

## New NASCAR Hall of Fame Inductee Ray Evernham Proud Of His New Jersey Racing Heritage

By EARL KRAUSE

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Growing up in and around the Central New Jersey town of Hazlet in the 1960s and 70s, and being a “car guy” from the start in that era when big-motor street and race cars were the focus of teenagers, it was not surprising that Ray Evernham looked toward already famed Wall Stadium as a place to watch, and then participate, in stock car competition on summertime Saturday nights.

Indeed, as soon as he was eligible, at age 18 per the rules of the State of New Jersey, in 1976 Evernham was signing into Wall’s pit area -- not as a crewman, but with his very own stock car to race. It was in the Stadium’s newly-developed Modern Stock division, which had full-fender cars powered primarily by six-cylinder motors that provided a perfect “entry-level” into the sport.

It led Ray Evernham to literally international recognition at the highest level of NASCAR; and now, some 40 years later, being named this past May 24 as a member of the NASCAR Hall of Fame Class of 2018. He is in esteemed company, with NASCAR’s first champion Red Byron; champion Cup level team owner and engine building master Robert Yates; NASCAR Truck Series champion Ron Hornaday Jr. and broadcasting legend Ken Squier.

When I spoke with Evernham last week, the day after his notification of the Hall of Fame honor, he was reflective of what it represented and how far he had come from those first racing days. “Emotion... the feeling of just what it means is just now beginning to come to focus,” he said. “To be in that company (of HoF inductees), to even have been considered... is overwhelming. “Very-importantly, I look at this (HoF induction) as recognition to Wall Stadium and all of the New Jersey ‘racing family’, who helped me, and believed in me... to get me to where I am right now. They were people who gave me the direction and drive to succeed. And Wall Stadium... it’s where I grew up, as a fan and then a racer. There, and with IROC (original International Race of Champions Series, then based in nearby Tinton Falls, N.J, where Ray was a shop manager) is where I learned not just how to race, but also how to prepare cars, to not give up... to focus on a goal.”

Indeed, Ray Evernham’s racing foundation is in New Jersey. It’s where he first drove and owned a race car in those full-fender Modern Stocks at his “home track” of Wall as a teenager. He became division Rookie of the Year in 1976; and its champion in 1977. He then moved into the Modifieds, at Wall and then-paved New Egypt with his No. 19 and 61 cars; and competed and won in the Dirt/Asphalt Modifieds at Flemington in the early-1990s.

From 1983 through 1989, he was with the International Race of Champions (IROC) Series in Tinton Falls, N.J. He started as a fabricator and worked his way up to team crew chief and manager; and in the 1990s, while racing Modifieds at Wall and Flemington, operated his “Ray Evernham Race Prep” shop in Manasquan, N.J.

In the early-1990s, the Garden State Vintage Stock Car Club (GSVSCC) was formed with the goal of preserving the rich stock car racing history of Wall Stadium; and in New Jersey. In that era, some of the earliest GSVSCC meetings were held at Evernham’s Race Prep shop, and Ray – then and now -- being a great supporter of the organization and its historic racing mission. That includes sponsoring the GSVSCC’s annual “Bob Thomas ‘BT’ Memorial Dedication to Local New Jersey Racing” award, named in honor of Ray’s late, good friend and fellow IROC manager Bob ‘BT’ Thomas. “BT” spent many Saturday nights in the pit area at his home track of Wall

Stadium while helping competitors and never looking for any compensation other than a sincere “thank you.”

Some 25 years ago, Ray Evernham was already looking toward his future... which meant a move south to NASCAR racing.

Ultimately, he earned 47 NASCAR Sprint Cup victories and titles on that level in 1995, 97 and 98 as crew chief for driver Jeff Gordon and Rick Hendrick’s No. 24. Later, Ray would lead the return of Dodge to the Cup Series, fielding his own team.

But what has set Ray Evernham apart is that he has never forgotten his Wall Stadium and New Jersey roots. That includes giving recognition to those in the sport on a local level that helped or inspired him – such as IROC’s Jay Signore and his late wife Barbara; Bob Thomas, East Windsor Speedway racer Fred Dmuchowski and Wall stock car driving legend Bob Howard Sr.

