

Racing Club Honors 11 Hall of Famers with Wide Variety of Backgrounds

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By Larry D. Croom

With apologies to new NASCAR Hall of Famers Red Byron, Ray Evernham, Ron Hornaday Jr., Ken Squier and Robert Yates, my favorite enshrinement ceremony took place Saturday night in The Villages.

The local Hall of Fame ceremony might not have been as glitzy and over the top as Friday night's annual banquet in Charlotte, North Carolina, but for those inducted by The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club, it truly was a special night. The new class includes 11 members who have done everything from driving race cars to owning a speedway to writing to serving on a pit crew to handling safety and technical issues. And one guy even raced lawn mowers!

Saturday night's Hall of Fame banquet at La Hacienda Recreation Center was filled with fellowship, handshakes and a ton of applause. And as always is the case with The Villages Motor Racing Club, you could feel the mutual respect and friendship among a group of members and their guests who share a common goal – the love of speed.

If you're not familiar with these motorheads – the club's membership sits at 167 – the group was formed in 2006 when Glen Carter, of the Village of Summerhill, decided to find out if anyone else here shared his love of racing. Very quickly, the former competitor at Alabama's famed Montgomery Motor Speedway found out how alive the need for speed was across Florida's Friendliest Hometown.

Since the club's first meeting more than 11 years ago, Carter's idea has grown into something very special. Each month, the group hears from a guest speaker connected to the racing world. And members – known for wearing bright yellow shirts that proudly display their colorful logo – attend a variety of events together, from radio-controlled car races to short-track events to the biggest stock car race of them all, the Daytona 500.

Want to know the best part about this group? Fun always is the name of the game!

That was certainly the case as the group inducted its newest Hall of Fame class, which includes Dargan Watts, racing journalist and historian; Paul Bova, vintage sports car racer; Jim Fenton, stock car racing champion; Jeremy Gerstner, longtime racer in a different series; Bob Wardwell, veteran of the U.S. Lawn Mower Racing Association; John Berti, voice of Citrus County Speedway; Ann Young, owner of Bronson Speedway in Levy County; John and Carol Emms, motorsports veterans who served as pit crew members for her son, John; Rick Bristol, marketing and promotions manager for Auburndale Speedway in Winter Haven; and Bob Wise, head of safety and technical inspections at Citrus County Speedway.

"I think this is wonderful," said Tina Ivey, who recently became vice president of the club. "I am so proud to be associated with this club and the Hall of Famers and people we get to meet."



Tom Niermann | Submitted photo
Jerry Conkle, immediate past president of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club, shows off his awards for winning the Daily Sun's Prediction Row contest Saturday

One of my favorite moments came when the Glen Carter Crew Chief Award was presented. Named for the club's founder – a true gentleman and a dear friend of mine – the award recognizes a member who consistently goes above and beyond.

For Janine Woodsford, that special honor brought tears to her eyes.

"I'm ecstatic!" said the club's newsletter editor, who once owned a race car that her husband, Bob, drove when the couple lived in Las Vegas. "You always hope to win this award. I worked hard for it and it means so much to me that I was selected by Glen to receive this."

By now, I'm guessing you have a good idea of just how strong the bonds of friendship are between these club members. But if you're still wondering, let's ask Silky Megan, a charter member who serves as the board's corresponding secretary.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would meet and listen to the stories told by such esteemed racing giants. Most of all, however, I love the fact that I am treated as 'one of the guys.'"

Or past president, Gerry Hafer, who started the club's newsletter in November 2006.

"Being part of what has become such a well-respected group in the motorsports world has been gratifying."

For the record, you can count me among the 147 people who are honored and humbled to carry the title of Hall of Famer. In 2006, I was asked to share my experiences of covering NASCAR and the Indy Racing League, including the day Dale Earnhardt was killed, the night Tony Stewart won the IRL Championship and Jeff Gordon's huge victory in the inaugural Cup race at the California Speedway. And a few months later, I came back to the club's banquet and proudly took my place in the Hall of Fame.

As some of you know, I've been a journalist for about 36 years. During that time, I've received my share of awards and accolades. But to this day, being inducted by this fine group of people ranks at the top of the list.

So to this year's Hall of Famers, I offer congratulations. To Carter – and I'm sure I speak for the entire club membership – thanks for starting such a wonderful organization. And to every club member, my sincere appreciation for bestowing upon me an honor that I'll always cherish.