

A black and white photograph of a man, Tony Bettenhausen, and his two young sons. Tony is standing in the background, smiling broadly, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt. The two boys are in the foreground, also smiling, wearing light-colored short-sleeved shirts and caps. They are surrounded by other people, some wearing racing helmets, suggesting a racetrack setting. The background shows a cloudy sky.

# TONY BETTENHAUSEN & SONS

An American Racing Family Album

Gordon Kirby with Merle & Susan Bettenhausen



In action on the dirt at Goshen, Indiana on October 6, 1946, on the way to his first AAA Championship win driving the Russo Wetteroth-Offy. *(Walt Imlay/Armin Krueger/Bettenhausen collection)*



Showing the strain of running a 100-mile dirt championship race after finishing third in the Hoosier 100 at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in 1946 aboard the Russo #7 Wetteroth-Offy. *(Armin Krueger/Bettenhausen collection)*



Tony drove Murrell Belanger's Stevens-Offy at Indianapolis in 1947 and '48 but failed to finish either race suffering a gearbox failure in '47 and a broken clutch in '48. This is the team's qualifying photo in 1948. *(RMA/IMS)*



Wearing nothing more than a T-shirt and Cromwell helmet Tony laps a struggling Charlie Van Acker on the way to winning the 25-mile feature at the Milwaukee Mile in July, 1948 aboard the #16 Belanger Special Wetteroth-Offy. *(Armin Krueger/Bettenhausen collection)*



Over the years, American automobile racing has enjoyed a handful of successful racing families such as the Pettys, Allison's and Earnhardt's in NASCAR and the Andrettis and Unser's in Indy car racing. We've also seen the phenomenon in Europe and international racing with the likes of Graham Hill and his son Damon, world champions both, and also the legendary Ferrari Formula 1 hero Gilles Villeneuve and his son Jacques who was successful in both Indy and F1 cars.

A little less well-known with the passage of time, but equally accomplished in a wide-range of American open wheel racing are the Bettenhausens. The family's story has been told before by Carl Hungness in his epic 'GO! The Bettenhausen Story', published in 1982.

But more than thirty years later award-winning author Gordon Kirby decided to take a fresh, pictorial look at the family with over 350 superb photos from the Bettenhausen family collection and the remarkable Racemaker Archive. The book is enlivened by Merle and Susan Bettenhausen's personal recollections, observations and commentary about their father, brothers and family; and accompanied by full statistical data of the Bettenhausens' racing careers.

!! *The story of the Bettenhausen clan is a saga of glory and heartbreak to rival anything in the history of automobile racing in America, and it delights me that at last one of the sport's great dynasties has the book it deserves.*

-Nigel Roebuck, Editor in Chief,  
Motor Sport magazine and author of many motor racing books

!! *It's doubtful there's ever been a more determined or star-crossed family in auto racing history than the Bettenhausens but throughout their victories, gut-wrenching defeats and tragedies it was a family shaped by hard work and heart. From the tough love of Tony to his kids Gary, Merle, Susie and Tony Jr., it's a story of talent, guts, perseverance and bad luck that revolved around the Indianapolis 500. Through words and many candid photos, Gordon Kirby and Joe Freeman have captured the spirit of this band of brothers and their leader through the eyes of Merle and Susie. It's an inspiring look at what makes racing so intoxicating and what made this famous family so memorable."*

-Robin Miller,  
renowned American open-wheel racing writer & commentator

!! *It's been unfinished since my dad died in 1961, and that was part of what his three sons had in mind. The initial goal was whoever won at the Speedway first, whether it be Gary, Tony or myself, the first one was going to be for my dad, and then the next wins were going to be for ourselves. It's unfinished; it will always be unfinished. Does that mean we're unsuccessful or not the best we can be? I don't necessarily think that's true. Sometimes in life things go your way; sometimes in life they go a difficult way.*

*Life's not determined by wins - life's determined by character, the quality of an individual and the track record you've set for yourself as you lived your life. I can say very positively that we never won Indy, but we had enough quality and character that Bettenhausen in auto racing will be a name that will always be remembered and always be loved. Whether we win or not, we've been very successful, and racing's been very helpful and very successful at making the Bettenhausens what they are today.*

-Merle Bettenhausen



Coming out of turn two on the opening lap of the 100-mile Championship race at Du Quoin in September, 1951. Paul Russo leads Johnnie Parsons, Duane Carter and Jack McGrath with Tony in fifth place. He came through to take the lead on lap eight and lead all the way. (*Armin Krueger/Bettenhausen collection*)



The start of the 1955 Indy 500 with Jack McGrath taking the lead from Tony and pole winner Jerry Hoyt. Fred Agabashian tucks in behind Hoyt while 1953 and '54 winner Bill Vukovich runs fifth ahead of Sam Hanks. Vukovich did not survive the race, crashing to his death on the 57th lap. *(RMA/Reel)*



Left to right: Merle, Tony Jr., Valerie, Gary and Susan at home  
in the mid fifties. (*Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection*)





