

AMERICAN SCENE

John Robbins: Heritage, Passion & Attitude

DAVE ARGABRIGHT



INDIANAPOLIS — John Robbins has a heritage, a passion and an irrepressible positive attitude. Those are the things that will be needed to keep auto racing prospering well into the future.

He was quiet in the beginning, a small kid tagging along with his father to Anderson Speedway. His father, Larry, is the younger brother of the late Rex Robbins, founder of the American Speed Ass'n and a bona fide short-track racing pioneer. Larry would literally hoist John in his arms and carry him up the narrow stairway leading to the official's tower.

There the small boy would watch the roaring cars circle the legendary quarter-mile track, wide-eyed and excited. As the years passed, John grew taller and was soon able to navigate the stairs on his own, but he never lost that fervor for racing.

Robbins, 34, recently purchased the ICAR Top Speed Modified Tour, a touring group that features modified fields at a variety of paved Midwestern venues. The series has been renamed the NSTA Top Speed Modified Tour and Robbins is finalizing a schedule for the coming season.

It's the fulfillment of a lifelong dream for Robbins, who viewed his uncle Rex with reverence and admiration. Almost from the beginning, John was fascinated by the business elements of racing, and as he reached adulthood he yearned to build a career path into motorsports. After attending the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, Robbins has spent the past decade gaining a mix of experience both inside and outside the sport.

Rex Robbins was always honest and direct when asked about the challenges of making a living by owning a track or a racing series. He encouraged John, but his words were tempered by caution. If you are serious, you can make it happen; but understand what you are getting into.

Rex, who died in January 2016 at age 80, left a lasting mark on his nephew. John launched the National Short Track Alliance some years ago, offering management services to tracks and series throughout the U.S. With his purchase of the touring series, this will be John's first taste of ownership at a series level.

I'll make a prediction: It won't be his last.

Personable and outgoing, John Robbins has the right temperament for the sport. He is realistic and he has already built a significant level of experience inside the sport. He also has a first-class business education, with a clear grasp of the fundamentals of commerce.

A lot of promoters understand racing, but they struggle with financial and business knowledge. We've also watched smart businessmen enter our sport and fall flat because they don't understand the nuances of short-track racing. Robbins has the rare combination of a bona fide business education and a lifelong understanding of the sport.

The next few years will be invaluable for Robbins as he jumps into the deep end of the racing pool. Rex was right; running a series isn't easy. It's hard and frustrating and you take one step back for every two steps forward. The most esteemed degree from the finest university won't exempt anyone from that reality. But if nothing else John Robbins has exhibited the same drive and tenacity that helped Rex survive those brutal early years of his promotional career. That's the proper phrase to describe the life of a promoter —

survival.

A few years ago there was a growing concern in the sport as many promotional giants were — and are — nearing retirement age. It's crucial that younger people enter the sport to provide the next generation of leadership. In recent years, it's been reassuring to see younger people taking the helm at various tracks and racing series, willing to invest themselves in whatever is needed to thrive and prosper.

Personally, this scenario strikes close to home. It's exciting to have watched that small boy grow up to carve his own niche in the sport, and John has gone about it in exactly the right way.

Rex Robbins ultimately influenced thousands of people and literally shaped the sport of short-track racing during his historic run at ASA. John needn't set his goals that lofty; just build a strong series, keep the racers in the game and sell tickets. That's where it all begins.

But he already knows that. Uncle Rex told him so.

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