



SPEEDWAY PRODUCTIONS
712 Cherry Blossom Court
Delmont, PA 15626
724-461-7135 (Office)
412-999-6625 (Cell)
don@speedwayproductions.biz

www.speedwayproductions.biz

Remember When: Bill “Pappy” Kessler

Bill “Pappy” Kessler started his driving career in the 1930's at the age of 12 when he entered the first ever Soap Box Derby run in Pittsburgh. Once he was hooked on the competitive spirit of racing it was the beginning of one of the most colorful careers in local racing.

In the early 1940, Bill started racing Jalopies. These cars consisted of a frame or chassis and running gear, there were no bodies on these cars. The Jalopies were very crude but safety was never a concern. The seat was usually homemade and the driver was tied in with a bull rope or an old truck inner tube. There were not many race tracks so Bill and the other drivers raced in fields, on farms, or where ever they could find enough space to race. The tracks were more like hill climbs. They ran a track in Large, PA. that went downhill through a creek around a large willow tree and up the other side. Bill also ran a track not far from Bakerstown, PA that went down a hill and through a creek. There was a track in Allison Park near the KDKA radio tower, it did not have a creek, it was just very dusty. The track he raced on in New Kensington was covered with oil and silver paint to keep the dust down. I can imagine what the EPA would do with that track today!

A few years later bodies were added to the Jalopies and they were re-named as Roadsters. Kessler, Herb Scott, and Lee “Smokey” Stover all built Roadsters and started racing in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. Herb Scott won his first trophy driving one of Kessler's Roadsters. Scott later went on to win 10 Pittsburgh Racing Association Championships and over 500 features. Lee Stover was also very successful in the PRA Coupe Division. It is interesting to note that Bill, Herb, and Lee are all members of the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame.

Bill did not restrict his early racing to just driving. In the late 40's, he helped a group of drivers form the Pittsburgh Roaring Roadsters Club. It was also during this time that Bill helped to build and promote Penn Speedway, which was located on Route 8 near the Suncrest Golf Course. The excavating costs for the entire project was only \$350. A problem with the local Blue Laws, for racing on Sunday, brought about the early demise of Penn Speedway.

In the late 1940's, Heidelberg Raceway started running the coupes and "Pappy" needed to make a change. Bill did not want to run the enclosed style of cars so he decided to switch to a class referred to as "the Big Cars". These cars looked like our wingless sprint cars of today but did not have a roll cage. Firesuits and racing helmets did not exist and safety was not a big concern. Bill purchased his first "Big Car" from Pop Healy of Brackenridge, PA. for \$350.

Bill promised himself that he would drive the car until he won the championship. The club voted to give Bill \$20 tow money. This might not seem like much but keep in mind that a hot dog and a coffee was 25 cents, ten gallons of gas was \$1.00, and the Turnpike toll was about \$1.00. Bill would have had money left over; those must have been the good old days. During his sprint car career Pappy raced all over the East Coast at tracks like Williams Grove, Selinsgrove, Reading, Nazareth, Hagerstown, MD., Winchester, VA., Vineland, N.J., and Raleigh, N.C. "At the high banks of Toledo, Ohio, I was racing with Tom Cherry's Roadster Club. The club was from Muncie, Indiana. "I had my first and only bad crash and was knocked unconscious. I was in the ambulance, which took me across the track, back to my racecar and trailer. I never went to the doctor and to this day my head is caved in on one side." Bill has also suffered a broken collarbone and broken ribs in other crashes but never missed a day's work.

"While racing under the NARA (National Auto Racing Association) banner he won the 1955 Championship. Pappy could have won the 1953 title, but was stripped of all his points for running a non-sanctioned show. His 1955 Championship was very special because Bill's idol, sprint car legend Tommy Hinnershitz, presented him with a trophy at the NARA Awards Banquet. During this time in Bill's career there were a couple Indianapolis 500 sponsors that

were interested in putting a deal together, He did not think he was ready for Indy. "That was the biggest mistake I ever made", said Bill In

In 1956 while defending his title, Bill injured his left eye when it was hit with flying debris during a race. With the loss of vision in one eye, he still finished third in the points but decided to retire from driving.

