



Presents

A Brief History of Western States Super Modifieds 1949- 2025

All Photos by Dennis Mattish and Bob Mize ©

The history of the Super Modified, called by many the ultimate short track racing machine, is as diverse as any class of race car in the United States. Supers, as they are called, are largely home-built open wheel race cars with big engines, big wings and, in most cases, tube frames. Unlike other classes like Sprint Cars and Stock Cars, Supers across the country are not severely limited by rules dictating size, shape, weight or power plants. Instead they tend to reflect the region they are in. For this story I will only cover western Super Modifieds. Oswego Speedway, The Mecca of Super Modifieds, and other areas of the country have their own unique rules and history.

The evolution of the Super Modified had its humble beginning in 1949 with the introduction of the Hardtop, called that because of the mandatory steel roof.

Because of declining attendance in both the Midget and Roadster shows, Bob Barkhimer was looking for a solution to attract the crowds and make the speedway profitable again. He noticed that the Stock Cars were becoming popular in the eastern half of the country, so he went out and bought twelve old junkers and hired some drivers. Those junkers were called Hardtops. Barkhimer then formed the California Stock Car Racing Association (CSCRA), which sanctioned the races.



1950: The beginning of the evolution.

1949-1954



Without much fanfare, the Hardtops made their Saturday night debut in July. Dave Carter won the first race in front of a crowd of 1,600. He would control the rest of the season, winning four out of the last five races for a total of six on the year. Carter was crowned the first CSCRA champion.

The new division enjoyed modest success during its short first season but that would change and become a resounding success in the coming years.



1950



1950: Johnny Key



1956: Hardtops on the high banks of San Jose Speedway.



1955



1958

NASCAR Hardtop to Super Modified The Evolution 1954-1977



Bob Barkhimer and NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) had a dialogue going on for some time when they got together during the winter of 1954. Bill France, founder of NASCAR, and Barkhimer came to an agreement to allow NASCAR to sanction Barkhimer's tracks. His empire consisted of 21 tracks in California and Oregon. All were run under CSCRA sanction and were absorbed into the national organization, beginning a new chapter in West Coast auto racing history.

The first NASCAR race in the West took place on April 4, 1954, at San Jose Speedway. Al Gaetano won the rain-shortened race. On this same weekend, Johnny Key finished in fourth place during an AAA Sprint Car race in Dayton, Ohio. A month later, he was gone.

Three months after Johnny Key died in a racing accident in Ohio, a race in his honor called "Johnny Key Memorial" was

held. At 200 laps, this was the second longest Hardtop race ever held at San Jose. (The longest race was 500 laps held on Memorial Day in 1952. Ironically, Key had won that race.) Thirty drivers started the race with five gallons of gas, assuring at least one pit stop. The Annual Johnny Key Classic is still run to this day, 70 years later.

The evolution continued in 1958 as changes were made to the NASCAR Hardtops during the off-season. The cars were able to run unlimited multiple carburetors along with more cubic inches of displacement. Certain chassis changes were also allowed which made for better handling.

The next big rule changes in the evolution took place before the 1962 season which allowed for larger and more powerful engines and streamlined bodies.

1965: Further advancements were made to the Modified Hardtops during the off-season and the cars were now called Super Modified Hardtops.

1970: A new era in Super Modified racing greeted the start of the seventies. T-shirted drivers were nowhere in sight. All drivers wore mandatory fire-repellant racing suits that also made them look more professional. The cars continued to evolve into sleek, sophisticated, more powerful machines.

Bill Scott put a set of Indianapolis Championship Car Firestone tires on his Blue Goose Special Super Modified in 1970. He immediately set a track record. The following week, other drivers showed up at the track sporting the new tires.



1960: Kearney Bowl in Fresno, CA, featured NASCAR Modified Hardtops.



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Racing Begins 8:15 p.m.
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During the early 1960s the name was changed to Modified Hardtops.

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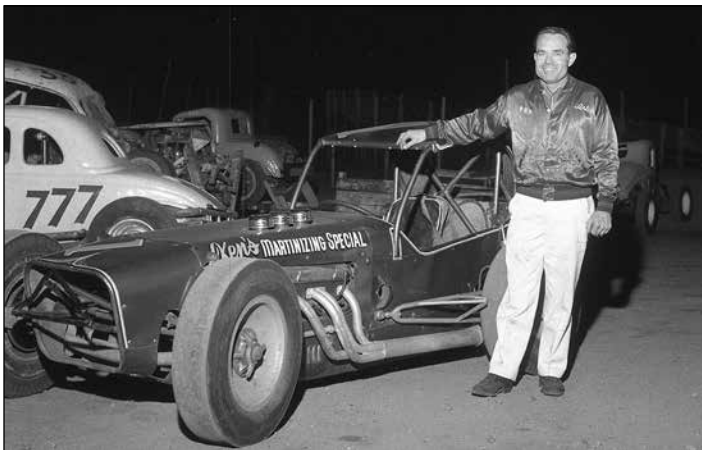
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In the mid-1960s the name changed once again to Super Modified Hardtops.



