



# Gene Marderness

*Gene Marderness spent so much of the past six decades in the dark and dusty infields between turns one and two at race tracks across the nation that he could have established a mailing address.*

Over the years, many fans have come to identify the sport's icons through his excellent photographs, which have been featured in most racing publications. One of his latest contributions is on the cover of Doug Wolfgang's autobiography *Lone Wolf*. A dinosaur of sorts who slaved over chemicals and film canisters in earlier years, Gene enjoys the camaraderie of his fellow shooters with their digital cameras and as one of their elder statesmen, he strives hard in setting a high standard for them to follow.

Gene Dale Marderness was born on June 15, 1942, in Reinholds, Pennsylvania, to parents (and race fans) Clarence and Margaret Marderness. During his first visit to the races, at age four, he stopped to watch the race cars warm up at the Reading Fairgrounds. When they pulled the trigger and flashed by in near-proximity to the front stretch wall, Gene quickly felt a challenge to his well-being and he headed for safety – out the front gate. He was quickly reassured by his parents and promised a more fan-friendly spot for future races.

The mold was cast for his future in racing photography when his dad shared his Kodak 'Brownie' camera with Gene at the races. Gene started taking photos at Williams Grove Speedway in the late Forties and shortly acquired a better 35mm camera. One of his most-treasured oldies was taken in 1952 with the "Brownie" of one-legged speedster Bill Schindler signing autographs at the Grove. Obviously this was during the heyday of Tommy Hinnershitz, whom Gene Marderness also greatly admired.

Only the sport of baseball posed a bigger threat to his racing-oriented endeavors. Gene was a pitcher in high school, college, and at least 15 years with the semi-pros in the Lebanon (Penna.) Valley League. He was an accomplished ball player and was approached after college by a scout with the New York Mets, a deal he nixed largely because of an injured elbow. He laughs when asked if his interest in racing photography was driven by a quest for cash. He says the only time he could rely on an income from his shooting was "during a short stint as the track photographer at Collier County Speedway (Florida) from 1977 to '85."

The move to Florida, where he taught school until recently retiring, was made in 1970. During this time, he has served as the photographer for both the Tampa Bay Area Racing Association (TBARA) and the Checkered Flag Sprint Series (CFSS).

The cost of traveling has proven to be a major obstacle in Gene's endeavors, but he has seen races from coast-to-coast in his search for the perfect shot. His semi-pro baseball reimbursement wasn't going to cover his expenses, so for the majority of the time his trips were subsidized by his teaching pay.

In the late Sixties through the mid-Seventies, Gene's efforts at documenting the sport were focused on his 8mm movie filming. But, by 1976, Gene realized that still shots were the only way he could pay his way and fans today continue to reap the rewards. Gene continues to produce his beautifully-colored, razor-sharp images of the men and machines in the oh-so fleeting moments that make our sport magic. He is very respectful of the men at work, the teams, and he is not expecting any special rights to be granted with his pit pass.

He speaks glowingly of the access that he has been granted to the sport's legends, including Jan Opperman and Gary Patterson amongst others. One of his more famous photos is from the very first World of Outlaws (WoO) awards banquet in 1978, featuring Bobby Marshall, Shane Carson, Rick Nichols, Dub May, Bobby Allen, Steve Kinser, series organizer Ted Johnson, Danny Smith, Johnny Beaber, Rick Ferkel, Sammy Swindell, Lee Osborne, and Don Mack. The late Dick "Toby" Tobias was another favorite of Gene's to photograph.

He has developed many life-long friendships with members of the media, fans, and the competitors themselves. Life on the road provides opportunities to share, and a common bond is natural among the traveling band of brothers.

Gene first teamed up with supreme story-teller John Sawyer in 1977 at East Bay Raceway and they formed the perfect pairing to share their experiences at races coast-to-coast. Their works regularly appeared in *Stock Car Racing* magazine and they hounded editor Dick Berggren to produce an open-wheel racing edition. Thus, Lopez

Publications' *Open Wheel* magazine was born and shortly became the open-wheel racing fan's most-treasured possession. Gene's 1979 posed shot of Steve Kinser, Sammy Swindell and Rick Ferkel with their (non-winged) sprint cars, with Ted Johnson in the background, was featured in *Open Wheel* magazine's issue number one.

In the earlier years, most of the racing photography was on-track action. Marderness was in awe of the work of John Mahoney with his more personal up-close driver shots. As one who appreciates the artistry of those around him, Gene started concentrating on getting more portraits of the sport's icons.

Gene also credits shooter Mike Arthur, whose work he admired for years, for helping him make the transition from film to the more modern digital 'memory storage' disks. Mike continues to lend him advice on getting the best results with a computer. Marderness is amazed by anyone who races, whether they are regular winners or not. He enjoys the work of other photographers and says that as a group, they are very helpful with their advice.

Besides writer John Sawyer and photographer Gene Marderness, the 'Three Amigos' included shooter Ken Coles, whom Gene befriended in the mid-Eighties. Gene says that neither he nor Ken was particularly technical about the use of their cameras, but the results are legendary. Ken was masterful at his art and it took Gene's urging to finally get him to put his images on sale via a website. That was shortly before Ken Coles' passing away in the spring of 2010.

Gene Marderness continues to live in Fort Myers, Florida, with his wife, Sue. They have three children, Matt, and twins, Melissa and Jennifer.

By Tony Martin

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