

# NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL of FAME & MUSEUM

## RALPH CAPITANI

Ralph Capitani was born in 1932 and attended high school at Des Moines (Iowa) Dowling. In the early 1950s, "Cappy" excelled as a fullback at the Iowa State Teachers College, now known as the University of Northern Iowa, in Cedar Falls.

During the 1960s, he moved to Knoxville (Iowa) to coach football at the high school, home of the Panthers, and teach government/civics.

Ralph started part-time work at the Marion County Fairgrounds in Knoxville in 1967 as Marion County Fair Association (MCFA) Secretary. It is during this time that he gained a broad knowledge of the workings of the fair association, from agriculture (4-H, FFA, implement shows) and amusements (carnivals, auto racing, concerts) to zoology (rodeos, livestock shows).

In 1978, coincidentally the same year that Ted Johnson started the World of Outlaws (WoO) sanctioning body, Ralph started his tenure as Knoxville Raceway's Director of Racing. In that capacity, he followed Marion Robinson, who initiated the Knoxville Nationals in 1961, and P. Ray Grimes.

However, Ralph has made it clear that he is not a 'promoter' in the rich midwestern tradition of showmen like J. Alex Sloan, Frank Winkley or Al Sweeney. He is, in fact, a very modest individual who doesn't take much credit but who is very much in touch with the needs and wants of grass-roots fans. Ask him what makes Knoxville Raceway so special and he'll tell you its because he has the greatest group of officials in the world and a fairboard that keeps reinvesting in its facility.

During the past 16 years, Capitani has acted as a visionary for the track, in particular, and the sport, in general. His visions for the half-mile dirt track have run along two lines. First, he wanted to strengthen the race track's weekly (Saturday night) racing program. Second, he wanted to dramatically increase the size and stature of the legendary track's premier event, the sport's national championship: the mid-August Knoxville Nationals.

His goals, shared by the MCFA, that have been reached at Knoxville Raceway since 1978 and have improved the weekly racing shows include:

- improved facilities (grandstands, concessions, restrooms, parking, p.a., guardrails/catch fences)
- increased purses for competitors
- increased sprint car counts
- added entry-level, limited (360 c.i.) sprint car division in 1983

- increased driver/owner point funds (race night sponsors)
- expanded television coverage (weekly regional cable show, national highlights)
- improved safety conditions (better equipped fire and rescue team, mandatory safety equipment)
- increased diversity of schedule (non-wing sprint, late model, modified, vintage events)
- increased strength of schedule (11 nights of WoO)
- adopted fair and consistent rules enforced by competent and professional officials
- increased local, regional, national advertising and marketing
- initiated Knoxville Raceway Hall of Fame in 1979

- improved ticketing procedures
- increased seating capacity (19,000+ in 1994)
- initiated Rookie of the Year Award in 1980

For all of the above reasons, the Knoxville Nationals was named the inaugural recipient of the National Speed Sport News "Outstanding Annual Short Track Event" award by Racing Promotions Monthly (RPM) in 1989.

Finally, his accomplishments that have improved the sport of sprint car racing include:

- initiated National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum in 1985 (suites, museum/Hall of Fame)
- initiated National 360 Sprint Car Council (standardization of rules) in 1993

The visions that have been realized and have improved the Knoxville Nationals event

Time has shown that Cappy and his employer, the 24-member Marion County Fairboard, are a good match. Not unlike the different branches of our government, they provide a system of checks and balances which allows Knoxville Raceway and the Marion County Fair Association to experience steady growth.

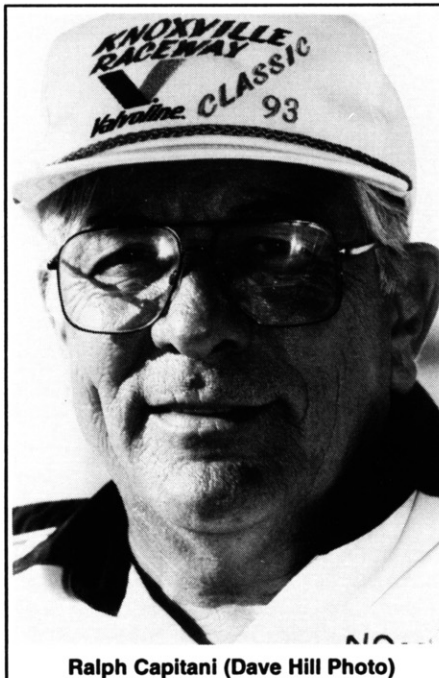
None of his visions would have become reality without the conservative and fiscally-responsible nature of the fairboard. Not to mention their spirit of volunteerism. And because of their efforts, the Marion County Fairgrounds, due to its state-of-the-art facilities, is poised to be a regional fair site in the event of a state-wide consolidation of county fairs in Iowa.

It also should be noted that without office manager Arleta Voyce organizing and documenting the details of his plans, none of them would ever even make it to the race committee, let alone the full fairboard for approval.

In 1969, Capitani gave up coaching high school football and athletic administration work because of his responsibilities at the track. And in 1992, the 1983 RPM "Promoter of the Year" retired from teaching and became a full-time employee of Knoxville Raceway.

Cappy has been voted the National Sprint Car Poll's "Promoter of the Year" on three occasions (1985, 1990, 1991) and has consistently been named one of the poll's top three most powerful leaders in the sport (with Ted Johnson and Earl Baltus) since its inception. Ralph Capitani has also recently been inducted into the Midwest Racing Hall of Fame.

Ralph and Marilyn Capitani, who have three sons (Steve, Dave and John), live in Knoxville, a town in which Cappy envisions as having a "gasoline alley" race-related industrial development complex by the year 2000.



Ralph Capitani (Dave Hill Photo)

include:

- increased purse (1977: \$4,500-to-win, \$40,000 purse, 1985: \$25,000-to-win, \$165,000 purse; 1995: \$100,000-to-win, \$500,000 purse)
- increased entries (1977: 120+; 1993: 180+)
- increased international status (Australian/American Challenge Cup)
- added tape-delayed national television coverage (The Nashville Network) in 1988
- added live national radio coverage in 1992
- added corporate hospitality tents (manufacturers midway)