

# **2006 Inductee**

## **International Drag Racing Hall of Fame**

### **Arnie “the Farmer” Beswick**

While the nickname of “the Farmer” was a descriptive term given because he made his living as a farmer, Arnie “the Farmer” Beswick’s passion was racing and one that has lasted for over 50 years. Arnie got his start as a racer in 1951 at the wheel of a 1950 Oldsmobile Rocket 88 at an abandoned air strip used as a drag strip at Half Day, IL. He later moved up to a 1954 Olds Super 88 with which he dominated his class through the 1954-56 seasons winning the 1<sup>st</sup> World Series in Lawrenceville, IL followed by the 1<sup>st</sup> NHRA Nationals at Great Bend, KS in 1955.

In 1956 he switched to a 316 cubic inch Hemi powered Dodge D500-1 and followed that in 1957 with a 354 cubic inch Hemi Dodge D501. The mandatory 7 inch wide tire ruling and the very front heavy and high torque D500-1 proved very disappointing to “the Farmer”. The ‘56 D500-1, however, impressed a lot of people and turned a lot of heads. When the steering column transmission shift linkage stayed intact, the car had little competition from any of the other brands who thought they had the baddest of the bad when they lined up side by side at the track. In 1957, along with campaigning his Dodge, Arnie also helped one of his friends who was racing a ’57 Pontiac. Arnie was so impressed with that car that he decided to give that brand a try in 1958. The car really got Arnie off and running with Pontiacs as the car was a consistent winner with very little maintenance.

Arnie and his Pontiacs were very successful the following years when the Super Stock wars were starting to come into their own. These events were so successful, in fact, that many tracks made these Super Stock shoot outs their top featured event of the weekend, often paying quite sizeable payouts. This was when all of the major car companies were producing special performance models designed for drag racing and they were very comparable to each other in competition, which made for some very exciting racing.

If a Super Stock shoot out race in that time frame was well promoted and well advertised, one had little doubt that there would be a large crowd of spectators in attendance. If Arnie hadn’t made previous commitments to be elsewhere, he’d make every effort to be in attendance at these early Super Stock races and quite often would return home with many top place honors not only with his 1960 Super Duty Catalina, but also in each of the following years with his 1961, ‘62 and ‘63 Passionate Poncho 4-speed Super-Duty Pontiac models. He traveled extensively to the southeastern tracks where the largest purses were being paid, and most often, would come home with his fair share of 1<sup>st</sup> place money. If all the facts and figures could be accurately compiled it could probably be said that with the amount of miles traveled and his success rate in terms of the amount of money he brought home one would be hard pressed to come up with any other Super Stock driver to equal or better Arnie’s travel and track record in that 4-year time span.

Arnie won the 1<sup>st</sup> NHRA Winternationals event in Daytona Beach, FL with his newly purchased 1960 4-speed Pontiac that he actually drove to the event, from Morrison,

IL. This event was co-hosted with NASCAR this year, but both sanctioning bodies went their own way in 1961 with NASCAR continuing their Winternationl series in Daytona, while NHRA moved theirs to Pomona, CA. Arnie followed his 1960 Daytona NASCAR win with another win in 1961 and followed that with several others in the Super Stock A/FX and funny car classes in the following years.

Probably his most highly touted win from the race publication and print stand point came in 1964 when Ford showed up in considerable numbers with their newly released 427 cubic inch Thunderbolt and Mopar had many of their very successful 413 & 426 cross ram wedges as well as a few newly released Hemis. Beswick's '63 Super Duty LeMans coupe was the class of the field and legal skepticism was expected. After consecutive nightly wins at the Daytona weeklong drag event, he was frequently torn down after competition. Never discouraged, he managed to get things back together in time to do battle for the next night of competition, continuing to send all of the factory Ford and Mopar boys home talking to themselves more and more after each night of racing. Arnie brought three 1963 Super Duty Pontiacs to this event, the LeMans (that he drove), a Tempest station wagon (known as "The Grocery Getter") and a Catalina. A couple of his crew members piloted the wagon and the Catalina and were able to hold their own most of the nights in the class they were entered in. It was probably one of the biggest wins in terms of cash and merchandise in Arnie's entire career, as he even won a new Ford convertible for his week of wins in the A/FX shootout.

A few months following this event, Arnie captured the Drag News #1 Mr. Stock Eliminator title and held it until Drag News changed the format as funny cars were starting to take over the spot light.

Earlier in 1963, at another well promoted, well publicized event that drew practically every top name A/FX or B/FX driver in the country, Arnie and his "Grocery Getter" wagon won A/FX and managed to pull off a B/FX win as well with his '63 Catalina. The event was called the Drag News Invitational and was hosted by the largest weekly drag publication of the time "Drag News". Arnie also received lots of magazine publicity from that event, however, the purse payout was sizably smaller than the Daytona Beach one.

