

Driver Inductee BILLY PAUCH

By BUFFY SWANSON

A second generation racer and New Jersey farm boy, Frenchtown, NJ's Billy Pauch was "on tractors and farm equipment all my life. So I guess learning to drive and harrowing and plowing and bouncing around over plowed fields was normal, you know?" he related. "I think that enabled me to get a jump on racing."

His father, Roy, who passed away earlier this year, never made a mark as a race car driver, "but he knew a lot about motors and chassis and he was always trying to figure things out," Pauch stated. "That put me ahead of the game. I didn't have to take all the hard knocks he took because he taught them to me. I could skip right over them."

Right over them and into the winner's circle: In 1975, Pauch's debut season running a homebuilt Sportsman car, barely out of high school, he collected 16 wins at Flemington, Nazareth and Bridgeport, and was named Flemington's Rookie champion.

His career pretty much exploded from there.

A December 2001 national poll rating America's best short-track racers in Dick Berggren's *Speedway Illustrated* magazine ranked Pauch third in the country. Berggren, himself, more recently noted, "I would surely put Billy Pauch in my top five."

The Eastern Motorsports Press Association twice voted Pauch its Driver of the Year, in 1987 and 1992. For six straight years, from 1987-92, *Area Auto Racing News* lauded Pauch as the winningest driver in the Northeast—in any division.

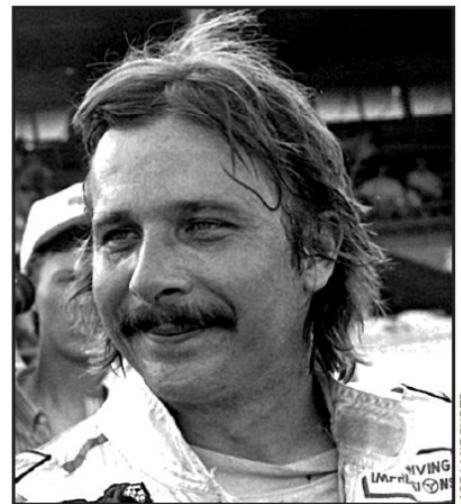
Validating those accolades and national notoriety are Pauch's numbers. As of this writing, he has racked up an astounding 723 documented feature wins (as well as 34 championships) at 30 speedways in seven states, including over 100

each at Flemington, East Windsor and New Egypt. Although he seldom ran at either track, Pauch is the all-time winner of both Grandview's marquee Freedom 76 and Fulton's Victoria 200 classic, with a half-dozen each. He's won the DIRT 320 Nationals at Syracuse; Big Diamond's Coalcracker (twice); Ransomville's Summer Nationals; Hagerstown's Octoberfest and the Delaware State Dirt Track Championships (multiple times); and has 14 victories on the Super DIRTcar Series, despite the fact that he never followed that circuit.

That's just Pauch's highlight reel in the dirt Modified ranks, which accounts for more than 80 percent of his winning record. Yet, his national reputation is founded, not solely on his dirt Mod success, but his uncanny ability to climb in almost any car and get the job done.

As a reader commented in *Speedway Illustrated*, "He wins in dirt Mods, pavement Mods and Sprint Cars, at times all in the same weekend."

In a world where most racers rarely venture for long outside their chosen division, Billy Pauch may be the only driver to score significant wins in dirt and asphalt Mods, winged and wingless Sprints, Midgets, Late Models and SpeedSTRs, under NASCAR, World of Outlaws, DIRTcar, USAC, CRA, SCRA, All Stars, KARS and URC sanctions.



ACE LANE PHOTO



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(Above) Pauch getting it done at Flemington Speedway in the mid '70s, wheeling for all he's worth. (Top right) Wife Barbara and crew watch Billy give his signature winning salute to the crowd.



ACE LANE PHOTO

“Go figure,” Pauch mused. “I won 500 races in the Modifieds. But it wasn’t until I won in a Sprint Car that everyone knew who I was.”

