



national sprint car hall of fame



tony Elliott



PHOTO CREDIT: PAUL ARCH

by Kevin Oldham

Old black and white racing photographs have a knack for speaking volumes without a word ever being whispered. One outstanding example exists from the summer of 1970 in which a nine-year-old Tony Elliott is standing beside his father Jim, who had just captured the Warsaw Speedway season championship for Sprint Cars. Wearing a million-dollar smile, anyone eyeing that image could easily conclude that racing had already seeped into the young lad's system and he was destined to follow his father's footsteps in every way imaginable. Effectively articulating Tony's entire life story, that one photo does indeed say a lot.

Shortly after that photo was snapped, Jim Elliott's oldest son was given a go-kart and as thrilled as he was to finally get his start, one can only imagine the amount of devastation when learning that his ultimate idol had been fatally injured on a motorcycle in the spring of 1973. Father of three, proprietor of Elliott's Auto Service, and a three-time Warsaw Sprint Car champion (1970-1972), sadly the senior Elliott still had so much more living yet to do.

Losing a father and mentor might curb the enthusiasm of any normal human, but Tony was anything but normal and obstacles only made him more determined to succeed. His mother was forced to work two jobs and she could not possibly keep pace with her son's insatiable racing desire. She frequently trusted him with the family station wagon, even though he was several years shy of holding an Indiana driver's license. He stacked phone books on the seat and longtime ally Roger Brandon and he made numerous trips to the North Webster go-kart track on their own, often coming home with the trophy. Clearly, nothing was going to stand in Tony's way of continuing his family's racing legacy.

After befriending classmate Bimbo Atkins, Bimbo's father plucked a nice-looking Nova from his used car lot and allowed Tony to take the wheel for his initial Warsaw Speedway street stock campaign in 1976. After tiring of tin tops he saved enough funds to acquire an old spring-front chassis from Kermit House, cutting his Sprint Car teeth at the tender age of 17. Naming his first Sprinter the CB special for high school sweetheart Cindy Boling

(whom he would marry 23 years later), through the guidance of fellow racer and now stepfather Jerry Priest he began to open some eyes.

One of those watching with interest was legendary car owner Paul Hazen, who had employed Tony's father for those Warsaw championship seasons. After years of being pestered for a ride, Paul finally caved in to Tony's requests in 1982. The younger Elliott was clearly up to the task and won almost immediately and took second in Warsaw season points. On the strength of five feature wins, one year later an Elliott was once again a Warsaw champ in the Hazen 57. It wasn't long until this dynamic duo became the dominant force on the local Indiana wingless scene and collected Kokomo crowns in 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1995 while also winning Gas City championships in 1987 and 1988. As a teenager, Tony routinely hustled adults in games of pool but now he was beating them on the track, accumulating far more Indiana victories than anyone else during his initial eight-year stint with Hazen.

Although his dad had begun making the Elliott name nationally recognizable, Tony took it to the extreme. Not the least intimidated by a Sheldon Kinser scolding or a big Bob Kinser swing, in only his second USAC start, Tony finished fourth at Bloomington in the fall of 1982. The next year, he was third in his second-ever Eldora outing. Knocking on the door to that initial USAC Sprint Car score for five seasons, he finally kicked it in after nipping Steve Butler in a live ESPN telecast from Santa Fe Speedway in August of 1987. He followed up with another nail-biter over Jack Hewitt at the Four Crown later that year, Tony Elliott's immense talent was no longer a secret.

Amid such rampant success, Junior Braga made his Midget available for Santa Fe while Kenny Jarrett requested his services for a 1985 Oklahoma City Silver Crown contest. The following year, Joe Conroy called him for Four Crown Champ Car duty and, much like Hazen, Conroy became another father-figure, offering nine years of Sprint and Silver Crown seat time. Although pavement was not his forte,

Tony and Joe took third at the Little 500 in 1995 and 1998, also winning 1993 asphalt assignments at Charlotte County (All Stars) and Berlin (USAC). Extending his influence westward, Tony subbed for Rick Ungar in Tom Wimmer's 7 and finished fifth in the CRA portion of the '87 Western World. And, when Paul Hazen could not commit to the '89 Four Crown, he joined Johnny Vance for Sprint and Silver Crown chores. After securing second in the Vance Sprinter, a few weeks later he broke two vertebrae in his neck during the Eldora All Star finale. Although far less serious than his father's loss of an eye at Bryan, Ohio, in the fall of '71, this was Tony's first of two significant racing injuries.

Bouncing back for Florida All Star action in 1990, he was suddenly calling the shots on Terry Winterbotham's team. He moved to Indianapolis to room with Kevin Thomas, and when not enjoying Indy's night life, he maintained the machine out of a trailer that was stationed at the shops of Galen Fox, Steve Stapp, and Jim McQueen, allowing him to pick the brains of the sport's most mechanically-minded. In a season filled with winged warfare, he stayed true to his roots by winning yet another Kokomo Speedway track championship.

