

Larry Croom shares racing beat stories with The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club

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By Larry D. Croom

From covering the tragic death of Dale Earnhardt to an odd encounter with model Cindy Crawford to 14 days in a small motorhome, Villages-News.com's Larry D. Croom shared stories from his 20-plus years of covering motor racing on Saturday night with members of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club.



Retired NASCAR driving legend Ernie Irvan, left, of Ocala, and Villages-News.com's Larry D. Croom attend The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club's annual Hall of Fame banquet on Saturday night.

Croom, who helped founder Glen Carter start the club in 2006, served as the keynote speaker for the group's annual Hall of Fame banquet, which was held at La Hacienda Recreation Center. The banquet honors those associated with auto racing who have spoken to the club during the past year. And this year's class was among the greatest ever inducted, as it included retired driving legend Ernie Irvan, who lives in Ocala, and award-winning writer and broadcaster Dick Berggren, a former driver who is known for his trademark flat cap and telling gripping stories from an unbiased perspective.

Croom is a member of the club's inaugural Hall of Fame and said the honor of speaking to the group on its biggest night of the year was very special to him.



The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club's 2018 Hall of Fame class includes, from left: Bob Jobes, Mike Anderson, Ernie Irvan, Bob Lupini, Buz McKim, Lori Sheppard and Bruce Jarvis. Dick Berggren, Joie Chitwood III and Bobby Diehl weren't able to attend Saturday night's banquet but also were inducted.

"This club has always been near and dear to me," he said. "I've made many great friends here over the years and I'm honored to be asked to speak to such an outstanding group of people. I've had an interesting career when it comes to motorsports, but the stories these folks tell from their days in racing are what makes this club very unique and special."

Croom took members of the audience on a journey through his days of covering several different forms of auto racing, starting with his first NASCAR Cup Series race where a young up-and-comer named Jeff Gordon took the checkered flag in the inaugural event at the California Speedway in Fontana, Calif.

"He was young and really pumped up," Croom said. "Luckily, his crew chief, Ray Evernham, was as cool as they come and he kept Gordon focused all the way to Victory Lane."

Croom also shared a funny story about a chance encounter with supermodel Cindy Crawford while covering an Indy Car race at the California racetrack. Croom said he opened the door to come out of the facility's media center, heard a loud thump and caught a young woman in his arms as she was falling to the ground.

"Suddenly, I realized I'd smacked Cindy Crawford with a huge metal door," he said. "She looked a bit dazed and she smiled while telling me not to worry about it. And luckily, her extremely large boyfriend who was standing behind her was friendly. Otherwise, my day would have been ruined."



Left: Ocala's Ernie Irvan, who won 15 races in the Cup Series and was voted one of NASCAR's 50 greatest drivers, was inducted into The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club's Hall of Fame on Saturday night.

Right: Villager John Angiolo thanks his fellow club members after receiving the Glen Carter Crew Chief Award.

Croom also talked about his days as executive editor of the Fort Pierce Tribune in South Florida and the newspaper's extensive NASCAR coverage, which involved 13 writers and photographers living in a motorhome outside turn four of the Daytona International Speedway for 14 straight days.

"There were some great moments from those two years of extreme coverage," he said. "But let me offer this piece of advice – never, ever stay with 13 sloppy journalists in a motorhome made for eight responsible people. It simply doesn't work out well, no matter how you cut it.

Croom also shared his thoughts on one of the most tragic days in racing – the 2001 Daytona 500 that claimed the life of NASCAR's biggest name, Dale Earnhardt, on the final lap of the race.

"It was one of the toughest stories I've ever had to write," said Croom, who covered the event for three different media companies. "I knew by the way the rescue crews were reacting and the fact that the traffic was stopped for the ambulance to take him to Halifax Medical Center that it wasn't good. But you snap into that journalist mode and you do the job. I had the story almost completely written by the time the official announcement of Earnhardt's death was released.

"It was a long drive home that night through the dark Ocala National Forest and all I could think about was how much his family and fans were suffering from his tragic and sudden death."

In addition to Irvan – one of Croom's all-time favorite drivers – and Berggren, the club inducted Mike Anderson, Joie Chitwood III, Bobby Diehl, Bruce Jarvis, Bob Jobes, Bob Lupini, Buz McKim and Lori Sheppard into their Hall of Fame. They became members of the 12th Hall of Fame class and joined the ranks of the many others who have spoken to the club and shared their racing stories over the past several years.



Villages-News.com's Larry D. Croom was presented with a framed certificate by Mike Anderson for serving as the keynote speaker at The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club's annual Hall of Fame banquet on Saturday night.