It was a “starting over” period and quite a transition when Pauch began splitting his schedule between Mods and Sprints in 1993. “Here I was dominating on Fridays at East Windsor, pulling out 18 wins a year in a Modified. The next thing I know, I was getting my ass kicked at Williams Grove in the Zemco (Sprint) Car,” he remembered. “I probably would have had a lot more wins if I’d just stayed with the Modifieds.”

But Pauch was never into tallying wins or titles. For him, it was always about the challenge, “something different,” he said. And it didn’t take long for his learning curve to land some stellar results.

In 1994, Pauch shocked the racing world, routing reigning Sprint Car royalty to win the World of Outlaws Champion Spark Plugs Sprint Nationals at the NY State Fairgrounds, and setting a world speed record on a mile dirt track in the process—a record that still stands.

When young would-be racers ask “The Kid” about turning that 144.590

mph lap in a Sprint Car on the onerous Syracuse mile, without an iota of irony Pauch tells them: “Drive it like you want to die.”

Pauch further proved his prowess in the open cockpit camp, winning another WoO event at Rolling Wheels in 1996; and in ‘98, the National Open at Williams Grove, the Holy Grail of the Pennsy 410 Sprint circuit. He is the all-time winner of the Thunder on the Hill Sprint Series at Grandview Speedway.

He likewise ambushed the asphalt Mod contingent, when he was called in as a last-minute sub to drive Mario Fiore’s #44 in the 1993 NASCAR Race of Champions at Flemington.

“I didn’t know much about those cars, but I knew that was a good car,” said Pauch. In an unfamiliar racer, rebounding from a heat-race crash, starting 43rd on the field, the local dirt driver persevered through a grueling 250 laps to make his moves stick and pull off a huge victory against all the blacktop series bigshots. “That was a big deal,” Pauch chuckled. “Most of those guys didn’t even know who I was.”

“Billy is the most tenacious driver you will ever meet,” a long-time friend observed. “He has this burning desire to win because, when all is said and done, he doesn’t want to disappoint himself.”

That stubborn “refuse to lose” mindset has taken its toll. Physically, Pauch bears the battle scars of his career. His knees were broken in two separate incidents, at Williams Grove and Penn National. The plates in his right arm are courtesy of a Knoxville Sprint mishap. He broke his wrist in a pavement Mod at Flemington (right before he was scheduled to start a NASCAR Craftsman Truck race). And suffered burns in one of Tony Sesely’s Mods.

“But I can’t complain,” said Pauch, looking back. “I did something I loved to do all my life, and I enjoyed it. I won a lot of races, and I had fun.

“Really, it was more fun when I was younger and I didn’t know as much,” the 59-year-old driver reflected. “Back then, you raced, you won races—it didn’t seem that complicated. Now, with all the rules and sponsor stuff...”

The thought trailed off.

Oh, he’s still got more wins to celebrate—by the end of May, Pauch already had three scores on the season. But he knows his career is finally winding down, and he’s okay with that. While he’s always been selective in regard to his racing schedule—concentrating on the high dollar payouts, calculating the travel expenses, all the pros and cons of rules packages and politics—he picks and chooses even more judiciously these days. Pauch, after all, makes his living racing. It has put bread on his family’s table for the past 40 years.



CHUCK HARTENSTINE PHOTO

One of the most prolific and versatile drivers of the modern era. Pauch won in Sprints as well as Mods. Here he celebrates a big win at Williams Grove.

He enjoys a nice life with wife Barbara, two great kids (Billy Jr., who’s making his own imprint as a driver, and daughter Mande, who’s now handling PR for DIRTcar), and another “Billy,” grandson William Arthur, Billy and Michelle’s boy who was born on New Year’s Eve.

At the end of the day, aside from some momentary major-league NASCAR dreams, there isn’t much he hasn’t accomplished in a race car.

“I drove for a lot of good people to make it all happen,” Pauch said of his success. “It always took a team effort, and I was lucky to click with a lot of different teams. And I’m still friends, and still keep in touch, with most of those guys.” ■