



# thomas j. Schmeh



PHOTO CREDIT: NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL OF FAME & MUSEUM COLLECTION

by Patrick Sullivan

**T**homas J. Schmeh was born on May 10, 1959, in Buffalo, New York, to William (Bill) and Ruth Schmeh. Bill was a lifelong railroad employee. He began as a fireman for New York Central, but would ultimately graduate to engineer, serving on the Buffalo to Syracuse route. Ruth worked for Dunlop Tires early in her life, but soon devoted her time to managing a large blended family.

Tom first attended an asphalt Modified race at Lancaster Speedway in 1969 and was instantly hooked on the sport. From his earliest days, he was an incessant record keeper, a natural offshoot of possessing an analytical mind. He graduated from Kenmore West Senior High School a year early, and quickly began taking classes at Buffalo State College. He graduated with a B.S. in Information Systems Management and accepted a position with General Electric as a computer programmer in the Aerospace Electronics Division.

All through his college years, Tom kept his interest in racing alive. In 1978, he was named the North East Auto Racing Associates Fan of the Year, in part because of his statistical acumen. He eventually developed a strong interest in Dirt Late Model racing, and although still in college, amazingly launched the Mid-Atlantic Racing Series (MARS), complete with a host of high-profile sponsors. As so often happens in many of life's endeavors, a chance event ultimately changed the course of his life. In 1982, he traveled south to watch a NASCAR Late Model Sportsman race at the famed Hickory Speedway in North Carolina. Suddenly a call was made for a single car scorer, and Tom answered the bell. It was here that he met Morris Metcalfe, the Director of Timing and Scoring for NASCAR, and was invited to attend a scoring school in Albany, New York. In the blink of an eye, Tom was working for NASCAR, and was traveling the entire eastern seaboard,

and as far west as Indianapolis Raceway Park.

It was on such trips that he began making stops at places like Williams Grove and Hagerstown, Maryland. Now, he was enthralled with Sprint Car racing. Once again, his agile mind went to work, and he deemed that Sprint Car

racers were simply not getting the attention they deserved. Never one to sit idly on the sidelines, he decided to do something about it. He started the regally named The American Short-track Congress, the genesis of the National Poll awards that continue to this day and are now named in his honor. He recruited some of the biggest names in the sport, and soon learned that some of the best in the business, men like Doug Wolfgang and Jack Hewitt, truly loved what he was doing.

In 1985, he attended his first Knoxville Nationals, where he was amazed how everyone in the community pitched in and embraced the event. As the developer of the nationwide poll award, he attended all the press conferences over the course of the race. It was here that he first heard of plans to create a National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum. Wasting no time, Schmeh quickly took Ralph Capitani aside and indicated his desire to be involved in the project. Cappy was thrilled to have someone from the East come aboard and start sharing the gospel.

As his interest in Sprint Car racing grew, he began traveling more and more, and when he saw a job that matched his talents, posted by the Miller Brewing Company in Milwaukee, he decided to take the plunge, and head to the Midwest. He had loved his job with GE, and the same was true at Miller, particularly when he worked with the motorsports arm of the firm. He took advantage of his new location to make more trips to Knoxville, and in support of the Hall of Fame effort, he spearheaded several fundraising efforts closer to his new home

Also, in this period, Tom was active in a task force organized to begin planning for a Hall of Fame. Then things got even more serious. The task force became a Board of Directors, the project gained 5013c status, and the group

