

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

BOB ESTES



Bob Estes

Bruce Craig Photos

Robert S. Estes was born in Los Angeles, Calif., on September 21, 1913, to parents Clifford and Lenore Estes. He had a sister Janet and a brother John.

Clifford was an engineer and took Bob, at age ten, to the racing shop of Harry A. Miller. Bob's life-long love of the automobile and auto racing was born.

While Bob was in high school, he 'hopped up' a beat-up 1925 Model T Ford roadster with a Frontenac OHV head that sped to 111 mph at Muroc Dry Lake, a record run in 1930. According to Bob, "Before I could shave, I worked as a grease monkey and a used car peddler. I had gasoline in my veins."

Deciding to become a full-fledged racer himself, Bob placed his Fronty in a sprint car and spent a year competing at various southern California dirt tracks. Because the financial rewards didn't meet his expectations, he changed goals.

Wanting to become an automotive engineer, Estes attended the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), leaving after only two years when his father passed away. He then worked at a filling station, and eventually leased two more such stations.

After his military service in World War II, Bob acquired a Lincoln-Mercury dealership in Inglewood. His professional style and quiet personal demeanor, combined with his total commitment to quality automobiles and auto racing, earned him a great deal of respect which continues today.

And while keeping an eagle-eye on the business, Bob became involved in a number of varied racing endeavors. They included being involved with midjets, sprinters, stock cars, Indy championship cars, hill climbs, timed runs, and the Mobilgas economy runs.

One of his first sponsorships was of a roadster in Walt James' California Roadster Association (CRA). The hot rod was piloted by a young Troy Ruttman.

In 1948, Estes entered his first car in championship competition at Indianapolis in partnership with Conrad Weidel. Manuel "Manny" Ayulo was the driver, although he failed to

qualify for a variety of reasons. Bob, a hard thinker and hard worker, had a Mercury stock car built in which Bill Taylor won the Pacific Coast title that year.

Estes added a sprint car to his growing stable of race cars in 1949. Jud Phillips, an employee at Bob's dealership, built the sprinter with a flathead engine. The sprint car competed on Frank Winkley's International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) fair circuit and with the American Automobile Association (AAA) with Walt James' brother Joe behind the wheel in 1949 and '50.

Bob entered a Mercury-equipped car in the 1950 Indy 500, again with Joe James as the pilot of the aptly-named Bob Estes Special.

In 1951, Bob changed over to Offenhauser engines and put Joe James into the Indy 500 in the Bob Estes Lincoln-Mercury machine, with youthful co-crew chiefs Jud Phillips and A.J. Watson. That was the same year that James won a Midwestern AAA 'big car' race at Dayton, Ohio, for Bob.

In 1952 Jim Rigsby of Lenox, Calif., drove Bob's champ car at Indy, finishing twelfth. Tragically, Rigsby perished in Estes' second sprinter, named the Dale Estes Special in honor of Bob's young son, on August 31 in a AAA event at Dayton when the throttle jammed. Driver Don Freeland took over the champ car ride for two races before Joe James returned to the wheel. On November 2nd, at a J.C. Agajanian-promoted 100-miler at San Jose, Calif., and with the mid-day sun in his eyes and mud on his goggles, James caught Mike Nazaruk's wheel and flipped hard, ending up in the catch fence. He never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead three days later. Estes was understandably grief-stricken, but chose to stick with the sport he loved so much.

Freeland returned to the wheel of Estes' champ cars in the mid-Fifties, with a third in 1956 behind Pat Flaherty and Sam Hanks being their best effort at Indy.

In 1953 and '54 Pat O'Connor won the Midwest AAA sprint car point titles. 1954 was the same year that "Red" Renner wrapped Estes' third sprinter, built by Phillips and Watson, around a telephone pole at Fort Wayne, Ind.

1956 saw Pat win his third Midwestern driving title, now sanctioned by the United States Auto Club (USAC), while driving for first-time champion owner Bob Estes. Pat won that year at Birmingham, Ala., Salem, Ind., DuQuoin, Ill., Dayton and New Bremen, Ohio. Pat also won an Eastern USAC show that year at Heidelberg, Penna. Following O'Connor in the '56 point parade were Eddie Sachs, Elmer George, Bob Veith and Don Branson.

In 1957, O'Connor picked up two more wins for Estes, both at Salem, on his way to sixth in the Midwestern driver points. The first of those wins was in the Joe James Memorial race. Bob earned fifth in owner points that

year behind Mari George, Clyde Dillon and Lee Elkins (both McNamara entries). Veith ran Bob's championship car at Indy that year.

Pat O'Connor decided not to run the sprinters until after the May 1958 Indy 500. Sadly, Pat was killed at Indianapolis while driving for Chapman Root. Jim McWhitney placed sixth in sprint car driver points in '58 while Estes finished seventh in USAC's midwestern owner points. Freeland ran Indy for Estes, finishing seventh.

Don Branson driving the Jud Phillips-built sprinter wrecked by Renner in 1954, claimed the '59 USAC Midwestern championship and earned Bob Estes another owner title. Branson won five straight features at Terre Haute, New Bremen, Salem, Nashville, Tenn., and Salem again. Following Branson in the point standings were A.J. Foyt, Bud Tinglestad, Eddie Sachs and Jim Packard. "Gramps" Branson also drove Indy for Estes that year.

In 1960, USAC still ran two regional championships, although they had no conflicting dates. Branson won once in the East at Heidelberg and won five times in the Midwest at Houston, Tex., Terre Haute, Milwaukee, Wisc., Salem and New Bremen. Don Branson and Bob Estes, who ran fourth at the Indy 500, finished second in both regional point standings (to Parnelli Jones/Harlan Fike in the Midwest and A.J. Foyt/A.J. Watson in the East). The driver and owner clearly would have been the mythical national titlists had USAC combined the two series into one in 1960 instead of waiting until '61. To add insult to injury to Estes, Phillips and Branson, their Offy was starting to be beaten by the Chevys of Parnelli Jones and Jim Hurtubise. Afterwards, Estes quit sprint car racing and sold his equipment.

Besides his land speed record runs at the Bonneville Salt Flats and his efforts in the Mobilgas Economy Sweepstakes, Bob competed in four of the Mexican Road Races and took second place in 1952, while Johnny Mantz set a speed record of 115 mph in a Lincoln. He also sponsored efforts at the Pike's Peak Hill Climb in Colorado.

Over the years, Bob served on USAC's Board of Directors, as well as on a number of their committees. He was a western regional representative for the sanctioning body, and a member of the National Championship Car Owners Association.

Bob sold his dealership in 1986, yet has remained an avid classic car collector. Despite having suffered multiple strokes in recent years, he and his wife Joy continue to live at their home in Inglewood. Bob and Joy have two daughters, Sandra and Antinette. Bob's son Dale lives in California and continues the family tradition by remaining active in motorsports today.