

Lanny Edwards

by Galen Kurth

"I get up every morning at 5 a.m. and I work seven days a week." That's Lanny Edwards' life, his recipe for success, and apparently, his secret for happiness. Edwards hit the ground running in Childress, Texas, in 1936 and hasn't stopped since.

The family moved to Lawton, Oklahoma, when he was young and he soon found work. "When I was nine years old, I had two worm stands on the highway. I hired five older guys to dig worms for me. I had to be open at four a.m. to catch the fisherman and sell 'em for ten cents a dozen. I'd sell the rest to a worm farmer who couldn't raise enough." That kind of work ethic has led Edwards to succeed in numerous businesses, and enabled him to be a successful racing promoter for 46 years.

He saw his first race at Lawton when he was ten years old. Around 1956, he started driving stock cars. "I had a flathead Ford, then a Hudson. My father realized that weight was the important thing, and he built some light cars. I won a lot in those things."

In 1962, Lawton promoter Bill Smith was threatening to pull Lanny's class of cars because they supposedly weren't drawing well. That Labor Day, Edwards promoted his first race, a street stock and factory stock show that packed the house. "A man who traded at my service station, Weldon Smith, told me the track was for sale, and since I'd done such a good job promoting the Labor Day deal, I ought to buy it. They wanted \$15,000 for the improvements, and I didn't have that kind of money, so Weldon and I went together on it. Then, in 1964, we bought the Wichita Falls Speedway."

Lanny bought out Smith's interest in 1969 and sold the Wichita Falls track. In 1972, he purchased the Devil's Bowl in Dallas and entered the busiest time of his life. "In 1978, I had Battleground Speedway in Houston, Ennis, Amarillo, Lawton and Devil's Bowl. I worked harder that year than I ever had, and made less money. Matter of fact, I think we lost money that year."

By the mid-eighties, he'd sold Amarillo and Battleground, but he'd also promoted at Daytona Beach, Florida, I-70 Speedway in Missouri, and numerous other tracks. "When you just go into an area to promote and you don't live there, you don't know all the people and it's a lot tougher."

Edwards was also busy with the National Championship Racing Association (NCRA), which he helped found in 1971. "G.W. Elkins from Amarillo was talking about it, and he and Bud Carson and I got the thing started. We had twelve tracks, and each would have one 'national' race a year. Then we, the promoters, got greedy. We wanted more shows. We also lost a lot of our stars, like Emmett Hahn, Frankie Lies and Harold Leep. After a while it just wasn't working as well anymore."

About that same time, Lanny was approached by Ted Johnson about "doing something like the NCRA with sprint cars. The NCRA ran supermodifieds in those days. "I told Ted to try putting on a few shows, so in 1976, we put on a race in Shreveport, Louisiana. I did a few at the Devil's Bowl, and in March of 1978, we did the first real World of Outlaws (WoO) race at the Devil's Bowl.

We ran two days, the first without wings, then with wings." Television found the WoO, and the Devil's Bowl, in 1980. "NBC came in, and it was quite a production. We didn't have enough lights, so we had to run a Sunday afternoon show.

They filmed it, and then gave it to The Nashville Network to air."

Edwards still isn't sure that was a good thing, and he sees television as one of the major problems a short track promoter faces these days. "Television is keeping more and more people home, and it's taking all the sponsors. NASCAR is always on TV, and it has all the big sponsors. A local or regional show is left with just the little guys. It's just a lot harder now to pay the bills."

That, by the way, is the first thing Edwards tells anyone thinking of promoting a race track. "You've got to keep the overhead down and pay the bills. You can't just out pay the guy down the road and hope to stay in business." Most racetrack owners, he points out, own other businesses. "Forty seven race tracks closed down last year. It's just really tough. You can't make a living off owning a

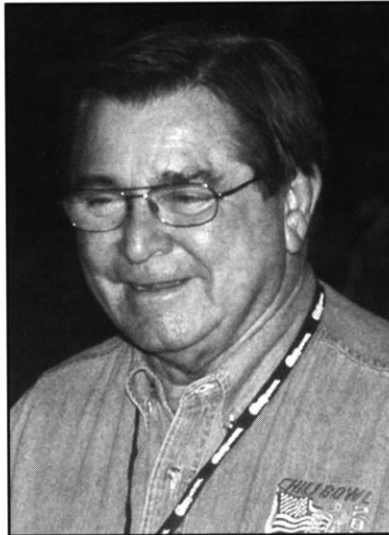
local race track." There aren't any secrets to success. "You just keep plugging, keep promoting. One thing I do is let the fans know I appreciate them."

Every spring, his tracks in Dallas, Lawton and Oklahoma City have nights when fans from different surrounding towns are admitted free. "After a Texas night at Lawton," Edwards recalled, "I had a man stop me, and he said 'I've been coming to your races from Wichita Falls every week for 21 years, and I appreciate what you're doing.' Here's a man who's supported me for 21 years, and the least I can do once a year is show I appreciate him. Promoters are missing the boat if they don't give back."

His other advice? "Don't ever try to cheat someone, and don't belittle anyone. You're not better than anybody else."

No one can talk about Lanny Edwards without mentioning the Chili Bowl Midget Nationals, one of the most successful racing promotions in history. The annual four-day extravaganza fills the International Petroleum Exposition (IPE) building in Tulsa every January, selling out as soon as tickets come available. The first Chili Bowl, co-promoted by Lanny Edwards and Emmett Hahn, lost \$18,000. "Bob Berryhill bailed us out and sponsored the first few years 'til it took off, and look at it now. It was fun back then, and it's still fun today. I've gotten to meet people like Rich Vogler, Billy Boat, Sammy Swindell, so many others... and now we're into the second generation. Incredible."

The Edwards promotional family is into its second generation as well. His twins, Monty and Marcy, run Lawton Speedway while son Lanny Ross handles the weekly shows at the Devil's Bowl. He and Beverly, his wife of fifty years, oversee the Oklahoma City track most Friday nights. In his spare time, if you will, Edwards also runs a truck driving school, a welding service, and several other businesses. The 2002 Racing Promotion Monthly (RPM) Promoter of the Year doesn't have to promote races, but he still enjoys it and he's still good at it, so he's planning to just continue to get up at five a.m. and keep after it, to keep promoting.



Bill Fries Photo

