

Editor's note: This is the final installment of a two-part series on NASCAR racing legend, and Suwannee County resident, Johnny "Speedy" Thompson.

Living legend raced with the best

FEB 1951 DAYTONA BEACH, FL
GRAND NATIONAL RACE

Johnny Thompson 1950 OLDSMOBILE



Johnny Thompson prior to his time trial run at the 1951 Grand National Beach Course race. A NASCAR official beside car is making sure it met race qualifications. Cars had to be stock right off the dealer showroom floor. Courtesy photos

Staff

As the 56th Daytona 500 heralds the coming of spring, race fans everywhere will be celebrating the great race that was born on 3.2 miles of sand and asphalt at the old beach course directly facing the Atlantic Ocean.

Johnny Thompson learned that course and each curve in it as he grew to become a legend of

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Johnny Thompson standing at the Living Legends Of Auto Racing Walk of Fame in Daytona.

'Speedy' Thompson started on the beach sands at Daytona

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NASCAR.

Johnny Thompson, who had driven short tracks in the Southeast, was about to undertake the premier challenge for race car drivers.



4th Annual Banquet
FEBRUARY 9, 2009



Johnny Thompson receives the prestigious "Glenn "Fireball" Roberts Hard Charger Award in 2009.

Courtesy photos

He had left what he called in his book the "cotton patch" and was now at "the race track". Drivers from across the United States made the trip to Daytona Beach for the event. In 1951, Thompson was one of 54 competitors vying for the \$1,000 purse.

"That was a lot of money then," he said.

Thompson drove a modified in his first appearance on the beach, anything goes as far as setting the car's suspension and engine components. This was a new experience for Thompson; he had never driven on sand and on a track the size of the beach course.

"I had the knowledge to drive," he said, "but not at that speed."

He qualified at 96 mph on a measured mile distance that set qualifying order.

"There was no practice," Thompson said. "Some years there would be 132 cars there."

According to Thompson, the length of the race depended on the tide.

"We raced each other and the tide," explained Thompson.

There were 145 cars in the race and Thompson finished 45th.

"To finish there you had to outrun 40 to 50 cars," he stated.

In 1952, Thompson came in 54th, having transmission problems. Out of 136 cars in 1954, Thompson finished 55th.

He was running against the top drivers of his day: Cotton Owens, Tim Flock, Fireball Roberts, Banjo Mathews and Marshall Teague. The year 1954 was Thompson's final trip to the beach. He qualified at

102.5, finished 26th out of 144 cars.

Beach racing was a different animal, according to Thompson.

"It was a wide beach. You could run 12 to 14 cars side-by-side down the straightaway, but when you got to the north turn, you had better be two-wide. That turn was the trouble spot. Drivers would try and force the issue by going more than two wide and end up in the sand dunes."

He went on to say that the A1A part of the track was only big enough for two cars.

"There was a red line painted across the track before the south turn," said Thompson. "It was a warning for the driver to put on the brakes to give them enough slow down time."

"One year, 17 of them piled up at the north turn. I missed it, but it looked like a junk yard," said Thompson.

There was also the issue of soft sand.

"If the sun was out, the sand got very mushy," said Thompson. "But, if it was

overcast, the course didn't lose its grip as badly."

Beach racing was not a good venue for spectators, maintained Thompson.

"You could only see the cars when they went by," he said.

Sand was also problematic for a competitor.

"When you get that many cars running on sand, it was hard to see the north turn coming at you," explained Thompson. "You had to look out the side window of the car to get a clear view of the turn. The sand hitting your face felt like needles."

Thompson raced five years on the beach.

In 2009 Thompson was awarded the prestigious Fireball Roberts Hard Charger.

"The award was given to me by Fireball's daughter," he explained.

The award is given for a driver's service and outstanding performance in racing. Thompson also has a memorial brick at the Living Legends of Auto Racing in Daytona. Drivers who raced the old beach course take precedence

over all others for induction.

Thompson's racing career lasted from 1947 to 1958 and he holds seven track records at the old Jacksonville Speedway. In 2013, Thompson received honors and was elected to the Racing's Hero's Historical Group for drivers who made their mark in racing history.

He received his certificate in recognition of the pioneering and the contribution he made to the sport of stock car racing in the early years.

His certificate reads "Memories Never Die As Long As There Are People That Remember and Keep History Alive".

Besides writing a book, Thompson also has written a poem, "The Last Race".

In one of the verses it reads:

"When I ride by that race track that stands on a hill; And I look at the oak trees that are standing there still; My mind will go back to the days of my past; And a smile will be formed on my lips at last."



Johnny Thompson
**NORTH TURN
DAYTONA BEACH, FL
1954**

Cars race through the infamous North Turn on Daytona Beach in 1954.