

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Bob Pankratz

by Norm Bogan

Bob Pankratz's innovation and craftsmanship helped contribute to the transition in race car construction. From the pre-World War II rigid chassis to the flexible, adjustable streamline components, many gleaned from the war effort, race cars became more stable with the ability to tune the running gear.

Pankratz was born in Great Falls, Wisconsin, in 1916. While still a youngster, the family relocated to Spokane, Washington, where Bob spent his formative years. As a teen, Bob participated in high school sports, competing in both football and baseball, while also acquiring a talent for working with metal, welding and machining. In the 1930s, Bob's older brother Wally moved to the Los Angeles area and beckoned his younger sibling to follow. Pankratz answered the call and joined Wally in southern California. Securing a position with race car owner and builder Clyde Adams, Bob soon embarked on the construction of two midgets, one that he eventually drove. Bob felt that working with Adams was like graduate school, learning to select metals for tensile strength and hardness.

Bob worked on aircraft before World War II along with his brother, who was a pilot that served as an instructor during the war. Bob planned to enlist, but suffered serious burns in a fire at southern California's Atlantic Speedway's last race before it closed for the duration. Recovering from his burns, Bob went to work in the local defense industry and received his certification as an aircraft and engine mechanic.

After the war, Bob returned to racing midgets and sprint cars and continued to serve various car owners in maintaining their racers. As a driver, Pankratz was recognized as a clean racer. Johnnie Parsons once related a story to Bob's son, Wally, about how Pankratz had bumped him at a big money race in 1946 at the Los Angeles Coliseum, turning Parsons sideways as Bob advanced. Soon Bob waved Johnnie back around in front, then passed him cleanly. During this era, racers raced to make a living coming out of the Depression, so rough driving was not tolerated. Pankratz's career as a race driver ended in 1948 at Bainbridge, Ohio, when a crash left him in a coma for three months. One void in a successful career was never winning at Gilmore Stadium.

Upon recovery, Bob went on to build and maintain race cars for numerous owners. Pankratz constructed several cars for Charlie Allen and often drove one. He provided cars for John Balch from the mid-1930s through 1948. Perry Grimm won championships in a Balch car. One of the more notable cars that Pankratz constructed was the Cheesman Offy sprint car, wheeled by a number of different drivers including Eddie Sachs and A.J. Foyt. The car is now in Tom Malloy's collection.

Pankratz built the Koch Offy sprint car that raced successfully throughout the High Plains region and the Jimmy Davies midget that carried Jimmy to all of his championships. The car was sold to Pat Clancy and was later stolen. The car was found sometime later in Sacramento after a crash, which killed the driver. Before the wrecked car was righted, a study of the undercarriage revealed it to be the missing Pankratz car.

One car that set Bob Pankratz aside as an innovator and craftsman was the Malloy sprint car. Emmett Malloy purchased a sprint car from J.C. Agajanian in 1946 and commissioned Bob Pankratz to strip it down and rebuild it, employing new ideas to streamline the car from a narrow upright rigid car to a low-slung

machine with a sharp nose and a flat tail tank. Wider front and rear axles made for a larger footprint. Incorporating a rocker weight-jacker to the front axle improved cornering attitude. And a dual rear radius rod setup allowed the crew to make adjustments increasing or decreasing traction on the rear wheels for varying track surface conditions. The narrow wire wheels were replaced with lighter, stronger and easier-to-balance cast magnesium wheels from Ted Halibrand. Halibrand also furnished a two-inch open tube quick change rear axle that was coupled to a midget center section and was modified to accept 1.75-inch wide quick change gears. There was a flat transverse spring, which was mounted 10- to 12-inches back on frame extensions to clear the quick-change housing. It was felt that this rear suspension made the car handle well on the high-banked tracks.

A number of that era's heroes gripped the steering wheel of this masterpiece, with many exclaiming how well it handled. A few of those that belted into the car were Rex Mays, Troy Ruttman, Johnnie Parsons, Mel Hansen, Gordon Reid, Bill Vukovich and Andy Linden. Bob was the

full-time mechanic with "Pops" Ruttman. This car was taken back East with Ruttman at the wheel and proceeded to set new world's records on the hills of Winchester, Dayton and Salem.

Bob assembled two 'Speedway' cars, one for Sid Street in 1952 and one for Emmett Malloy in 1953. Walt Faulkner ran the dirt championship car circuit in 1952, but failed to qualify at Indy and "Potsy" Goacher had no better luck in '53. Bill Cantrell tried to qualify Malloy's car at Indy in 1953 and also failed. Jimmy Reece did qualify the Malloy car seventh in 1954, finishing 17th. He returned in '55 to finish 33rd with a broken rod. George Amick, Roy Prosser and Edgar Elder all sat at the controls before the Malloy car was sold to George Morcroft in 1955. In the decade of the 1950s, a Pankratz chassis started 53 events on the National Championship trail.

The Malloy shop was located in Inglewood, California, where the Emmett J. Malloy Construction Co. was based. A four-bay wooden clapboard garage housed spare parts for their heavy equipment. When Bob and the sprinter came on the scene, all the spare parts were shifted to the left side of the building and the right half, with its wooden sliding door, became the race shop. Being a typical race shop of the times, it appeared overcrowded and a little disorganized, but Pankratz's hand tools were clean and ready, as if awaiting a surgical procedure. Pankratz was a master at forming aluminum. He loved black cars but they required an extra massage to the aluminum panels to not show ripples in the paint job. Don Edmunds complimented Bob on his ability to have all the hand formed pieces line up perfectly in the final construction.

As he rehabilitated and retired from driving, Bob developed an appreciation for classical music and became well read. While spending time with his son Wally, Pankratz urged the boy to explore these same avenues. After leaving the racing scene around 1956, Bob joined his brother, Wally, in the Imperial Valley, maintaining crop dusters for Wally's growing business. Bob Pankratz was known to have a good sense of humor, was well liked and respected by his peers. Bob Pankratz will always be known as a good journeyman driver, who went on to become a master craftsman, injecting new ideas into race car construction.



Pankratz Family Collection

