

NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

Granville "Buster" Warke

by Pat Sullivan

Born before World War I, Granville "Buster" Warke became an eyewitness to the early days of auto racing by accompanying his father to the tracks in the vicinity of his Walnutport, Pennsylvania, home. It was at places like the Allentown Fairgrounds that Warke was captivated by the skill of the drivers, but the mechanical aspects of the sport equally enthralled him. After graduating from high school, Buster enrolled in the Curtis-Wright Aviation School on Long Island to study mechanics and perhaps get a chance to fly. It was here that he met open wheel racer Milt Marion and, with minimal prodding, was coaxed to serve as a 'stooge' on Milt's crew.

After joining forces with Denver's Walt Killinger in a similar capacity, he was soon thrilled to be given an opportunity to actually compete. It was June 22, 1935, in Charleston, West Virginia, when his chance finally came - but he reasoned that it would be a whole lot more comfortable if he had a helmet. No problem. He turned to his good friend Tommy Hinnershitz. The two men shared a helmet through the preliminary events. However, at feature time, Buster was forced to grab a traditional soft cloth cap, and ran an impressive fifth in a race won by George "Doc" MacKenzie. From that point forward, Warke would serve twin masters; he still loved the thrill of manhandling a race car, but he had an unmistakable gift for making stubborn machines go fast with a handy set of tools.

Like many of his generation, he was attracted to midget car racing as the discipline flourished across the land, and he tasted some success behind the wheel of the smaller cars. He was a frontrunner at places like Philadelphia's Yellow Jacket Speedway. In 1938, he was among a select group of drivers, including Duane "Pappy" Carter, "Babe" Bower, and Roscoe "Pappy" Hough, who traveled to Buenos Aires, Argentina, to race during the off season.

Nonetheless, Warke dismisses his midget car racing days, suggesting that he "was okay on the dirt, but on the asphalt I wore the right rear tire out right away instead of going easy like the other guys." After World War II, Buster kept his hand in the midget wars by maintaining the three Ted Koopman Offy's driven in the East by Dick Shuebruk, Ed Casterline, and Joe Sostilio.

Yet, Buster's main love would always be the 'big cars'. He raced on Ralph "Pappy" Hankinson's circuit since that life-changing day in 1935. With an eye toward the future, he purchased a car in '36, enlisted Frank McGurk as the driver, and sought his own rides elsewhere. It would prove to be a lifelong trend. Not only would Warke compete against other talented drivers, but he often prepared cars that he would go wheel-to-wheel with later in the day.

By 1937, Warke joined forces with former driver John Bagley, who, as an owner, began concentrating his efforts on the American Automobile Association (AAA) Eastern Circuit. Bagley's team was a formidable one, anchored by a McDowell-powered car driven by St. Louis native Frankie Beeder, and a Cragar-powered machine piloted by one of the best open-wheel drivers ever, Milwaukee's Tony Willman. In a stellar '37 campaign, Beeder accomplished a feat that was heretofore unprecedented, he simultaneously claimed the Eastern and Hankinson series' titles. Following that banner year, Warke hooked up with Patterson, New Jersey, owner Fred "Jiggs" Peters to race his Miller Marine. From that point to the end of his racing career, Buster would enjoy steady rides. By then, Buster Warke was a fixture on the East Coast racing scene. When Williams Grove Speedway opened on May 21, 1939, he shared the front row with Tommy Hinnershitz. In those heady days, Buster raced against every open wheel legend of the time and he even enjoyed hunting trips with the great Ted Horn.

Raring to go after the war, Warke headed to the Midwest to run the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) fair circuit armed with Ben Shaw's airplane-powered car. It had been a Curtis six-cylinder, but Ben made a four-cylinder out of it. According to Warke, "It needed very little mechanical work, and I ran the whole season with it." He proved that he belonged by running fifth on consecutive race dates at the Iowa State

Fair - one of the true crown jewels on the IMCA trail. Of course, in those days it was two-lane highway all the time. To get from Bethany, Missouri, to Owatonna, Minnesota, required some hustling, but in the days before radar, the local constables sometimes had a sympathetic eye.