began searching for an Executive Director. Tom applied and was a finalist. However, in the end the position was offered to G. Wayne Hall of Texas, and on January 1, 1988, the project took on an entirely new tone. Tom joined the Board of Directors, and soon he was sharing ideas with people like Cary Agajanian, Harold Annett, Indiana's Bill Smith, Eunice Kuyper of the Pella Corporation, and Casey's General Store founder Don Lamberti. Hall was creative, but his fiscal style left some uneasy. A change had to be made. In March 1989, Lamberti made the call, and by the time he hung up the telephone, a relatively young Tom Schmeh, was poised to make a life-changing decision. Tom quickly realized the magnitude of the challenge that confronted him. In the early days, Tom and Lori DeMoss occupied a small office at the back of the Knoxville Reminder newspaper and worked to turn what many truly believed was a pipe dream into a reality. In an act of dedication, both Schmeh and DeMoss often delayed receiving their pay for the good of the project. If there was a seminal moment, it was what transpired during what appeared to be the darkest of times. Don Lamberti had co-signed a \$1.7 million dollar note to get the project moving and construction began in 1989.

While one plan had the location of the Hall of Fame in the Hy-Vee grocery store parking lot across from the racetrack, it was Lamberti who was prescient enough to suggest locating the museum, and significantly, suites, outside of turn two of Knoxville Raceway. Then things turned south. The farm crisis that gripped the nation had a ripple effect in states like Iowa. The bottom line is that Lamberti had received strong fiscal advice that he simply had to get out from under the \$1.7 million dollar note. One thing Tom recalls vividly was Don looking him in the eye and vowing he would be back in the project at some point and be back stronger than ever. The initial incident led to three sleepless nights, and construction was actually halted. Rolling up his sleeves, he went to work. It was here that the Marion County Fair Board jumped in, in a substantial way. Hall of Fame board members like the late Lee Barfield recruited a new host of investors, and in the end, the project was saved. Looking back, Schmeh says, "Don pulling out was one

**Tom Schmeh**

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of the best things to happen, because it forced us to get a broader base of support. We put a new package together, and the Fair Board signed the note. By 1991, construction resumed, and during the Nationals, Schmeh sold three-year leases for the first 20 suites. The official grand opening came on January 2, 1992, and with Iowa governor Terry Branstad present, the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum became a reality.

If anyone thought the story ended here, they have a scant understanding of the challenge of keeping an enterprise like the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum afloat and vibrant. It requires a broad band of support, a steady flow of donors, and buy-in from industry leaders of all stripes. What was required was someone to hit the road and deal with people face-to-face. Sometimes Tom came armed with a display, at others it was just a handful of brochures, but track by track, Schmeh made the rounds convincing people from coast to coast to invest in this dream. As Tom says, "the idea was to get people excited, and to recognize that last night's race was now history, and this was a place where today's racers would be honored someday." Then came the brick program, fashion shows, and ultimately the famed raffle car. It was also necessary to keep interest alive year round, so to that end, Tom began the popular Sprint Car 101 series, and the International Reel Wheel Film Festival. To create compelling displays, the museum itself needed cars, trophies, and prized memorabilia, and it took someone individuals and families trusted to part with, or loan, valued heirlooms.

As Tom grew into his role, Knoxville Raceway's Ralph Capitani

demonstrated a willingness to consider some of his innovative ideas. In the final analysis, because of Tom, races such as the Knoxville Raceway Masters Classic, the Tournament of Champions, and World Challenge were born. He was also a driving force in the creation of the Midget Nationals and the return of the UAC Silver Crown series for the Hawkeye 100. Diversifying track activity even further, he helped establish the Late Model Nationals with Bruce Neimeth.

Tom served as the Executive Director from 1989 to 2008 and Curator until 2017. Tom began to feel ill, and what he naturally thought was something he would eventually shake, turned out to be histoplasmosis made worse by Tom's HIV. He was ill, deathly ill. Then the stunning word came that Tom was in hospice. He spent nine days there, but in the end, a treatment, albeit an agonizing one, turned the tide. He spent another 50 days in a Des Moines hospital and in rehab. When he walked out, it was a great day for his legion of friends and the sport.

Tom Schmeh's greatest strength is his passion for the sport, and love of people. Yes, he had help, as he will tell anyone who listens. Nonetheless, he is a man who moved the puck down the ice. Without a champion like Tom, there would be no National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum.

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