The early 1990s were all about change for Tony. After years of selling cars in Warsaw and Indianapolis, he opened Elliott's Auto Connection in Kokomo and like his father became a responsible businessman. Marrying the former Elayne Haudenschield in 1991, he also moved to Dick Newkirk's Sprint Car. Because that ride was reserved for special shows, he filled the gaps with Ralph Potter's Midget, finishing a close second in 1992 USAC Midget points while securing the car owner's crown for Ralph. He notched four USAC victories with Newkirk from 1991 through 1994, one of them came at the '93 Four Crown, another at Santa Fe, and two at Kokomo.



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Tony Elliott

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When not digging for USAC gold, Elliott could be found at Lincoln Park and Kokomo, the only two venues in the country where wingless action still reigned supreme. His countless combats with Kevin Thomas and Dave Darland reignited interest in a sport that many had considered dead. To this day, fans wax nostalgically about those glory days of the "Big Three" and thanks to Tony's performances in the late 1980s and early 1990s, traditional Sprint Car racing still exists.

Using the 1993 off-season to mend a broken back suffered in a Hanford CRA spill, by the end of '94 he had reunited with Hazen. Not missing a beat, their 1995 tour contained ten wins and yet another USAC score at Kokomo. Although a 1996 foray with Dick Fuller netted yet another Kokomo USAC conquest, Hazen was waiting in the wings when the wheels fell off the Fuller wagon midway through the campaign. Aborting his 1997 Midget title attempt with Chuck DeCrane and parting ways with Paul for the final time in July, car owner Jeff Walker came to the rescue. Lifelong friends, Jeff's father Don was Jim Elliott's primary Warsaw rival, so the two had truly been tied at the hip for decades.

They immediately performed in a pressure-packed, expanded version of Indiana Sprint Week and finished inside of the top-five in five of seven contests. Their instant chemistry was undeniable, making for a magical seven and a half seasons that ultimately raised the traditional Sprint Car bar for both winning and having fun. A harbinger of things to come, they began 1998 with a potent Stealth/Claxton combination and blitzed the field at the Beaver Dam USAC opener. Elliott was clearly in the zone for 1998, as the venue, machine, and surface simply did not matter. If it had wheels, he found a way to win. One incredible stretch came in early July when he won seven races in eight attempts, beginning with his first Silver Crown score at the Sumar Classic and ending with four wins at Kokomo's Wolverine Nationals, two of those Kokomo conquests coming in a Midget while the other pair were captured in winged and wingless Sprints. Tallying 22 victories in his dream season, five of them fell under the USAC Sprint Car banner and propelled him to his first National Championship over Kevin Thomas in one of the most heated combats in series history.

Also a Kokomo Speedway champion in 1998, he repeated that feat for the eighth and final time in 1999. After an estimated 60 Kokomo victories, Tony was the all-time king of the former flat quarter-mile configuration. Although he failed to defend his USAC title in '99, an

Indiana Sprint Week championship, Ted Horn 100 triumph, and a double-digit win total proved that he had not lost his touch. Dueling with Jay Drake for the 2000 USAC Sprint Car championship, Tony's consistency helped secure his second crown in three years and he also won the prestigious Hoosier Hundred. Victories in a variety of disciplines were still plentiful from 2001 to 2004, including six more USAC Sprint Car wins, a second Hoosier Hundred in '01, another Sumar in '02, the World 50-lap Midget contest at Western Springs in '02 and the Western World Championship at Manzanita in '03.

But, all good things must come to an end and the Elliott and Walker combination had run its course after 2004. This led Tony to briefly attempt a 2005 All-Star assault, returning to his Hoosier home for sporadic Sprint Car rides through the 2007 season. However, it soon became apparent that something was missing, as a shift in the local Indiana Sprint Car culture had eliminated the fun, camaraderie, and shenanigans that Tony had relished, much like his father. Choosing to limit his participation to the most personally rewarding events, the Chili Bowl and Little 500 topped his list. Although he never did claim a Little 500 victory, he did finish second in 2008 and is among the leaders in all other statistics. He is tied for fourth in starts (22) and tied for fifth in top-fives (seven) and top-tens (nine). He is also third in laps completed (7,690) and tied for sixth in laps led (1,059).

He finished with 40 USAC National victories (26 Sprint, nine Midget, and five Silver Crown), two USAC National Championships, 11 Indiana Sprint Car track championships and hundreds of feature wins. He will be revered as one of open wheel racing's most diverse talents and colorful personalities. Remaining intimately involved in the sport through his booming custom trailer and golf cart business, the same old Tony could be seen at all major events, having the time of his life. With his mind always at work in pulling the next prank or crafting a lucrative business deal, he was brimming with energy, living every day like it was his last. He was forever in search of the next great time. Unfortunately, it all came to a tragic conclusion when the small airplane in which he was a passenger crashed in stormy weather bound for an October 2015 Notre Dame/Clemson football game.

Taken from this earth far too soon at the age of 54 and a father to five children, Tony Elliott, like his own father Jim, also had a lot of living yet to do. Looking back at that photo from the summer of 1970, I'm not sure anyone could have possibly known just how much meaning it would hold but it did indeed speak volumes about the man he would eventually become. Like father like son, the apple definitely did not fall far from the Elliott tree.



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