Ray is also highly regarded as a racing businessman and television motorsports analyst; and – very significant to the GSVSCC – being a racing historian with his own mission of preserving antique race cars and keeping them in a museum setting to be appreciated for future generations. That led to Ray developing and hosting the “AmeriCarna” show on the cable TV network Velocity, where he and fellow Wall racing native Eddie Bohn and staff members have found and then meticulously restored historic racing and street cars; while documenting the “real life” American car culture.

Last week, as Ray was being notified of his NASCAR Hall of Fame selection, he was at Indianapolis for the pre-500 festivities. That includes the fan-pleasing garage and on-track display of beautifully-restored vintage Indy cars; of which Evernham is the proud owner of roadsters and rear-engine cars spanning decades.

On that topic, he recently directed the restoration of the original Clint Brawner Hawk Dean Van Lines Indy Car driven at Indianapolis in 1965 by Mario Andretti and crew chiefed by Jim McGee. That project was the subject of an “AmeriCarna” episode.

Also, Ray’s wife, Erin, is an accomplished race driver in divisions ranging from Sprint Cars and Midgets to the ARCA Series.

In July 2015, Ray and Erin become parents of their new baby daughter, Cate Susan; entering a new, wonderful life chapter.

While there is no doubt that Ray Evernham has “Hall of Fame statistics,” he also represents “Hall of Fame character” in his life. Very importantly, Ray has worked tirelessly on behalf of charities, such as the Leukemia Society of America (his son, Ray J., is a leukemia survivor), the National Bone Marrow Donors Association and IGNITE (Asperger’s Syndrome).

That includes support of the IGNITE Community Center in Davidson, N.C. that was created for young adults that have high-functioning autism. Also known as Asperger’s Syndrome, this form of autism afflicts young adults with a condition that leads to difficulties in social interaction and nonverbal communication. But they can also function extremely well in daily activities, are intelligent and can be involved fully in a variety of jobs and recreational activities that those not having Asperger’s participate in.

As per its mission statement, IGNITE focuses on the existing strengths and interests of its members, allowing them to pursue individual interests, while providing supports where needed.”

Ray Evernham’s 24-year-old son, Ray J., has Asperger’s. As noted, while a youngster, Ray J. also survived the blood disease leukemia. A young man that serves as a real inspiration, Ray J. has also proudly worked at his dad’s Ray Evernham Enterprises.

With support from the Evernham Family-Racing for a Reason Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization started by Ray Evernham, IGNITE was created and is thriving in its mission of offering skills training and activities that foster educational, financial, employment and social

independence for young men and women with Asperger's. It has led those in the IGNITE program to be part of their community and part of everyday activities and lifestyles.

Along with going into NASCAR's Hall of Fame next year, this past January Ray Evernham was inducted into the Eastern Motorsport Press Association Hall of Fame; and was similarly honored by N.J.'s Garden State Vintage Stock Car Club in 2014. Ray enjoyed "returning home" to attend those ceremonies, and also comes back to Wall Stadium whenever possible to visit friends.

Back in the early-1980s, when Ray was racing in the Modifieds at Wall, I was there one night in my media role and my race fan dad, Earl Sr., had accompanied me. Dad viewed the racing from the grandstand, and after the event had concluded joined me in the pit area. It was there that I introduced Dad to Ray Evernham, who not only shook my father's hand with a welcoming smile, but also took the time to show him the various "points of interest" on his signature red No. 61 Pinto Modified on its open trailer. Dad, who loved racing and the mechanical side of cars, had a great time.

My Dad, who has since passed away, was very honored to have met Ray that night and always enjoyed that memory. And, some years after their initial meeting, Dad renewed his acquaintance with Ray during one of his visits to Wall in the early-2000s.

I have never forgotten how Ray Evernham took the time to speak with my Dad and "show him around" his Modified. To me, that has always represented the true manner and characteristics of Ray Evernham... not only at his "second home" at race tracks in New Jersey and around the country; but in life itself.