnny Rutherford, Dave McDonald, Dan Gurney, A.J. Foyt, Parnelli Jones and Bobby Marshman. In '69, Jim ran the USAC Houston Astrodome Grand Prix midget car race with fellow Texans Foyt, Rutherford and Lloyd Ruby. He had even won one USAC midget feature at Houston in 1962.

Jim suffered a shoulder separation, bruised ribs, and a burn under his right arm in a sprint car crash at Hatfield, Pa., in 1963, yet the soft-spoken Texan with nerves of steel was testing Firestones at Indy with Andy Granatelli's Novi within days. He came back the following year to finish sixth in USAC sprint car points behind Don Branson, Jud Larson, Mario Andretti, Foyt and Rutherford. In 1975, Jim received a concussion, cracked vertebrae

and badly injured elbow at Terre Haute, which forced him to miss that year's Indy 500.

In 1970, Jim won a USAC sprint car race at Terre Haute's Action Track in a car he built himself. Other first-time winners were Don Nordhorn, Dick "Toby" Tobias and Karl Busson in '70, the year when Jim, Rutherford and Foyt all came out of semi-sprint-retirement, and the year before roll cages became mandatory.

The National Sprint Car Museum founding board member was even an entrant in Gil Sonner's number 47 Casey's General Stores sprinter at the inaugural Goodyear Masters Classic race at the Knoxville Raceway in 1993. In fact, he led the first eleven laps and finished fourth that year. However, in August of 1995, Jim's loving wife and best friend, Shirley, had a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair, so Jim gave up racing for good.

On February 14, Valentine's Day of 2000, the McElreaths were again struck by tragedy when their daughter, Shirley Anne

Bettenhausen, wife of Tony, was killed in a plane crash while returning home from tire testing with his Indy car team.

These days, Jim and Shirley reside in the Dallas area, and Jim has invested in a subdivision 65 miles south of Dallas that keeps him busy. In his free time, McElreath is constantly tinkering in the shop on several historic race cars, many of which he and welder son James had originally built. "I've got seven cars and I'm eventually going to redo all seven of them," he said. "I've really got after it lately and that is mainly what I'm working on when I'm in Arlington, Texas. I've got three sprint cars, two dirt championship cars, one Indy and a 1936 Ford that James learned how to drive in. That is keeping me real busy."

Story courtesy of FlatOut  
(Mind Over Media Publishing).