1963: NASCAR Modified Hardtops



The 1961 season ended at San Jose Speedway with the first-ever Open-Competition race. The rulebook was thrown out, and any type of race car (except Midgets) was allowed to race. Art Pollard brought this Super Modified down from Washington and set an all-time single-lap track record of 16.13. Pollard went on to have a successful career driving Indy Cars. It was clear at that time where the fastest cars were from. Bob Mize Photo courtesy of Don Mize



1964: Super Modified Hardtop



1967: NASCAR Super Modifieds



1969: Bill Scott Super Modified

1972: Burt Foland drove a Ford-powered Super Modified to victory, the first time in two decades a Ford had won in the premier division at the track.

1973: A new era in racing started this year, as mufflers were now required on all race cars.

1974: NASCAR made a rule change for the local speed plant during the winter. Up until now, the cars always raced to the yellow flag. For safety reasons, the new rule stated that everybody must slow down when the yellow is displayed and the scoring would resort to the previous lap.

A new association called the "Golden State Racing Association" (GSRA) held their first race in 1976. They were a breakaway group of disgruntled racers from San Jose Speedway whose apparent mission was to hurt NASCAR and Bob Barkhimer. This was a huge blow for San Jose Speedway, as all the top drivers and owners were part of that group. The damage done to local auto racing by the GSRA would take years to recover from. What they ultimately did was drive the final nail into the coffin of San Jose Speedway.



1972: San Jose Speedway. Bill Scott (5) in the "Blue Goose Special" races with Ernie Rose (10) and Jamie Hood (33).

The photos on this page show how beautifully the cars evolved since the Hardtop era.



1975: Quick Nick Rescino in the fastest car to ever turn a lap at San Jose Speedway. By the midseventies the cars were becoming more streamlined.

1977: The last race in San Jose Speedway history was set for September 3, 1977. A newspaper article printed during that final week stated "Joe Sunseri pointed out with justifiable pride that 17 of the 33 starters in this year's (1977) Indianapolis 500 once raced at San Jose."

The racetrack that was a proving ground for the big time was now a memory and so were the West Coast Pavement NASCAR Super Modifieds.



1970: Al Pombo was a dominant driver in the 1950s, 1960s & 1970s, winning 30 championships and countless main events at a variety of tracks.



1973: Bob Cetti in what was called the San Jose-style body.



1977: The end of an era in San Jose. The track was closing, and the straight up Super Modified engines would soon be moving to the left (offset).

The Canadian American Modified Racing Association (CAMRA) was formed in Spokane, WA, in 1962 and operated until 1984. The Association's goal was to standardize Super Modified rules among the racing clubs of the Pacific Northwest. Tracks in the circuit were located in Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and Canada. Some names of note who raced with CAMRA were: Tom & Jerry Sneva, Jim Malloy, Art Pollard, Ken & Davey Hamilton, Dick Simon and Roy Smith, along with many others.



Norm Ellefson (27) won over 35 main events with CAMRA, the most of any driver in that Association's history. That's Gary Patterson on the outside.



George Robertson won over 20 main events in CAMRA.



Jerry Sneva and the Pink Lady were a force in CAMRA.



Ken Hamilton

WRA

The International Drivers Challenge (IDC) was a Washington Racing Association (WRA) sanctioned Open Competition series run in Washington; Oregon; and B.C., Canada, from 1970 until 1976. There were about 45 IDC main events during an 8-year run. Roy Smith won the most. The WRA was in operation from 1970 to 1984.



Bill Deschamps won the IDC title in 1972.

SUPER MODIFIED OPEN COMPETITION

July 2-3

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¾ PAVED - SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

SANCTIONED BY WRA
(WASHINGTON RACING ASS'N)



Roy Smith won the most IDC main events.

Golden State/West Classic

1971-1975

The first Golden State Classic (GSC) was held in 1971. This series would develop into the biggest western states open competition series in history. A term used at that time was "run-what-you-brung," meaning just about any type of race car within reason was accepted. The smorgasbord included Super Modifieds, Sprint Cars, offset Roadsters, rear-engined cars, four-wheel-drive cars, Sprint Buggies, Modifieds, Indy Cars and Sportsmans. There was even a car with a blower on it - fast as hell down the straightaway, it didn't handle very well in the turns.

The cars and drivers came from New York, Ohio, Florida and other parts of the USA and Canada.