Nonetheless, Buster felt it was time to head closer to home and in the offing was a chance to prepare and drive cars for successful owner Ted Nyquist, a man Buster remembers fondly for "not being afraid to spend a buck." Warke had another banner season in 1947. Also in the Nyquist stable was one of the best sprint car drivers of his era - Joie Chitwood. Warke remembered this Eastern AAA season as one where the team "either ran first or second, or lost the rear end. We were using a quick-change rear end that wasn't perfect." The Chitwood/Nyquist duo struck eight times, and Buster won at Shelby, North Carolina, for good measure. Warke also made his first official starts on the National Championship trail having failed to qualify at Syracuse in 1938. He cracked the field at Langhorne, Pennsylvania in June, Lakewood Speedway in Atlanta on July 4, and he would finish sixth at Goshen, New York, in mid-August. All told, he would enter 15 Indianapolis-style championship car events, but unfortunately never got a shot at the Brickyard as a driver.

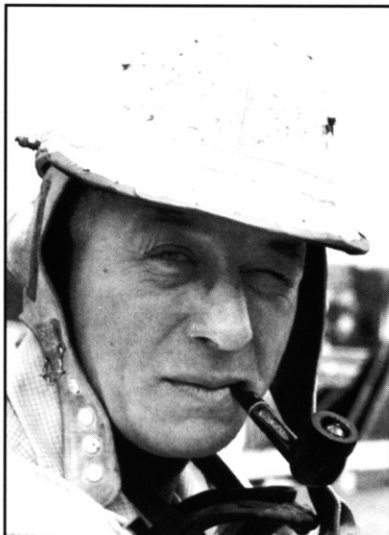
From 1947 until the end of his days as a driver, Warke was a consistent force behind the wheel. Always in the 'top 20' in season points, his

high-water mark came in the waning days of his career when he finished fourth in the 1954 final standings behind Johnny Thomson, Tommy Hinnershitz and Al Herman. It was a crash at Flemington, New Jersey, in 1956 that led to his decision to hang up the goggles for good. While he was still willing, his wife's nerves were frayed beyond repair. Driving at the time for Massachusetts speed shop owner Ed Stone, it was an easy transition to devote his time to turning wrenches. The move paid immediate dividends during the 1957 season. At the controls of the Fred Tomshe-built car was the thin man known in racing circles as "Cotter Pin" Bill Randall. Warke remembers Randall as a man who "wasn't much on the dirt, but he could sure go on the pavement." Adopting the mantra of all mechanics, Buster hastened to add, "You had to keep him away from the cars though, because he would screw them up every time." Randall, who had raced since '39, won the United States Auto Club (USAC) Eastern title without the benefit of a single win, a feat not duplicated until Brian Tyler's '96 crown.

With his services in high demand, Warke began a long association as chief mechanic with Charleston, West Virginia's Fred Sclavi, the owner of Bell Lines Trucking. A fixture on the Championship trail, this association took Buster all the way to Monza, Italy, for the 1958 running of the 'Race of Two Worlds'. Set to go in the Sclavi & Amos entry was Maurice Trintignant. The Frenchman was fresh off his second win in the Grand Prix of Monaco, but one heat on the high-speed banked track proved to be sobering. A suitable replacement was found in a young man who had just completed his first Indianapolis 500 - A. J. Foyt, Jr. The Texan ran as high as third in the final heat of the day, but a mechanical failure sent him to the sidelines.

Sclavi and Warke persevered, and the duo looked to be headed to a glorious day in the 1962 Indianapolis 500, but a late spin by Roger McCluskey dropped the team to a sixteenth place finish. Already frustrated from the Indy experience, Sclavi threw in the towel after Don Branson crashed the car at Milwaukee. Warke stayed on for a time with new owner George Walther - but found the new relationship decidedly less than satisfying. While he would leave the Walther operation, Buster would never want for opportunities.

After years on the road as a driver and an owner, Buster Warke could never really leave the sport. His knowledge of the Offenhauser engine was unparalleled, and even today he is consulted on restorations. He learned how to make cars fast and beautiful by admiring the work of Allentown, Pennsylvania's Hiram Hillegass, whom he recalls as a man "who couldn't do much more than write his own name, but he could sure shape metal." Examples of Warke's restoration projects are proudly displayed across the country, including at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum. Granville "Buster" Warke, at age ninety, lives in Center Valley, Pennsylvania.



Frank Smith/Bruce Craig Collection

