

# chuck Merrill



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by Kathy Bell

**C**harles T. "Chuck" Merrill was born June 9, 1944, in Lincoln, Illinois. Chuck was the third child and the only son of Harold T. Merrill and Rachel Suiter Merrill. His sisters are Carolyn BeVard (husband Tom), both deceased; Joyce Letterle (husband Ken) of Lafayette, Louisiana; and Barbara Hertzfeldt (husband Tom) of Mackinaw, Illinois.

Chuck graduated from Lincoln Community High School in 1962. After trying college for a short time and deciding college was not for him, he returned to his hometown to begin his life. Although, at the time, he had no idea where his was going or what type of work he wanted to pursue.

He married in 1964 and has two lovely daughters from that marriage, Carla S. Merrill Luckhart of Sherman, Illinois; and Rachelle M. Merrill Haake (husband Jim) of St. Joseph, Illinois. He has three wonderful grandsons, Grant Allan Luckhart, Tyler James Haake and Bryce Merrill Haake. None of the grandsons care much for racing. Chuck said, "They like all sports that end in 'ball' and cars that start with 'sports'."

After going through a divorce in the early 1990's, Chuck later married Karen S. Blilie of Fridley,

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Minnesota, in October of 1999. "All of Karen's family has been supportive of my racing efforts at Maxim," Chuck said. "Ed Blilie, Karen's father, started taking her to the races at North Starr Speedway at nearby Blaine, Minnesota, when she was only three years old. The girl didn't have a chance," he said. "She has been a race fan all her life."

Karen's mother Dorothy lives in Rochester, Illinois. Her brother, Doug Blilie, and his wife Terry live in Coon Rapids, Minnesota. Her nephew, Michael Blilie, his wife Jamie and their son Levi live in

Spring Park, Minnesota. Niece Alison and her husband Aaron live in Pine Island, Minnesota, while niece Megan lives in Coon Rapids, Minnesota.

"That side of my family are all avid sprint car fans and love going with us to any races nearby," Chuck said.

Chuck Merrill began his quest for knowledge, at nineteen years old, while working for his parents Harold and Rachel in their small plumbing and septic system business in 1963. After five years, Chuck wasn't content with the size of their business and, in 1968, he and his parents decided to expand the business. The company, Merrill's Contractors, Inc., of Lincoln, Illinois, added sewer work, concrete curb & gutter, and sidewalk services to their plumbing business. Chuck built and acquired a patent on a form-riding curb/gutter and sidewalk machine in 1968. This machine helped put Merrill's on the fast-track in the contracting business.

After buying his parents stock in 1976, Merrill decided to expand the company again and bought out a faltering asphalt company in Springfield, Illinois. Already known for their quality of workmanship, Merrill's soon found themselves competing in central Illinois for private developers, along with city, county, and state government roadway projects from 1968 through 2008. In June of 2007, Chuck sold the business to one of his competitors and completed all the projects that Merrill's Contractors had on-hand by September of 2008. That marked the end of his career as a contractor. Having been an observer of his cousin Gil Suiter's sprint car team from 1980 through the spring of '83, Chuck Merrill decided to buy a sprint car and start a team of his own in May of 1983. His first driver in the well-known white and blue number 5M car was Scott Ritchhart of Lincoln, Illinois. The two were friends back then and are even closer friends today.

Danny Smith drove the number 5M car to a seventh place finish in World of Outlaws (WoO) points chase in 1984. Randy Smith and Tim Green combined to give Chuck the Knoxville Raceway "Owner of the Year" title and track championship in 1985. The team's crew chief was a twenty-year-old by the name of Dan Musselman, the '85 "Mechanic of the Year" at Knoxville Raceway. Other early drivers in the race car were 'Indy' Andy Hillenburg, Kelly Kinser, Jimmy Sills, Ronnie Standridge, Jim Moughan and a few others.

In 1984, Chuck had met a young Mark Kinser, who was driving his Kinser family-owned number 51 sprint car. He had been watching Mark's career take off and he thought Mark would become a great sprint car driver soon. During the 1980's, Chuck did a lot of experimentation with his own sprint cars. As Mark's talents grew, so did Chuck's interest in building sprint cars.

With a natural mechanical ability that Chuck acquired from his father, his self-taught skill of stick-welding, his old-fashioned hard-work ethic, an up-to-date understanding of modern materials,

combined with good business skills and knowledge learned in the construction field, Chuck decided to divert some of his energies into a new endeavor.

In late 1988, after six racing seasons of working with his race team's mechanics and listening to what other racers, car owners, and sponsors were saying they wanted or needed in a race car, Chuck started his own sprint car manufacturing business, Maxim, Inc., in Springfield, Illinois. Looking up Maxim in the dictionary, with its Greek meaning to be 'the greatest or the best,' led Chuck to the slogan, "Maxim. Simply the Best."

