

TOM MARCHESE

by Al Krause

No man has had more influence on the growth of auto racing in Milwaukee than Tom Marchese. He promoted races from 1929 through 1968, covering nearly all of the major developments in the sport on the one-mile track at Wisconsin State Fair Park, attracting more than five million paying patrons.

Tom Marchese was born in 1899 in St. Agatha, Sicily, the third of six children of Luigi and Gaetanna Marchese. Luigi came to America and settled on the rough lower east side of Milwaukee in 1902. He sent for his wife and four children, Joseph (Joe), Tony, Tom and Anna, to join him two years later. Luigi and Gaetanna had two more boys, Carl and Salvatore (Tudy), in 1905 and 1907, respectively.

As an immigrant youth, Tom quit school at age eleven and began working a variety of jobs: paper boy, shoeshine boy, trucker, shoe-trimmer, and chocolate shipper. In 1918, he began to work as a mechanic at the Holmes Motor Company, a Ford dealership where he was soon joined by his younger brothers. On the side, the Marchese brothers constructed a midget racing car using a Henderson motorcycle engine on a platform wooden body. In 1922, they moved on to a Model T dirt car, utilizing a Rajo cylinder head built by Joe Jagersberger of Racine. Carl was the designated driver.

Not long after his brother Joe started a grading and excavating business, Tom and Tony converted a portion of the building into an auto showroom and repair shop with Carl and Tudy, aptly named the Marchese Brothers Garage.

Throughout the 1920s, Tom sold and serviced a variety of automotive brands, including Rickenbacker, Star, Gardner, Falcon-Knight, Auburn, Plymouth-Chrysler and Pontiac. In the meantime, Tudy joined Carl in the sprint car driving business at tracks like Cedarburg, Beaver Dam, DePere and Madison in Wisconsin, Roby and Hammond in Indiana, and Hawthorne in Illinois. In late 1927, Tom and Joe had finally amassed enough money to purchase a 122-cubic-inch Miller Special from Andy Burt of Chicago, which Carl drove with good success. One year later, they purchased a second Miller Special from Harry "Slim" Heinle of Crown Point, Indiana. Carl took the new car and Tudy the older one.

After Carl finished fourth and earned \$4,350 in the 1929 Indianapolis 500 in the lighter car wrenched by Tom, the Marchese brothers became state heroes. So much so that Ralph Ammon, manager of Wisconsin State Fair Park, asked Tom if he'd like to try his hand at promoting a sprint car race. Ammon was tired of dealing with traveling circuit promoters like Ralph Hankinson of the American Automobile Association (AAA) and J. Alex Sloan of the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA).

"I agreed to do it with some misgivings,"

Marchese stated. "I wasn't sure I had the savvy."

But the day was a triumph for the Marchese clan, for the race drew about 6,000 spectators. They saw Carl finish second to Gus Schrader in the 50-mile feature on July 21, 1929. After that, Tom knew where his destiny lay.

In the early '30s, Marchese was able to secure a few AAA sprint car dates. One of them was a 100-miler set for July 16, 1933.



Tom Marchese

But after heavy rains washed out the proceedings after time trials, a committee of drivers headed by Wilbur Shaw prevailed upon Marchese to run the race the next day. So, at 5:30 p.m. Monday, when most Milwaukee residents were sitting down to dinner, the race started. And the winner? Why, Wilbur Shaw, of course, as a crowd of 4,000 or so looked on. "It was a learning experience," was Marchese's rueful comment.

In 1938, Marchese was awarded the contract for the weekly midget auto races on the one-fifth mile dirt track at the fair park. That same year, Marchese formed Wisconsin Auto Racing Association, Inc. Regular crowds of up to 12,000 were not uncommon.

Marchese continued to promote the midget races and an occasional 'big car' date, until 1942, when World War II gas and tire rationing brought racing to a halt. After the war, Marchese resumed the midget car shows and finally, in September, 1946, he was given exclusive promotional rights for all auto races at Wisconsin State Fair Park.

Starting in 1947, and for the next 30 seasons, the one-mile oval at the fair park was the site of more national championship races annually than any other major track in the country. A pattern developed over the years in which five to seven big races were held annually with total paid attendance anywhere from 150,000 to 180,000.

In 1948, modified stock car racing came into the picture, both on the quarter-mile clay track and the mile speedway. After scheduling only one or two races for stocks the first three years, Marchese scheduled four stock car races in 1952, a pattern that would continue into the late 1970's. In addition, two Indianapolis-type champ car races were slated each summer. So profitable did the races become for contestants, that many car owners and drivers would not make their racing commitments until after the fair park schedule was released. Marchese also ran weekly modified and jalopy races, and he helped organize the short-lived National Midget Auto Racing Circuit.

When the AAA closed down its auto racing activities in late 1955, Marchese was one of the prime movers in the formation of the United States Auto Club (USAC), along with Indianapolis Motor Speedway owner Anton "Tony" Hulman, Indianapolis business executive Tom Binford and others. Marchese was one of the first appointees to the newly-formed USAC board of directors. For his many contributions to the club, the USAC board gave Marchese a special award in 1966, saluting his 37 years of auto racing promotions.

The development of the Wisconsin State Fair Park Speedway is one of Marchese's main accomplishments. He played a major role in the paving of the one-mile dirt track in April, 1954. Gone were the days of deep ruts, flying rocks and clods of dirt, or choking dust, and as he said, "having the fans go home looking like coal miners."

Through all these years, Marchese won other awards. In 1950 and 1951, he was voted "Promoter of the Year" after a poll of his peers by Speed Age magazine. In 1952, his AAA contemporaries voted him a similar honor. That would be followed by awards from Unico, the national Italian fraternal organization, and the United Service Organization (USO) for the tickets he had provided for wounded veterans at Wood, Wisconsin.

But 1967 would be the year tragedy struck the Marchese family. In March, Tom's wife Millie was fatally burned in a Milwaukee hotel fire. Less than two months later, his brother Tudy, who retired as a midget driver in 1935, died after a long illness. The final blow was in September, when his son Tommy was fatally injured in an auto accident not far from the family home at White Lake, Wisconsin.

Later that year, Marchese sold Wisconsin Auto Racing to John Kaishian, the successful promoter of Hales Corners Speedway. Tom remained as president until his retirement in 1976. Carl Marchese, who retired as a big car driver in 1929, died in 1984, after years of helping Tom at Wisconsin State Fair Park as race director. Tom passed away in 1990 and was preceded in death by son Louis from his first marriage, and son Thomas from his marriage to Millie. Tom and Millie are survived by their daughter Tana, who married David Salvaggio, and their children: Donald, Thomas and David, Jr.