

Billy Garcia's need for speed

Retired racer shares experiences with motor racing club

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By Jessica Green

Adjusting to The Villages lifestyle hasn't been difficult for retired racer Billy Garcia.

Well, except for acclimating to the – much – slower speed of his golf cart.

"When I first moved here, I just couldn't take it," he said to members of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.

Many in the audience nodded emphatically; after all, this is a group that loves to go fast.

Garcia is a former privateer who raced midgets, sprint cars, modifieds and super modifieds, but before he shared details from his interesting career as the group's May meeting guest speaker, he illustrated how his mind always seems to gravitate toward speed.

"I've already thought, 'I wonder how you could make this faster?'" he said, holding up a remote-controlled car that sat on a table near the podium.

That sort of thinking got its start when the Village of Bonnybrook resident was just 9 years old.

Garcia's father worked as the photographer for several tracks near Sacramento, Calif., and while he was snapping photos Garcia would work the crowd selling soda and popcorn.

He finally got his chance to climb behind the wheel at age 20, and he admits the experience was a lot different than he'd imagined.

"I drove it and I was scared to death. When I hit the backstretch I thought, 'This is stupid,'" he said.

But more experienced drivers he knew assured him that was normal – so he gave it another try. And another. And another.

Then, in 1970, he got his first car – a modified sprint car that he raced at Capitol Speedway. He built his second car in 1972 with the help of a local speed shop.

In 1980, Garcia began racing full time for Don Tognotti, an auto shop and race car owner in Sacramento. The following year, Garcia drove 103,000 miles in more than 100 races in 27 states.

"Once you start racing, it's in the blood. Then once you start becoming successful it gets easier – but it also gets harder."

A conflicting statement, but as Garcia spoke, it made sense.



Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun
Billy Garcia, a retired auto racer, holds a drawing of his car from a 9-year-old fan as he speaks during a meeting of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club on Wednesday at Colony Cottage Recreation Center.

"It gets easier to race because you know what to expect," he said.

However, there are more events, higher costs, greater expectations and more time spent on developing the car and making it faster, he said.

All that took a huge amount of time and dedication and, with the exception of the almost four years he raced for Tognotti, he did it while holding a full-time job.

Time well spent

Even though it was difficult at times, Garcia said he wouldn't trade his time spent on the track or the road.

Garcia raced as part of ESPN's Saturday Night Thunder while driving midgets in the United States Auto Club series; he drove sprint cars in the World of Outlaws sprint car series, and in the All Star Circuit of Champions Series, even had a stint doing research and development driving for Tognotti.

"There's nothing we raced in that we didn't finish in the top 10," he said.

And Garcia told the audience he says "we" a lot for a reason.

"In racing, you don't do anything alone," he said, crediting his wife for being his most dedicated crew member and doing everything from grooving tires and cleaning nozzles to being a housekeeper and a fundraiser.

"She would go in these small-town Laundromats and take over the place; and with not just my clothes, but she would do laundry for all these guys – Freddy Linder, Lee Osbourne and Bobby Allen – while we'd be out racing. Then she would sell T-shirts and things when we got low on money," he said.

The couple saw a lot of the road, because much of Garcia's racing career was spent chasing the higher-paying, big events in different series such as the Knoxville Nationals, the World of Outlaws Premier Race in Dallas, and the Turkey Night Grand Prix for Midgets – not chasing points.

"I always thought about racing as hard as I could, and picking up as many wins as I could wherever I went; I never really thought about picking up the points (necessary to win a series championship)," he said.

Until 2004.

That's when Garcia committed to racing a wingless sprint car in the Central State Racing Association's program.

He took the championship title.

And he did it again in 2005.

However, before he won the championship for the second year in a row, he was involved in a wreck and did "a pretty nasty barrel roll," he said.

"I didn't know I was hurt. I didn't think I was hurt. I just wanted to get the guy who got me," he told the audience.

When to quit

But winning the top honors back-to-back combined with injury allowed the question, "When should you quit?" to resurface.

In the end, Garcia decided to retire while on top and moved to The Villages with his wife in 2005 after the series ended.

However, he'll never forget what it's like to drive a sprint car, which he says people often ask him to describe.

"It feels like (the car) wants to tear your head off. You've got pressure on your chest and dirt hitting your face... but it's thrilling," he said with a smile.