The series, which raced at four different tracks, was the brainchild of Dick Cinelli, who put up \$25,000 of his own money - a huge gamble, especially for a series held in November, the rainy season.

When the checkered flag fell on the series, it was the San Jose regulars who dominated, taking nine out of the top ten spots. Bill Scott won the first race and was crowned overall champion. Bob Seelman from

Michigan, driving the same Indy Car roadster that Troy Ruttman had raced in at Indianapolis in 1965, finished seventh, the only non-local to crack the top 10.

If people were wondering where San Jose Super Modifieds stood on the national level, this series answered that question.

1972: The second annual Golden State Classic grew in size and stature from the first year. A cast that reads like a who's who in American and Canadian short track auto racing converged on the Golden State. Twenty-three out-of-state drivers were in the San Jose pits for the second race of the series. Howard Kaeding led the local contingent in claiming the first nine positions in the main event. New York's Ollie Silva, who won the first race at Roseville, finished 10th. Nick Rescino won the second race at San Jose and claimed the series championship. The out-of-state drivers had a strong showing in the series this year, especially the rear-engine, four-wheel-drive cars driven by Todd Gibson and Armond Holly.

A great field of 84 cars were on hand at Altamont for the 1973 Classic with over 2,000 people in the stands. Roy Smith of Victoria, B.C., in his yellow Daffodil Special, held off the persistent challenges of Howard Kaeding to win the race. Nick Rescino's track record of 17.543 (102.603 mph) withstood the assault from the biggest field so far in the history of the track.



By the time the 1973 series reached San Jose for the final three races, Roy Smith from Canada had won at Altamont Speedway and Jerry McClees from Washington captured the Shasta Speedway (Anderson, CA) race.

Then tragedy struck the series. Returning from Redding, CA, in a Beachcraft Bonanza (a small private plane) were promoter Dick Cinelli, his wife Nancy (who was with child) along with her parents Glenn and Martha Kelly. The plane with the five passengers and the purse money from the Shasta Speedway race on board, was approaching Reid-Hillview airport in heavy overcast when the plane lost power and crashed near a residential area, killing all aboard and scattering money and plane parts over a wide area.

Super Modified driver Earl Kelly, who had just lost his parents, sister and brother-in-law in the crash, held a meeting the next day. With a very heavy heart, he authorized the continuance of the series as a tribute to his family. With the death of the key players, the Golden State Classic would emerge under a different name.

1974: Earl Kelly took control of the Golden State Classic, a series his brother-in-law and sister started, and renamed it the Golden West Classic. The format was the same but a dirt track (Clovis Speedway) was added to the series. It was thought that Sprint Cars would have an advantage on the dirt, but the top four cars were San Jose Speedway regulars.



1972: Ollie Silva, Massachusetts, was a legend in the New England/New York Super Modified scene.



1974: Todd Gibson, Richwood, OH, in the Flintstone Flyer rear engine Super Modified.

The Altamont race was by far the biggest single day event in track history (not counting the Rolling Stones concert), with a staggering 102 Open Comp cars checking into the pits and over 3,000 fans in the stands. Perhaps the most impressive performance by a race car and its driver in the history of Altamont Speedway took place that fall day. Jerry Sneva drove the Pink Lady Special to a dominating win when he lapped the field over an equally impressive and loaded field of Open Competition cars.

Dewayne Woodward won the only San Jose race. Woodward's win was the foundation for his winning the very competitive series.

Johnny Brazil won the 1975 championship in the very successful and competitive Open Wheel series, but the series held what would be their final race ever at Altamont Speedway that year.

Todd Gibson would power his rear engine Super Modified to victory over a 74-car field. Ironically, no Californians ever won the race at Altamont Speedway. The winners were Roy Smith, Canada (1973); Jerry Sneva, Washington State (1974); and Todd Gibson, Ohio (1975).



1974: A variety of Open Comp cars was on display during the GSC Trophy Dash. On the pole is Don Melvin in a Sprint Car. Next to him is Bobby Baker (42) in a Roadster. Row two is Todd Gibson (0) in a rear engine Super Modified. Next to him is Mike Damron (25) in a wedge-shaped Super Modified, and in the last row are the upright Supers of Roland Wlodyka (91) and Nick Rescino.



1973: Ron Neal, Ohio, in an early offset Super Modified. Note the blower on top of the engine.



1973: Jack Conely, Michigan, in the "Flying Chicken Coop."

With the death of NASCAR Pavement Super Modified racing at San Jose Speedway, Madera would also lose its sanction at the end of 1977. For the next two years there was no sanction for the division, and that caused dwindling car counts at the few tracks that still ran them. At the end of 1979, a small group of Super Modified owners and drivers got together and formed the Super Modified Racing Association (S.M.R.A.). Car counts immediately doubled. The S.M.R.A. was one of the few associations that allowed rear engine Super Modifieds.