Johnny Herrera debuted the first Maxim sprint car in Florida in February of 1989 with mechanic Rick Pollock of Winchester, Illinois. Rocky Lee Hodges also drove the house car for a couple of months. In July of 1989, Jack Hewitt became Maxim's house car driver. Jack won several races during the remainder of 1989, including the Winter Nationals at Lanny Edwards' Devil's Bowl Speedway. Chuck hung up his car owner hat for that of a manufacturer following the 1989 season.

In 1989, during the battle between the World of Outlaws (WoO) and the short-lived United Sprint Association (USA), Chuck ran into Karl Kinser at a USA race.

"I told Karl we had put a new white Maxim roller together for him," Chuck said. "It was painted and lettered just like Karl and his driver, Steve Kinser, had been racing, with one exception, it had a sizable red Maxim logo on each side of the hood."

Chuck told Karl the car was sitting in the Maxim shop for them whenever they were ready to race it. Everything was brand new; all Karl had to do was check it over, put his motor in and race it.

After much thought, Karl told Chuck if his cars were as good as he said, he guessed he'd give it a try. And he did. The first night racing the new Maxim, Steve Kinser and Sammy Swindell had a hard fought battle at Moberly, Missouri, and Steve won the race in Chuck's Maxim race car. That was the beginning of a long-term relationship and, as far as Chuck knows, Steve and Karl have only used Maxim sprint cars from that day on. It was a great testament to the quality of his Maxim brand.

Chuck said, "Karl, Steve, Mark and I always had a great working relationship and a close friendship throughout their sprint car days together." He said that when Steve came back from his time with NASCAR and he needed a new car as quickly as possible, he called Chuck. Steve still races a Maxim today, and so does his son Craig.

It should be noted that Tony Stewart's 1995 United States Auto Club (USAC) title was won in a Glen Niebel-owned Maxim non-winged sprint car. Other USAC drivers that have won championships in Maxim sprint cars are Levi Jones and Bryan Clauson.

Why would a busy man working long hours at his Merrill's Contractors company, and already flying off in the company plane to races as a car owner, take on yet another huge undertaking? "Because the opportunity was there and I was becoming burned out from my contracting job. I needed something new and different to work on," Chuck said.

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## CHUCK MERRILL

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"I knew the mechanical side of the business from being a contractor and from being a hands-on car owner. Ironically, when I owned sprint cars, I did the motor work and my mechanic did the setup on the race car. I had wanted to become more involved with the race cars for several years.

"I built Maxim, Inc., from the ground up," he said. I took some of the dimensions off of my old car, and instead of having the tubes go straight-across, we semi-stacked the front and rear tubes. For the first couple of years, that is all we built. They were fast race cars. We had other ideas and, with Karl's input, we built what we called a K-Kar. A lot of years went by, and we continually improved our race cars all of the time. And Maxim still keeps current with all new technology and materials," Chuck said.

Due to the experience and innovative ideas of Chuck Merrill and Karl Kinser, as well as from other people, and the ability to perform research and development with Mark Kinser and Steve Kinser through the house cars, Maxim's position in sprint car racing has held steady at the front of the class.

"I was younger back then with a lot more energy," Chuck said. "I pretty much covered the complete Midwest and I went from time-to-time to California and Pennsylvania. We have customers throughout the United States and I tried to see as many of them race as I could. It was easier then because I had my own airplane to fly to the races in. I could leave my day job late in the day on Wednesday, fly to a race and be back by 1 or 2 a.m., then be back to work at the contracting company by 8 the next morning," he said. "On the weekend, I might leave work by 3 p.m. on Friday and go to races until the checkered flag dropped on Sunday night, which left me a couple of hours to sleep until I had to be back to work by 7 or 8 Monday morning."

Chuck said Maxim doesn't really have down time. The busiest time of the year for them begins in October and goes to the first part of April in the United States. Then in April, they start building cars for their Australian and New Zealand customers. They have been involved in the Australian market for the last fifteen years or more.

His list of drivers who support or have supported Maxim is endless. Over the years, a few of the drivers who have shown their loyalty to Maxim include Tim Green, Jimmy Sils, Brent Kaeding, Brian Brown, Jac Haudenschild, Jason Meyers, Jason Statler, Randy Smith, Randy Kinser, Daryn Pittman, Joey Saldana, Jason Johnson, Johnny Herrera, Danny Merrell, Joe Beaver, Tony Bruce, Bronson Maeschen, Gary Wright, Greg Hodnett, Lance Dewease, Donnie Kreitz Jr., Craig Dollansky, Billy Pauch, Stevie Smith, Austin McCarl, Kyle Larson, Sarah Fisher, Jessica Zemken, and Erin Crocker. The Maxim name is also known for quality, thanks to the news media. Dave Despain did Erin Crocker's first WoO sprint car win interview at the Maxim shop, and Sarah Fisher mentioned her Indy Car 'handling like a Maxim' in a television interview.

