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Larry Phillips: NASCAR's Only Five-Time Winston Racing Champion

NASCAR fans take pride in knowing everything possible about their favorite driver. Most fans can tell you how many races their driver has won, how old they are, and many other facts. But not many fans know the true story of how several top names in NASCAR actually got started.

Larry Phillips, of Springfield, Missouri, a race car builder and driver, died of cancer in 2004. However, his impact on NASCAR will continue to be felt for years to come.

Rusty and Kenny Wallace, Mark Martin and Ken Schrader are a few of the drivers who credit Phillips with helping launch their careers. And Phillips is the only person ever to win five NASCAR Winston Racing Series championships.

Kendall Bell and David Zeszutek have written a biography of Phillips titled *Larry Phillips: NASCAR's Only Five-Time Winston Racing Series Champion; Master of the Short Track* (\$18.95, Bella Rosa Books, ISBN 978-1-933523-95-8) that tells the story of this man who veteran NASCAR driver Rusty Wallace said was the first person he knew of who could actually earn a living in racing. "He showed us that you could race and make a good living. Back then, nobody was doing that," said Wallace.

Phillips had a no-nonsense reputation, Wallace said.

"If you were hanging around his shop just talking about everything but racing, he'd flip you a quarter and say, 'Here, call someone who cares,' " Wallace said. "But if you wanted to know anything about a race car, he could tell you. Larry loved racing and loved talking about racing. But he didn't have time for people who wanted to waste his time."

Phillips also made quite a statement on the tracks.

'He'd sell you a car and then build one for himself. Then he'd come out and beat you on the track. I mean you were going to get beat," said NASCAR veteran driver Ken Schrader.

Mark Martin says that Phillips is the only driver he would pay to watch race.

If Phillips felt that a car wasn't handling as it should, he could usually figure out the problem quite easily. Once he couldn't figure out how a certain spring reacted during a race, so he cut a hole in the firewall and, while speeding around the track, had his young son Terry stick his head through the hole to see the spring's reaction to stress in the curves.

Phillips was seriously burned in a wreck at a track in Fort Smith, Ark. His hands were so badly burned that doctors didn't think he would ever race again. Four months later, Phillips proved them wrong.

Racing wasn't the only thing Phillips loved. He bought a helicopter and later flew himself to and from the tracks. And when he wasn't flying or driving a race car, Phillips was often spotted riding his motorcycle. Several of his fellow drivers often joined Phillips for motorcycle rides through the Ozark countryside.

But it was racing that Phillips enjoyed the most. He raced at tracks all across the country, but mostly in Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

This book gives readers a first-hand look at life as a race car driver. And the authors tell it like it really happened by including comments from former competitors and race track promoters. From his humble beginnings to his glory days, Phillips remained focused on his goal to succeed. Former competitors who admit freely that they didn't care much for Larry when he first arrived on the scene, became close friends who visited with Larry often as he fought the disease.

When Larry died, former competitors, track officials and what seemed to be the entire population of Springfield, turned out for his funeral. The *Springfield News-Leader* newspaper covered it and ran a large photo showing the expansive funeral procession that was led by many of his motorcycle-riding friends.

Fans will want to get this book and read more about the man who preferred to race on the short tracks, whether they were dirt or asphalt. And by winning an unprecedented five Winston Racing Series championships, Larry Phillips proved why many people still refer to him as "the master of the short track."