Bill campaigned two coupes in the Pittsburgh Racing Association that ran at Heidelberg, Claridge, Mon Duke, South Park, and Little Washington. In 1961 Pappy's son Bill Jr., got his dad involved again in the sport as a car owner. Pappy wanted to see if he could still build winning race cars. During the 70's the Auction Barn Race Team was virtually unbeatable. Pappy and his wife Dot, along with their three sons Bill, Henry, and Bob, ran the race team as well as the family owned business.

The Auction Barn Race Team won championships at North Hills, Lernerville, Mercer, Motordrome, and Tri-City Speedways. One night at Tri-City Raceway Bill's cars finished 1-2-3 in the feature. This is probably the first time in history that one car owner had this happen. His cars were impounded on two separate occasions, and he told the protestors when they were checking the cars "I will be eating steak and you guys will be eating hot dogs when this is over". The cars were all found legal. In 1973 at the Motordrome Speedway, the Semi-Late Championship was decided by one point when Bill Kessler, Jr. beat out teammate Brian Muehlman. Brian however won the championship at North Hills that year. It was the second of three straight titles at North Hills, Deek Scott won in 1972 and Dave Pegher in 1974. Pegher also won the 74 title at Lernerville and Muehlman was the Co-champion in 73 with Bud Kunkel.

In 1977, when Dave Pegher broke his wrist at Mercer Raceway, Pappy called me and asked if I would like to drive his race car. To be considered as the driver of one of the Auction Barn cars was an honor. I talked it over with my partner and car owner Ron Hasley and we decided to team up with Pappy. Bill had three cars and we had two so on any given race night I never knew what car I might be driving. This was like being in racecar heaven. We raced the Hasley-Gamble

cars at North Hills and Lernerville, and then took the Auction Barn cars to Mercer and Tri-City. If you combine this with running the Invitationals on Wednesdays, we were a busy team.

His list of drivers included: Herb and Deek Scott, Glenn Hall, Bob Schaefnocker, Matt Sherlock, Sr., and Matt Sherlock, Jr., Jim Irvine, Jr., Bob Wearing, Sr., and Bob Wearing, Jr., Brian Muehlman, Frank Chappel, Bill Kessler Jr., Don and Dave Pegher, Don Allison, Banker Beach, Jim Smith, Steve Skillen, Jim Bertges, Bob Cooke, Dennis Curry, Tony Burke, and Lou Bradich. Bill has had about forty drivers, and he always gave the little guys a break. He is responsible for starting the careers of many of the drivers mentioned. Bill's wife Dot had three Powder Puff victories to her credit. Every successful driver and car owner in racing today has a dedicated and strong woman working with them, and Bill was very fortunate to have Dot. Dave Pegher was the winningest driver with over 100 feature wins. In 1974, Dave won 24 features at Mercer Raceway.

In 1984, Pappy was honored by the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club for his many years in racing and was inducted into the Pittsburgh Circle Track Club Hall of Fame. Bill's biggest thrill and perhaps his most emotional moment in racing was in 1991 when he was named Sportsman of the Year at Pittsburgh Pennsylvania Motor Speedway. It was a very popular decision; the audience gave Bill a standing ovation. The team picked up a late model feature win and finished fifth in the final point standings with Dennis Curry as their driver.

Lou Bradich took the \$4000 payday home to Chester WV after scoring the exciting win in the Napa Penn National 50 Late Model event recently at Pittsburgh's Pennsylvania Motor Speedway. Proclaiming himself the luckiest guy around, likeable Lou Bradich from Chester WV put the hammer down, and clawed his way to the checkered flag to earn the biggest racing payday in his late model career at PPMS that now totals 23 wins.

Lou Bradich, Team Bradich and the Kessler 09 are having an excellent season.

Car owner Bill Kessler and crew chief, Jerry Bradich have put together a successful team that includes Jumbo Pease, Mike Watson, Tom Pease, and Bill Kessler Jr.

Bill Kell Racing Engines provides the power for the Rocket Chassis. Lou credits their success to the cooperation of Bill Kell, Marc Kowatic, his family, brother, especially a devoted pit crew. The highlight of Lou's career was winning a feature for Pappy Kessler the night he passed away.

The high cost of racing and the fast paced technology of today's race cars made it very tough on low buck race teams like Pappy Kessler's, but it did not dampen his spirit. I salute the man and feel honored not only because I drove some of his racecars, but to have him as a friend.