Arnie did well for the most part throughout the 1964 A/FX season, but with the factory support from Ford and Chrysler, wins came fewer and fewer as the year progressed. It was early 1965 when Mercury approached Arnie about driving one of the OHC Comets and joining their factory team. Talk of the 1965 Mopar altered wheelbase machines being built had already started the race community a humming in late 1964. Beswick reasoned that corporate competition from Ford would be the only way for him to have a chance of winning against the altered wheelbase Mopar Hemis. After considerable discussions with Ford, Arnie finally agreed to sign with them.

Ford and Mercury reassured him, that they were quite positive the racing association people would not put a stock wheelbase car in the same class as an altered wheelbase. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way and the next thing you know it was a big free for all - a run what you brung kind of environment at every track that Arnie went to. Ford was adamant about not allowing their drivers to move the wheelbases on their overhead cam race machines and in the same breath - would not allow their drivers to run against the altered wheelbase Mopars, in hopes of getting the race associations to see it their way and put the altered wheel base cars in a class of their own. Unfortunately, that

never happened. Out of sheer disappointment, after only a few months filled with long waits due to the unavailability of engine parts and having someone constantly telling him who he could or could not race against, Beswick abandoned the Comet and happily returned to Pontiac.

Additionally, when GM had pulled out of racing in early 1963 all the popular GM drivers jumped ship to Ford and Mopar, leaving very few to run under any kind of GM banner. The track promoters were frantic to bring in a competitive GM racer to match against the field of Fords and Chryslers that were showing up and “the Farmer” and his Pontiacs were able to fill that bill. What General Motors lacked in new parts and pieces, because of their complete shut down of high performance engine development, Arnie was able to make up for with his revolutionary innovations. This also kept the promoters constantly hounding him to bring his Pontiacs to their tracks.

In late 1964, Arnie had already installed a blower on his GTO, as he always wanted to see what a supercharged engine would do in a stock-bodied sedan. Little did he know when he put this potent combination together that in the following year the track operators would be ringing his phone off the hook to have that lone GTO taking on many of the factory Ford and Mopar machines. Many weeks he traveled to as many as four – sometimes even five different track locations trying to keep up with the track operator’s invitations. It was a hectic schedule beyond anything even Arnie could comprehend.

During this early 1965 time frame he was credited with being the 1<sup>st</sup> person driving a stock bodied car of breaking the 9-second bracket and followed this a few months later by being the 1<sup>st</sup> to break into the 8-second bracket, at the same time trying to pioneer the newly released GM Turbo 400 transmission so that it would hold the torque and propel the weight of a full bodied, high horsepower car. Many times Arnie’s crew would replace the transmission after each run because they knew from earlier experiences, it would never make a 2<sup>nd</sup> pass down the track.

During his career, Arnie campaigned cars in S, SS, A/FX and in 1964 S/FX with his supercharged injected aluminum front-end GTO. While campaigning this ’64 “Mystery Tornado” in the S/FX wars he was most often being pitted against the altered wheelbase Mopar entries. He knew that the altered wheelbase feature offered a sizeable starting line advantage. Since Mercury hadn’t kept him competitive and the GTO was a relatively heavy car, he knew he would have to build a similar machine to the acid dipped ultra light weight Mopars to continue to be competitive.

The decision was made to use his ‘63 LeMans coupe and make a wheelbase change on that car. He also decided at the same time to install a supercharged fuel injected motor. The wild orange and black striped paint scheme that finished this monster mirrored the “tiger” theme that Pontiac was using with their new GTO sales pitch. Arnie’s fearless driving style along with the car’s ability to make many of its runs on the rear bumper, made the “Tameless Tiger” a widely known name across the land as well as one of the most talked about entries at any race event it entered. Although the car didn’t win as consistently as it did in the earlier A/FX trim, it was certainly as much or more of a conversation piece during and long after it left the race event.

Arnie and his team continued their unbelievably hectic schedule throughout the entire 1965 through 1970 time frame with his many different Pontiac race machines. In 1966, Arnie put together his 1<sup>st</sup> all fiberglass stock bodied entry, a ‘66 GTO. This car was followed by his 1<sup>st</sup> one-piece flip-top entry, a 1968 GTO. In 1969 he was able to put

enough funds together to purchase his 1<sup>st</sup> professionally built funny car, a 1969 GTO Judge funny car entitled “The Super Judge”, created by the Logghe Chassis Company in Detroit, MI. In 1971, Arnie elected to go to a smaller fiber glass styling for his next funny car ride, which would be a body molded from the new released 1971 Firebird/Trans Am, which Arnie affectionately named, “Boss Bird”.

Most of his competition had already changed to the much smaller and lighter weight bodies in the brands they were representing. The new Firebird body was made so it could be mounted on the frame previously used by “The Super Judge”. By this time, the Hemi Mopars and OHC Fords were so strong he needed every kind of edge he could find in hopes of being competitive.