Tony shakes hands with a dignitary in the cockpit of his Novi at Indianapolis in 1957 with his old friend Duke Nalon standing in the background. *(RMA/Reel)*



In 1957 Tony drove one of the low-slung Kurtis 500F-V-8 Novis at Indianapolis. After a series of problems he struggled home five laps down in fifteenth place. *(RMA/Reel)*



In the pits with the Novi during practice at Indianapolis in 1957. Two months later at the first 'Race of Two Worlds' on the high-banked 2.6-mile oval at Monza, Italy, Tony set a World Closed Course record aboard the Novi in qualifying at 177.046 mph. *(RMA/Knox)*



Tony's oldest son Gary enjoyed a long and successful career covering more than thirty years from 1963-'96. (RMA)



The Bettenhausen brothers, Merle, Tony Jr., and Gary pose for a victory photo after Gary won a midget race at Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1975. Kokomo Speedway promoter Bill Lipke stands behind them on the right. (RMA/Reel)



'Young Gary Has His Dad's Desire': The Daytona Beach News Journal noticed Gary's potential in March, 1964. (RMA)





Gary in the 'City of Syracuse' sprint car Number 2 in October of 1969, wheel to wheel with Rollie Beale and Bruce Walkup on the high banks of Winchester Speedway. Gary won the USAC Sprint Car Championship that year (*John Mahoney*)



After scraping into the field on the back row Gary knew his Offy was not only outdated, but also well-used. He didn't expect to finish the race, but come the final hundred miles he was running in the top five without any problems. In the end, car and engine ran strong all the way and Gary finished an amazing third, beating Gordon Johncock in an exciting battle to the flag. It was one of his proudest moments in racing. *(RMA/Knox)*





In full flight as defending champion at DuQuoin in 1981 aboard the #1 Terre Haute First National Bank championship dirt car.  
(RMA/Reel)





For his 21st and final Indy 500 in 1993 Gary started Menard's #51 Glidden Paints Lola-Buick from eighteenth and ran all the way to finish 17th, completing 197 laps. (RMA/Swope)



Gary and Wavelyn at Goodwood's Festival of Speed in England, 2004. "True love after all these years," Wavelyn smiles. *(Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection)*



Gary and Wavelyn with Dana, Cary, Todd, Gary, Laura, Todd and Matt in 2006. *(Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection)*



A pair of old friends and racing rivals, Larry Dixon and Gary, remember the 'Larry & Gary Show'. *(Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection)*



The old gang gathered together during the month of May, 2010. Left to right: Steve Chassey, Bubby Jones, Larry Rice, Lee Kunzman, Jerry Sneva, Bill Vukovich Jr., Gary and Johnny Parsons Jr. *(Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection)*



Merle on the dirt at Terre Haute, IN. (RMA/Reel)





In late summer of 1971 Merle raced the Joe Hunt Magneto #99 Championship dirt car at Springfield, DuQuoin and in the Hoosier Hundred. He finished seventh at Springfield and tenth in the Hoosier Hundred. *(RMA/Reel)*



Merle made his comeback in 1973 with a prosthetic arm, running twenty midget races in the family #16 sponsored by Steed. He scored his first win as a one-armed racer at Johnson City, TN on Aug 31, 1973. (RMA/Reel)



Aboard Willie Davis's sprint car at Eldora in September, 1973.  
(Bettenhausen collection)





Tony Jr in the Bettenhausen family midget at Terre Haute in 1976. (*Racemaker/Reel*)



Tony made his rookie start at Indianapolis in 1981 driving H&R Racing's Provimi Veal McLaren M24-Cosworth. He qualified in the middle of the field and drove a steady race to finish seventh, five laps down. At Milwaukee the next weekend he started fourteenth and finished twelfth. *(RMA/Torres)*



Smiling happily as a thriving owner/driver in the early nineties with healthy sponsorship from coal and energy company AMAX.  
(RMA/Swope)





Brazilian up-and-comer Helio Castroneves finished second to his friend Tony Kanaan in the 1997 Indy Lights championship before joining Bettenhausen Motorsports for 1998. *(RMA/Levitt)*



Helio had a good year, scoring points in half the races and finishing a fine second at Milwaukee, but was beaten to rookie of the year by his pal and rival Tony Kanaan. *(RMA/Levitt)*



Tony in serious discussion with Castroneves in the pitlane at Japan's Motegi Speedway. *(RMA/Levitt)*



The Bettenhausen clan at Tony's home for Christmas. Standing left to right in back row: Wavelyn, Todd, Cary and Gary. Seated on the couch: Tony, Shirley, Webb, Valerie, Susan, Merle, Tracy and Ryan. Cross-legged at front: Bryn and Taryn. *(Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection)*



Christmas 1999 at Tony Jr.'s. Left to right: Gary, Tony, Valerie, Susan and Merle. *(Wavelyn Bettenhausen collection)*



Tony and Shirley's Christmas card from Aspen in 1999 with daughters Bryn and Taryn. *(Bettenhausen collection)*