1980-1994



1980: The SMRA rules were wide open allowing all types of cars (except Midgets) including rear engine.



1982: Everett Edlund won a pair of championships.



1982: Johnny Brazil (100), Ken Hamilton (98) and Dewayne Woodward.



1988: Madera Speedway



1992-1995

NSRA
1987-1993

In 1987, Curt Kern and Ed Williams started the Northwest Supermodified Racing Association (NSRA) after USAC quit sanctioning Supers in the Northwest region. In 1992 Kern formed the Western States Supermodified Tour (WSST) when the NSRA was becoming a Sprint Car only association.



1989: Davey Hamilton won the first 3 NSRA championships.

The United States Auto Club (USAC) had National and Regional Super Modified series from 1985 to 1989. In the western region, races were held at Mesa Marin (Bakersfield, CA), Las Vegas, PIR Copper World, Washington, Idaho and Utah.



Chuck Gurney won the 1985 National Championship.



Billy Vukovich won the 1987 championship and set a world speed record for Super Modifieds at PIR.



1985-1989



Ken Hamilton was the 1986 Champion.



1995-1999

The Western Super Modified Racing Association was formed in 1995 with the Supermodified Racing Association and Western States Super Modified Tour cars and drivers joining the new sanctioning body. Races were held in Arizona, California, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Colorado, Washington and an East vs West race in Indiana.



1996: WSMRA at Altamont.



Rebel Jackson Jr. dominated the series winning three of the five (1995, 1996 & 1997) WSMRA championships.

Indy Car driver Davey Hamilton founded and was the owner of the Supermodified Racing League. Races were held in Phoenix (Copper World), Oregon, Idaho and California. The series held 69 races in its history before being sold in 2005.



2000-2005



SRL at Altamont



Troy Regier dominated the SRL with 3 championships and 26 wins.



Lonnie Adamson was the 2002 and 2003 SRL champion.



2002: Altamont



Meridian Speedway has been the premier track in the Northwest featuring some of Super Modified's signature races, more specifically the Diamond Cup, Bob Naylor Classics and now the JP Super Modified Reunion Race.



2020: Meridian Speedway – Jim Birges (32), Diamond Cup winner.



2005: Meridian Speedway – Rick Veenstra (91) and Troy Regier (9) during the Diamond Cup.

Midway through the 2005 season, SRL owner Davey Hamilton sold the league to Rick Cameron. Rick renamed the series Western States Supermodified Racing League and hoped to take it to the next level. Unfortunately high costs and low car counts spelled doom for the WSSRL after a couple of years.



2006: Jeff Russell



2006: Rick Cameron owned the WSSRL.



2006-2007



2006: WSSRL at Altamont

The SMRA name was revived and grew from the defunct WSSRL. Only three tracks held races during the four-year run. The SMRA ceased operation in 2011 due to shortage of entries. It would be more than a decade before there would be another Super Modified sanctioning body in the West.

SMRA Part 2
2008-2011



2008: Madera Speedway



2008: Madera Speedway

Mark Pasquale created the Super Modifieds Speed Tour Series in 2023. The Speed Tour is a racing series committed to growing Super Modified racing in the western United States. The 2024 season had fields of 16 cars and a total of 26 different drivers. Races have been held in California, Idaho, Washington, Nevada and Oregon.



2023-2025



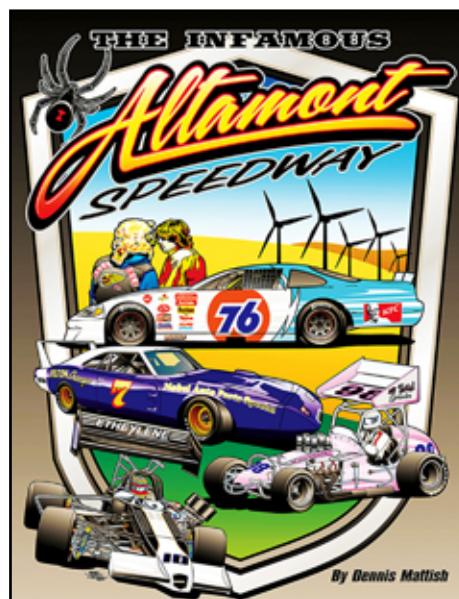
2024: Shasta Speedway



Bryan Warf won the 2023 Harvest Classic at Madera Speedway.



2023: Madera Speedway. Tim Skoglund (7H) and Justin Funkhouser (5F).



Check out this 300-page hard cover coffee table book which features Super Modifieds. Available on Amazon. More information can be found at: historysanjoseautoracing.com



2024: Kyle Vanderpool in the Mike Sargent Super Modified.