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# national sprint car hall



Photo by: Paul Arch

# Jack Kromer

by Jacy Norgaard

The 2022 class of the Sprint Car Hall of Fame is comprised of individuals who have become household names on the track, in the pits or behind a microphone. For Jack Kromer, that impact was made with his face pressed against a camera. A five-decade career with sufficient accolades and publications worthy of the Hall of Fame. His life's work is a story filled with chances, triumphs, and adversity. It's a story worth telling, but one that almost never happened.

Jack Kromer grew up in a household with a father who loved capturing the everyday moments of life, family snapshots that have turned into precious family heirlooms. One day in 1968, Jack's father received a free Kodak Hawkeye Instamatic camera. His dad took one photo of Jack to test the camera out and handed it off. "Here you go. Go take some pictures," he said to Jack. Jack spent the day capturing his first photos and sent them off to Kodak. But only one came back. The photo his father took of him. Dejected and defeated, Jack was turned off from photography. But he never gave up and tried again a year later at school. This time the photos turned out and in 1970 his motorsports photography career was born. Jack took that camera to Nazareth Speedway. Far from a credentialed shooter, Jack captured his first photos from the grandstands as a fan. He continued attending races as a fan for the next four years on a regular basis at Nazareth, all while upgrading his equipment to include a 35mm camera

and an interchangeable telephoto lens. Looking to take the next step, Jack resorted to a little youthful deviousness in 1974 at Nazareth Speedway.

Noticing people sneaking down into the infield through a hole in the pit fence, Jack recognized this was his chance to get to the infield for better photos. He waited until the heat race was over before sneaking down with others. "I wasn't a rule-breaker kind of guy. I took a chance going in there and didn't know if I would get in trouble. But the lure of being able to shoot the races from the infield that day sure was strong and I went for it." Jack snapped a few photos and did his best to blend in. But he got in the way of another photographer and track officials asked him to leave.

Dejected once more, Kromer got his first big break just moments later. Photographer, Bob Perran witnessed Kromer's interaction with track officials and proposed a solution. "I guess he felt bad for me. He said, 'Hey kid, if you really want to do this racing photography stuff, maybe I could ask Lenny Sammons (Area Auto Racing News) about getting you press credentials.'" Perran explained it was too late in the year to do anything, but maybe next year. Much to his surprise that next spring, he received an Area Auto Racing News press card in the mail. His last name was spelled incorrectly with an A instead of an O. But some personal penmanship fixed that, and his credentialed career began.

Jack's first photos were published that spring in Area Auto Racing News and he spent his time at Nazareth Speedway as well as other local tracks such as Middletown and Flemington. He mostly captured photos of the modified class and Sprint Cars on occasion when they were on the card. He shot a few stand-alone sprint car events at Volusia County Speedway during the 1978 Speed Weeks and looked to add more to his resume in '78. But that plan changed on April 22, 1978 when his photographer career and his life came dangerously close to ending at Flemington. An out-of-control race car

smashed through the inside wooden retaining wall. Kromer ran to avoid being hit but was pummeled by all but one board, causing him to catch air and land on the dirt infield access road. He was given a 50% chance of living and visited two hospitals that night. The worst day of his life was a direct result of his desire to photograph race cars. Hardly a bone in Kromer's body wasn't broken including his neck, shoulder blade, and ribs. He underwent two chest operations that night and spent 26 days in the hospital.

Kromer rebounded from his near-death encounter and photographed his first Central Pennsylvania race in March 1979 at Williams Grove Speedway. He was instantly hooked. He never took to focusing on sprint cars until the 1980s when Open Wheel Magazine debuted. The national exposure and payment for his images motivated him to focus his efforts on sprint cars. The cost of processing film meant that Kromer had to be perfect with his technique as he only had a limited number of shots each night. This mastery of his craft landed him over 30 first place awards from the Eastern Motorsports Press Association (EMPA) and American Auto Racing Writers and Broadcasters Association (AARWB), including the Ace Lane Memorial Award, EMPA's highest honor. Jack's work with Open Wheel Magazine over the years has resulted in the most cover shots by any photographer in their history. And now his career has come full circle with an induction into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. "It's such a huge honor and a very humbling experience and one that I could never imagine happening in my lifetime," Kromer said.

It is 52 years later, and Jack Kromer can still be found with a camera in his hands at a racetrack. He still has that first camera and that doctored press pass, reminders of a career filled with triumphs and tribulations and one that almost never happened.