Another problem Arnie was having – the supply of Pontiac Super Duty blocks and cranks had about dried up to a point they were about non-existent and if one could be found it was priced out of any reasonable price range. This was the only block and crank that would begin to hold up under the supercharger and the nitro-methane power boost potential. Trying to keep up with the 75 to 100 events a year schedule, Arnie knew he could only fix and patch for so long before the reliability factor was totally out the window as Arnie had already experienced what could happen if you attempted to make one too many runs with a cracked crank in the motor.

Arnie’s first stop after the ‘71 Firebird “Boss Bird” was finished, was the 1971 Daytona Winternationals. He was racing his all new Firebird in the funny car shoot out, finding out his new lighter and more aerodynamic ride was running very competitive with the rest of the field, crossing his fingers each run that the motor would hang in there and make it through to the end of the week without any serious breakage.

During one of the first nights of competition, out of the clear blue, a surprising happening took place. Arnie was approached by an individual who was telling of all of the problems he was experiencing while trying to get his 1971 Dodge Challenger funny car down the track. He spoke of blowing several engines in an attempt to make a decent pass but to all no avail. The gentleman told Arnie, that he had reached a point where he was broke and to his wits end with the car. He had followed Arnie’s racing career for many years and had high respect for what Arnie had accomplished throughout his career, and would be honored to let Arnie use his Challenger if Arnie would have any thoughts of accepting the offer. After hearing the offer, Arnie had to pinch himself several times to be sure he was not dreaming or maybe hearing things. He even asked his pit crew people if they heard the same words, as they were standing near by.

This offer was made to Arnie on the 1<sup>st</sup> night of the week-long race event. Arnie asked the gentleman to think about the offer he made and that Arnie would do the same. Each night of the week’s race, this same gentleman would show up and hang out in Arnie’s pit area repeating the same offer he made to Arnie on the first night. Arnie was informed that if he would furnish the motor and the clutch, the car owner would furnish the body, rolling running gear and transmission. After hearing the same offer all week, Arnie knew this guy had to be serious and Arnie didn’t need to hear it again. Arnie no longer had any doubt in his mind that this gentleman was for real, and Arnie was ready to go for it and put the wheels into motion.

Within a matter of a couple of weeks and some used pieces from his friend, Don Schumacher, Arnie and the Challenger were ready for their 1<sup>st</sup> ride. It didn’t take many passes to dial everything in and Arnie was back in his winning form. He even managed to

set several track ET and mph records in the following months before a newly constructed shop burnt to the ground destroying all of Arnie's race cars (including the recently finished "Boss Bird"), all of his spare parts, two race car haulers, and most of his farm machinery.

Luckily, the Challenger was not in the building, but the complete motor was, as it was being prepared for the next race event. The Challenger was getting paint work done at a local body shop, but with no motor or spare parts, Arnie returned the Challenger back to the owner with only memories left of a beautiful and unbelievable offer that for his part, Arnie could now no longer hold up his end of the deal. Unfortunately, the severity of the fire put Arnie out of the race business for many years to come, as he now had to concentrate on finding a way to replace his farm machinery so he could keep that part of his livelihood afloat.

It was in 1986, after constant encouragement from many fans around the country and with the help of a long time friend furnishing a rolling body, Arnie was able to return to the track. This time the car was a carbureted 455 cubic inch Pontiac-powered 1963 Tempest. He quickly became a part of the nostalgia "Blast from the Past" touring group. After a few months of testing the waters, he realized there was a huge fan response to the nostalgia craze, so Arnie began gathering parts and pieces to build his own recreation of the '63 LeMans "Tameless Tiger". This time around and with today's better tires, he elected not to alter the wheelbase. Once his new creation was up and running the popularity and demand for this latest car far surpassed any idea of what he could have ever imagined it might possibly be.

In addition to being featured on the cover of countless magazines and in the editorial pages of these magazines and the racing papers along with his string of records and his class wins, in 1995 Arnie was one of the first inductees into the Super Stock/Drag Illustrated Magazine Hall of Fame and was named one of America's best drivers, along with several NASCAR and Indy Racing League personalities, at the National Driving Championship dinner in Chicago the same year. 2002 marked 50 plus years of competing in the sport by Arnie and even though he nearly destroyed his latest "Tameless Tiger" 64 GTO Pro Nostalgia racer in a horrific, fiery explosion after he crossed the finish line at a Wentzville, MO track in August of 2003, he is presently rebuilding it and plans to compete with it again in 2006.

As an innovator and leader in the automotive racing arena, Arnie Beswick has achieved unparalleled success in the high profile sport of drag racing. Today he is recognized by fans the world over as not only a legendary racing figure, but the man we all know as Arnie "the Farmer" Beswick.