



RICKY WARNER - MECHANIC

By Doug Kennedy

RICKY WARNER grew up in an area that is noted for Sprint Car Racing. To be precise, he lives in Newville, Pennsylvania, a borough just west of Carlisle. The location afforded him the opportunity to watch the best to perform their skills at tracks like Williams Grove, Lincoln, and Selinsgrove Speedways. Warner got his first job in racing working as a “helper” at the age of 18 for local driver Randy Wolfe. After a few years, he decided to move on to a higher level and started working with Jac Haudenschild and the Eldon Racing team. This led to his first job as a crew chief as he started working for California driver Tyler Walker. That team experienced a lot of early success.

For the next two years, he chased a childhood dream of becoming associated with NASCAR so he took a job working for Andy Hillenberg. In 2002, he reunited with Walker and the team picked up right where they left off and started winning. This eventually led to Warner being hired by NASCAR’s Ray Evernham as a car chief in 2004. However, he yearned to return to sprint cars and started working with Donny Schatz. They won the WoO championship in 2006. Following that season, Warner was hired by Kasey Kahne racing to work with driver Joey Saldana.

Their first season began with a bang as Saldana won seven races by June, but something went wrong and Kahne let Saldana go an hour after the team had scored a WoO race victory at Kokomo, Indiana.

That’s when Tony Stewart stepped in and hired him to work with Donny Schatz.

Over the next 11 years, the team won the Knoxville Nationals 10 times, had 10 WoO championships, three consecutive King’s Royal event wins and more than 200 WoO feature wins. Between 2013 and 2018, the team won better than 150 races. That team was loaded for bear with Schatz, Warner, Ron Shaver with the engines and Jack Elam with the chassis. Schatz realized this was a near perfect relationship both on and off the track. Schatz said he knew what and when he could manipulate Warner but had the utmost respect for him. “He could complement me and he knew how I did things,” Schatz was quoted as saying. “It was just a great combination.”

In 2019, Warner took over the Tony Stewart Ford Motor development program and took the car to victory lane. Most recently, Rico Abreu and he have become a very successful team.

The Abreu/Warner relationship began in 2022. That season the team scored six wins and more than doubled (13) their wins in 2023. Needless to say, there’s a lot of anticipation for 2024 when the team will race for the High Limit Championship. The 2023 season was extremely productive as the team had 41 top fives and 58 top tens in the 71 races they ran. They also scored victories with WoO, the All-Stars and High Limit.

“I can’t say enough about what Ricky has brought to myself and the team. Everyone knows how good he is at setting up the car, but on the personal side, he is such a great person, friend, and leader,” said Abreu.

Warner is surprised as well as to how quickly this team has jelled. His reaction to that was something he was quoted as saying, “Usually it takes a year to get to know somebody. Try to figure out what their style is and what their comfort level is....Every guy is different.”

With some health issues two years back, Warner contemplated getting out of the racing game. He thought that this might have been the time to retire, but as Warner said, “You think maybe this is time to switch or do something else, but then something happens that changes your mind and you want to keep going.” He knows how important racing is to him so that is what drives him to keep going. “It grabs a hold of you and never let’s go,” Warner was quoted as saying regarding racing.”

The travel is not something he truly enjoys as would rather be spending time with his family that includes wife, Danele, daughter, Stevee, and son, Drew, but Warner continues to be one of the best ever to turn the wrenches and manage a team.

Donny Schatz has high praise. “From the day that we started racing together, we hit it off on all fronts. We were winning right away and contending for a championship. I guess we found our way to each other at the right time and place... He wears his heart on his sleeve and takes great pride in his racing. I’m damn proud to see him get inducted into the Hall of Fame.” ■