

Community News

Jews in NASCAR? Surprising But True!

By Steve Goldberg

Baseball has always been considered a popular sport amongst Jews. Basketball as well, and football. Golf and tennis, too. But NASCAR? Not so much.

But when race week for the Bank of America 500 at the Charlotte Motor Speedway begins the second week in October, the Jewish presence at the track will be significant.

About a dozen or so years ago, I was sitting with a some other journalists between interview sessions on the annual January NASCAR Media Tour. Aside from our common appreciation for the sport, we quickly realized that among the 200 writers, photographers, and broadcasters there, we were the only ones as far as we knew who were Jewish.

Mike Harris, who lived in Raleigh, was the motorsports editor for the Associated Press at the time. Lewis Franck lived in the homeland of New York City and was a contributor to Reuters and *Autoweek* among others, while I wrote on NASCAR for publications including *Time*, *Business North Carolina*, and *Charlotte Magazine*.

What prompted our discussion was the fact that the entertainment outing for that year's tour was going to be a visit to The Comedy Zone where Borsch Belt comedian Jackie Mason was rehearsing his upcoming Broadway show. Had they thought this out? It was tough enough to understand Mason's hard core New York delivery when you were Jewish. For all these mostly southern-based NASCAR media, we thought we would have to translate.

And thus was born the Jewish Motorsports Press Association. Mike, Lewis, and I were the charter members of this group that didn't then and doesn't now officially exist. But we had a mission. We would translate Mason's Yiddish-laced delivery to the good ol' boys and then lobby for kosher hot dogs at the track and a Jewish driver in NASCAR's diversity program.

The three of us tried to think of a Jewish stock car driver we could adopt as the champion of our cause and immediately thought of Greg Sacks who raced on NASCAR's top two levels from 1983 to 2005, winning the Firecracker 400 in 1985. After all, he was from Long Island and his father's name was Arnie. He has a daughter named Rachel. But we're still not sure about him.

Thanks to Buz McKim, the historian for the NASCAR Hall of Fame, I've recently learned that the 50s and 60s saw several drivers with Jewish roots drive on NASCAR's top level, guys with names that sounded more like law firm partners than gearheads. Danny Weinberg won a Grand National, now the Sprint Cup series, race in Hanford, CA, in 1951 driving a Studebaker. Racing under the name Ben Benz, Bernard Friedland from Far Rockaway, Long Island, started nine Grand National races in 1958-59.

Others who could possibly get

mentioned in an Adam Sandler racing-themed Hanukkah song include Paul Goldsmith who won the last stock car race run on the Daytona Beach road course in 1958 and Larry Frank who won the Southern 500 in 1962. But like Sacks, there's no definitive answer yet.

For sure there's Gene Felton, an Atlanta born UNC graduate who only ran one Cup race, the Dixie 500 in 1976, but who was very successful as a road racer, winning four IMSA titles and competing at the famed 24 Hours of LeMans. Felton now restores old stock cars for buyers who want a little extra horsepower on their morning commute.

So the JMPA still isn't an actual organization, but perhaps it should be.

In the following years as NASCAR grew to be one of America's biggest sports, so did the press corps and pretty soon you could organize a minyan in the media center. Jenna Fryer is the lead on NASCAR for the AP now. Viv Bernstein covers for the *New York Times*. There's Bob Pockrass at *The Sporting News*, Jeff Gluck at *USA Today*, and Robert Edelstein, who wrote a biography of Charlotte Motor Speedway co-founder Curtis Turner, at *TV Guide*. Randy Covitz is the racing writer for the *Kansas City Star*. The editor in chief for Speed.com, now seemingly folded into the overall Fox Sports site, is Tom Jensen, who as Viv Bernstein wrote in her blog, was organizing his son's upcoming Bar Mitzvah party at the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

Former members of the NASCAR's ink stained kvetches were Seth Livingston at *USA Today* and Sarah Rothschild for the *Miami Herald*.

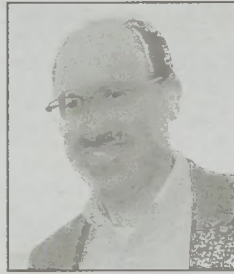
On the broadcast side, Eli Gold, who also voices Alabama football, works for the NASCAR owned Motor Racing Network. Through Viv, I learned that Steve Richards, a pit reporter for Performance Racing Network radio is a member of the tribe, and shares the same real last name as Jon Stewart, which is Leibowitz.

Then there is Steve Newmark who is not only Jewish but one of the most influential men in NASCAR as president of Roush Fenway Racing.

He's not the first member of the tribe to hold a high position in NASCAR. Texan Kenny Bernstein gained fame as a champion drag racer, the first driver to exceed 300 mph. Bernstein also owned a NASCAR team from 1986-95, notching three Sprint Cup wins with drivers Ricky Rudd and Brett Bodine.

Max Siegel, currently the CEO of USA Track and Field, the son of a Jewish father and African-American mother, served as President of Global Operations for Dale Earnhardt, Inc., the race team started by the late NASCAR champion from 2007-09.

Until June of 2012, Jay Abraham had spent 11 years at NASCAR as COO of the NASCAR Media group and Pres-



NASCAR's Steve Newmark

ident and CEO of NASCAR Images.

Jon Schwarz is the Senior Director of Integrated Marketing Communications for NASCAR in New York City, joining the circuit from Bank of America in 2011.

On the sponsorship side, local Jewish owned businesses helped the wheels go round for race teams and tracks. Radiator Specialty Company, the business started by I.D. Blumenthal and his brother Herman in Charlotte, was a supplier and sometimes sponsor of NASCAR teams, including driver Buddy Baker, with their Liquid Wrench, Gunk, and Solder Seal products.

Rockingham, North Carolina, is famous for four things. One is "The Rock," the speedway that hosted a pair of Sprint Cup races for four decades until 2004. The other three are Levines - Sherman, Leon, and Alvin, who, like NASCAR, found their center in Charlotte. Leon's Family Dollar Stores have sponsored cars on the Nationwide Series in the past.

A lawyer by trade, Newmark is responsible for the multimillion

dollar business side of one of the top teams in NASCAR that fields cars for star drivers Carl Edwards, Greg Biffle, Ricky Stenhouse, Jr., Trevor Bayne and Travis Pastrana. They've won two Sprint Cup and

four Nationwide Series Championships.

The son of the son of the son of a rabbi, he grew up in Chapel Hill,

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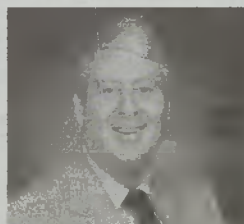
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Milton Goldstein, CLTC
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Charlotte, NC: (704) 442-5618
Cell: (205) 907-0670
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