Chuck said one rule he has always tried to follow is to not interfere with drivers and their relationships with other chassis builders. Maxim has had a lot of great national, regional and local drivers, in the 305-, 360- and 410-cubic-inch sprint car divisions, sitting in the cockpits of their sprint cars.

Along with the Kinser's, Chuck has also had a long friendship with great sprint car owners like Jack and Carol Elden, Bob Hampshire, Tom and Kay Wimmer, Tom and Sherri Leidig, Bob and Jane Berryhill, Gary Wright, Bruce and Bev Thompson, and several others. He said many of his customers know that his cell phone is on 24/7 and regularly call, text or e-mail him, so he's aware of what is going on with their team and the racing world.

"The best part of being in the sprint car business is all of the good people you meet and the friendships you make over the long haul. He said he takes a lot of pride in watching Maxim race cars do well, no matter whose team or driver it is. According to Chuck, Maxim has and continues to rack up thousands of wins. When Chuck last kept track in 2012, Maxim sprint cars were winning over 100 races a month at different tracks throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and even South Africa.

"Everyone has an ego, and I know I have one too," he said. "It has always been rewarding for me to watch Maxim cars win races. I've always felt by having a better race car, I can help a guy win a race and help his financial situation, whether he's rich or poor. If they can do better in a Maxim by even one or two spots, third to first, last to tenth, then a Maxim pays for itself in no time."

"I've always been concerned about safety, whether I was a car owner or building the cars," Chuck said. "I have always concentrated on the roll cage and keeping it as strong and safe as we can. You let the front of the car collapse, bend or whatever it wants to do in a hard crash. That's not where the driver is. You must protect the drivers first and foremost. You've got to build a strong cage for them to sit in. That's the key and that's what Maxim has always concentrated on. After twenty-five years, our efforts have been and still are

focused towards safety and keeping the driver from injury. We have gained on safety over the years. However, we are about to become better. A new joint racing safety foundation named Motorsports Safety Education Foundation, Inc., or MSEF, is being formed in 2014. The MSEF headquarters will be in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Chuck said, "It takes a lot of hard work and dedication by all Maxim's personnel to construct a perfect, safe and fast race car."

He said one key to quality is working with Maxim's welders and machinists and offering them guidance in a craft in which to make a decent wage. He said, "It takes time to develop a welder just like it does to develop a sprint car driver."

The one business problem Chuck foresees is trying to meet all the needs of every one of Maxim's customers in the short off-season. It seems to get shorter every year. In the early winter of 2014-15, a group plans on racing in Yuma, Arizona; everyone will want their new model race car at the same time.

According to Chuck, "We will do the best we can. Maxim personnel work the hours they have to work in order to keep every customer happy. Service is the biggest thing in the sprint car manufacturing business. The personnel at Maxim work hard to give Maxim customers great service and I think we have done a very good job over the years. Fast service and high-quality products combine for the key to success in this business."

Merrill said, "I didn't build Maxim all by myself, that's for sure. Without my wife, Karen Merrill, by my side the last twenty years, I would not have achieved my goals."

Maxim has a lot of dedicated people who work hard. However, the toughest job at Maxim is the office manager's position and Marilyn Guitierrez is among the best in the business. Marilyn has been a key factor of Maxim's success since day one. Marilyn has put up with Chuck for over thirty years and is at Maxim every day to cheerfully greet everyone that enters the door. Merrill said, "I know Karen and I have poured thousands of hours and many long days and nights into Maxim's business over the years. We still do the work because we love being a part of such an exciting business and because of the many friend we have made over the years."

Chuck Merrill of Maxim, Inc., has been named the North American Sprint Car Poll's "Builder/Manufacturer of the Year" a total of eight times, including in both the '360' and '410' classes. Thirteen (13) World of Outlaws (WoO) point championships have been won by Maxim teams. Ten (10) Knoxville Nationals victories have been earned by Maxim teams.

Chuck served on the board of directors of the non-profit National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum Foundation, Inc., from 1993 to '98, including serving as board president in 1996-97.

Chassis-builder Chuck Merrill and engine-builder Earl Gaerte initiated the museum's sprint car raffle program and donated the first raffle sprint car for the fundraising benefit of the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum when they were both on the board of directors in 1995. The sprint car raffle program has raised approximately one million dollars over the last twenty years for the museum foundation.

Chuck said, "I have always tried to give back to our racing community in a variety of ways. Also, Maxim treats our customers, owners, drivers, race fans, business associates and others we conduct business with like we want to be treated. One has to be firm but fair to survive in this tough industry. I know we, at Maxim, have done a reasonably good job in that aspect of our everyday business. We are grateful to all our customers and friends, past and present, for helping keep Maxim 'Simply the Best!'"

Chuck and Karen Merrill continue to live today in Springfield, Illinois, the home of Maxim, Inc.