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national sprint car hall of fame

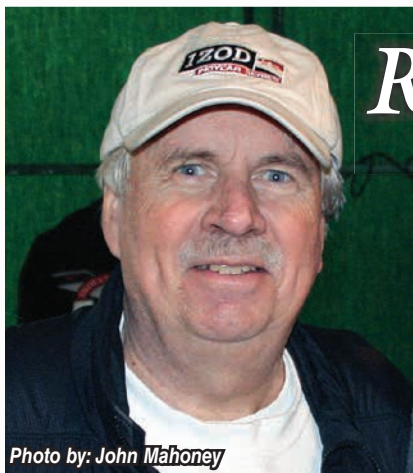


Photo by: John Mahoney

Robin Miller

by Bill Blumer Jr.

From the early 1970s to 2021, Robin Miller was probably the most followed media personality in all of motorsports, first as a writer for The Indianapolis Star (IndyStar) and then, national TV.

He could be bombastic and opinionated and controversial – all perfect traits for a writer. His take on the Indy Car split between Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) and the Indy Racing League (IRL) spawned, “I hate Robin Miller” t-shirts. At least, Miller knew people were reading his work.

He was born Robin Lee Miller on October 27, 1949 to Bob and Alene Miller, in Anderson, Indiana and raised on the south side of Indianapolis. He loved racing as a boy. On Saturday mornings, armed with his toolbox of slot cars, parts and tools, he'd head to the local hobby shop for the weekly races. He brought home several trophies for his efforts.

During “The Month of May,” Indy Cars captured Robin's attention. With no money in the family budget for tickets, Bob found a way to circumvent the turnstiles and the pair enjoyed the Indianapolis 500 from a prime view on the outside of the backstretch.

In 1968, Robin snuck into the Speedway once again, this time as a member of Jim Hurtubise's pit crew. Maneuvering through the pit entrance, looking the part of a crewman, he stuck close to “Herk” and marched right past IMS Security, despite not having a pit badge. His ability to tinker with toy cars didn't translate to real race cars and he was let go from the team before race day. “Robin might have been able to put gas in his car, but I'm not sure he could fill the wiper fluid,” noted one longtime friend.

Despite his mechanical shortcomings, he managed to campaign a midget on the USAC trail during the 1970s. There, Miller made the friends and contacts that would last a lifetime. Being a driver himself gave him credibility among the racers he wrote about.

After three failed attempts at higher education, in pursuit of a journalism degree, Miller landed an entry-level position at The Indianapolis Star newspaper. In 1969, he got his first byline. He rose through the ranks covering Pacers basketball and, upon their arrival, Colts football. He learned to gain the trust of the players, which gave him an inside edge on a story. Miller disdained public relations people. “Why do I have to go through PR, if I already know someone?” he wondered. When the Colts hosted Monday Night Football, TV announcer Al Michaels would make it a point to have lunch with Miller to pick his brain about the impending game.

After a couple of years with the newspaper, Miller was assigned the racing beat. His Indy 500 insight (along with other IndyStar writers) was so important, that fans from all corners of the country would buy a month's subscription just for the race coverage. In 2001, he was fired by the publication, a move he later called a “godsend,” as it opened another door, TV.

Miller was often on local radio and TV shows during his time at the paper. Now, ESPN, NBC Sports Network, SpeedTV and others welcomed his work to their airwaves and a national audience. Clips of Dave Despain and Miller on WindTunnel show some of his most entertaining work.

Whether it was his utter contempt for an unworthy Indy Car driver's ability or his admiration for a “Badass,” on his, Toughest Drivers Series, Miller's enthusiasm for the matter at hand was evident. Wide eyes, his smile (or scowl), flailing hands, a bobbing head and his volume, added an emphasis to each word he spoke. His work in ink couldn't totally duplicate his TV effort. Miller contended, “I have a face for radio.” The more popular he got, the more he tried to deflect attention.

While his TV persona might have put some people off, Miller was warm and

accommodating with fans. He was always willing to pose for a photo. When a fan would ask him to autograph the cover of a program, he'd pause. If he noticed a driver such as Rick Mears or Helio Castroneves had already signed it, he would ask, “Are you sure you want me to ruin this?” He'd then pick a spot to sign far away from the star's mark.

Over the years, Miller received many awards. He always felt unworthy, suggesting, even when it was a local media award, surely there was someone more deserving. He was thrilled with his 2021 induction to the Motorsports Hall of Fame, an institution he was known to criticize. In a column for Racer, Miller contended he long felt such halls should be primarily for drivers. He mentioned two of his friends - Lee Kunzman and Pancho Carter - who he felt should be inducted. Even with a specific category for the media, he still noted many fellow journalists he found more deserving including Joe Scalzo.

Away from the track, Miller was an adept conversationalist on things beyond racing. He loved music and could argue politics with the best of them.

During his four year battle with cancer, which at first looked beatable, but then snowballed beyond a cure, many drivers and colleagues paid tribute. When they commented on his work, there was a common theme - “He told it like it was.”

In his final days, he wrote a goodbye letter for Racer, with this summation, “I've had the greatest life anyone can imagine and I've been lucky enough to share it with the fans.”

Robin Miller passed away on August 25, 2021. A bachelor, he was survived by his sister Diane Zachary.