

WALTER E. BULL

by Larry Ball, Jr.

With the advancements made in the area of electronic media, we now more than ever live in an information age. A driver leading a feature at Chico can have a tire go down, and the world knows about it before the car is back to the pits. A young driver can record his first feature win at Williams Grove and we have the story complete with photos within hours. Other than the occasional radio broadcast or newsreel, sports pages and racing papers were the only source of information for individuals hungry for news during the early part of the twentieth century. Some may have relied on *Horseless Age*, *Motor Age* or *Automobile* for information. Others may have looked to *National Speed Sport News*. After May of 1938, many would look to *Illustrated Speedway News* as their source of weekly racing information. On May 7, 1938, Walter E. Bull published the first issue of *Illustrated Speedway News* from offices located at 331 St. Nicholas Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

Walter Bull was born November 23, 1901, in Manhattan, 37 years before the first issue of *Illustrated Speedway News* hit the presses. How Walter became interested or involved in racing is unclear, as he is listed as a beauty parlor manager in the 1930 United States Federal Census. Walter's first involvement with racing appears to have been in a publicity role. In 1936, he would work for Walter Stebbins who promoted midgets at the Madison Square Garden Bowl. After working for Stebbins, Walter turned up at the Cross Bay Speedway (also known as Ozone Park) in Queens as the announcer for the weekly "big car" events. He would retain this position until starting the paper in 1938.

The *Illustrated Speedway News* was published every week throughout the year, and claimed to be devoted to auto racing, impartial, and not affiliated with any track nor racing association. The paper was five cents a copy in 1938, and a subscription was \$1 for the year. By 1939 the subscriptions were \$2 per year, and the paper boasted of European bureaus in Bologna, Italy, and Surrey, England. What contribution was made by those European bureaus is still a mystery.

While *Illustrated Speedway News* held itself out as a national publication, the emphasis was certainly on the tracks, drivers and association of the East. The late Thirties and early Forties saw significant growth for open wheel racing. In particular, the midgets were threatening the big cars' open wheel dominance from a popularity standpoint. The *Illustrated Speedway News* would report on races from tracks such as Des Moines, Shreveport, Ascot, and Winchester, but most readers wanted to know what happened at tracks such as Danbury, Williams Grove, Freeport, and Yellow Jacket. The popularity of the midgets would lead to the big car drivers referring to the diminutive cars as "doodlebugs." With midget drivers making the money they were in the late Thirties and early Forties, they didn't take offense at the term. For a number of years the *Illustrated Speedway News* would conduct an annual readers' poll that would name the most popular midget car driver in the country, "King Doodlebug."

Most readers would look forward to the weekly paper wondering who would be pictured on the rotogravure covers (front and back) that would become the paper's signature. The gravure printing process was known for producing perfect copies at enormous speed. In addition, the process produced good gloss on relatively low quality paper. So popular were the rotogravure covers, that each year *Illustrated Speedway News* would produce a year-end bound collection of the covers called "Breath-takers of the Speedway."

It has often been pointed out that Walter didn't attend many races. That is not to say, however, he didn't care about the sport and its participants. He was always prepared to help with charitable and benevolent causes, particularly those to benefit injured drivers or their families. In fact, Walter was on the committee that held a benefit in 1950 for Vern "Flip" Fritch, who had been confined to a wheel chair as a result of a flip at Owasso, Michigan, in 1949.

From the 1930s into the '70s, *Illustrated Speedway News* would continue to be an important source of racing information. In fact, many of racing's best journalists cite *Illustrated Racing News* on their resume. Walter Bull would continue to run the paper until the early 1970s when he sold to his editor, Jack Schwartz. Within a few years, the *Illustrated Racing News* would go out of business. Walter E. Bull died at his home in Mastic Beach, Long Island, New York, in June of 1978.



Walter E. Bull (on right, with promoter Harvey Tattersall, driver Ed "Dutch" Schaefer and car owner "Slim" Schloeder)