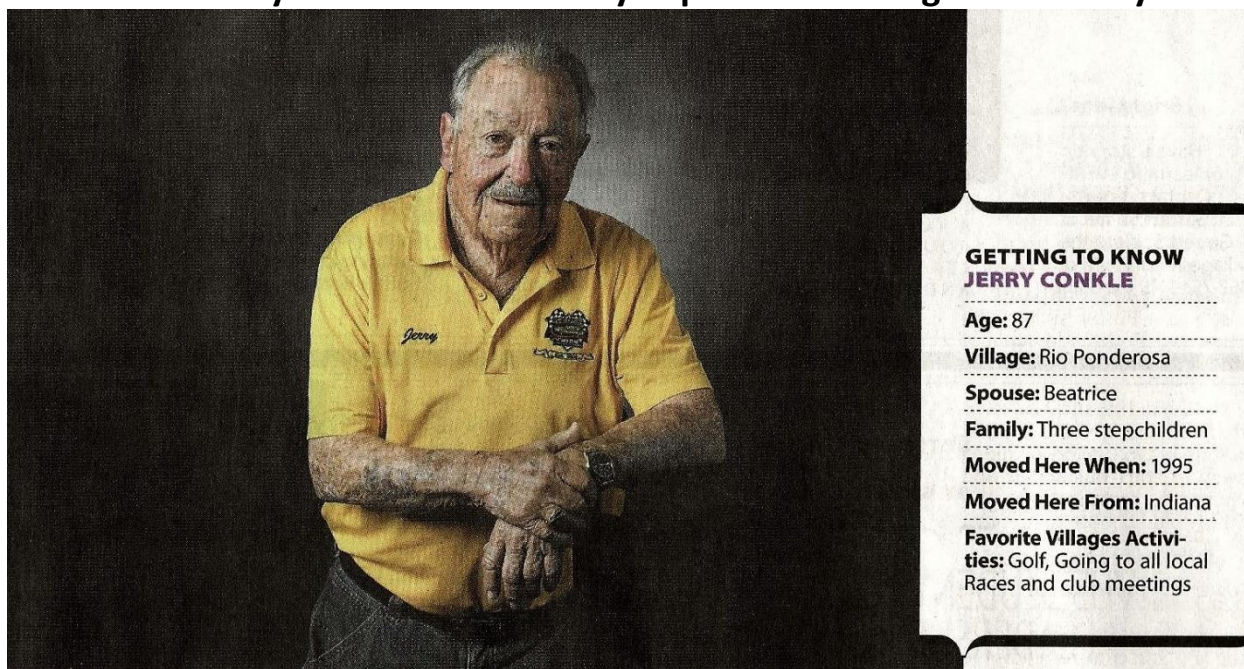


# Villager Backstory

You may know Jerry Conkle for being a past president of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club, but you may not know that he worked for Delco Motors for 40 years and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the Indy 500.



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By James Dinan

If you were asked to name the Indianapolis 500 winner who was born with six toes on his right foot, would you know it?

Jerry Conkle was asked that question from the man who worked as a photographer at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for 49 years.

“Six toes? Easy, Louis Meyer,” said Conkle, of the Village Rio Ponderosa. “He won the race three times in the 1920s and 30s.”

So the photographer asked Conkle another question – when was the only time an Indy race happened at Daytona International Speedway?

“I said 1959,” Conkle said. “I was then asked the specific month and day. Without hesitation, I said April 4.”

Racing has always been in Conkle’s blood. Born and raised in Muncie, Indiana, Conkle remembers going to the races with his parents when he was a child.

“They started up again after World War II and I quickly became a regular,” he said. “When I was 15, I hitchhiked 50 miles to go to a race across the street from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, then I went to my first Indy 500.”

After high school, Conkle went to work with Delco Battery in Muncie. Part of the General Motors family, Conkle was there for just over 40 years.

"I worked as a tool maker and machinery repairman," he said. "I had to go to trade school for two years to learn how to do this."

For some people, a car battery is nothing more than something purchased at the store or for a mechanic to install in the car. But actually creating a battery in the factory is hard work.

"It takes a lot of machines to make a battery," Conkle said. "There's a stacker that stacks plates, machines to melt the lead and injection molding machines. It's not an easy process, but I enjoyed every minute of it."

Conkle said it was a learning experience every day at the factory. It also could be dangerous given modern standards.

"I had to work with PVC, lead, asbestos and acid," he said. "I'm very lucky to get out unscathed."

But Conkle found time to have fun outside the factory. He raced go-carts for several years and traveled to see races around the country.

"I've seen 40 races in person at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway," he said. "I'm primarily an open-wheel racing fan, but I like them all."

He's also quite the avid golfer, making 15 holes-in-one in four states.

"My first hole-in-one was at a course in Mississippi on February 11, 1971," Conkle said. "I've shot my age 640 times and counting."

And it was during a golf trip that Conkle and his wife, Beatrice, discovered The Villages. The two made a stop in Florida's Friendliest Hometown in 1994 while en route to a golf course in Ocala.

"There were only two championship golf courses in The Villages at the time of our initial visit," he said. "We watched the bridge being built over U.S. Highway 27/441. My wife loved it, but said we couldn't come back unless we buy a home. So we did and moved here for good in 1995."

Today, Jerry still plays golf twice a week and exercises four times a week. He's won two super senior golf championships, and he's part of The Villages Motor Racing F&I Club, serving as its president for three years.

"The club does several things," he said. "We have a guest speaker every month. We've had four Daytona 500 winners as speakers and several journalists. We have our own Hall of Fame for people who have spoken at club meetings. And it's not just auto racers. We've had mechanics, boat and motorcycle racers, even a horse racing jockey."

And there's plenty of time to check out some racing across Florida. Jerry regularly checks out the races at 14 Florida tracks.

"I watched the USAC Sprint Cars in action in Ocala last month," he said. "I also went to Daytona International Speedway for Daytona 500 weekend this year. We checked out several races, including the ARCA race and the NASCAR Xfinity Series. I've made so many friends and memories from moving to The Villages."