

NASCAR Legend Marvin Panch Will Be Missed, But Not Forgotten

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By Larry D. Croom

I wish I had had the pleasure of meeting former NASCAR driver Marvin Panch. It would've been fantastic to pick the brain of the 1961 Daytona 500 winner and learn more about the day he drove an afterthought of sorts – a 1960 Pontiac Catalina – to Victory Lane at the World Center of Racing, beating the likes of his teammate, Fireball Roberts, and other hotshot drivers like Joe Weatherly, Fred Lorenzen, Ned Jarrett and Buck Baker, to name a few. And it would've been wonderful to hear Panch talk about delivering the keynote address at The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club's annual banquet in 2011, as well as his continued friendship with several members of the organization.

Unfortunately, that interview will never take place, because on New Year's Eve, stock car racing lost a legend when the 89-year-old Panch died of natural causes in Daytona Beach.

If you're not familiar with the driver nicknamed "Pancho," let's just say he was an amazing talent on the race track.

Though he never drove a full season during his 15-year career, Panch competed in 216 races.

He visited Victory Lane 17 times – the same number of wins recorded by another legend, Curtis Turner.

While in his early 20s, Panch – who in 1998 would be voted one of NASCAR's 50 Greatest Drivers – started his racing career in Oakland, California, as a team owner and then a driver.

He made his first East Coast start in 1953, finishing 28th at Darlington Raceway.

Then he won his first Grand National race in 1956 at the age of 30, following that up a season later with six first-place trophies.

But there's no doubt that Panch is best known for that improbable 1961 Daytona 500 victory, where he drove a year-old hand-me-down from Roberts that was prepared by legendary car owner and crew chief Smokey Yunick and his boys. It was a very special ride that gave Panch a chance to establish himself as one of the big names in racing.

If you wonder how good a driver Panch really was, consider this – in addition to Yunick, he competed for top team owners Pete DePaolo, the Wood Brothers, Holman-Moody and Petty Enterprises. From 1962-66, he scored eight victories in Wood Brothers factory-backed Fords. And his



The Associated Press
Marvin Panch, who won the NASCAR Grand National 66 lap race in 1965, died New Year's Eve at his home in Daytona Beach. He was 89.

final win, at the age of 40, came in the 1966 World 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway in a Petty Enterprises Plymouth that actually was set up for dirt track racing.

Now, if you want to know what kind of a person Panch was, look no further than February 1963, when he was seriously injured after flipping an experimental sports car during a test session on Daytona International Speedway's road course. As the car burst into flames, several people ran to Panch's rescue, including fellow Grand National driver Tiny Lund, who was awarded a Carnegie Medal of Honor for his lifesaving actions that day.

Panch, hospitalized with internal injuries and severe burns to his neck, back and hands, was out of the Daytona 500. So he asked Wood Brothers to let Lund drive his car. They agreed, and Lund – who is 6 feet, 5 inches tall and 270 pounds was anything but tiny - went on to win the race, his first victory in 136 starts.



Submitted photo
Glen Carter, left, who founded The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club in 2006 and served as president/crew chief for three years, poses with NASCAR legend Marvin Panch during one of his visits to The Villages. Panch died at the age of 89 this past New Year's Eve in Daytona Beach.

Here in The Villages, Panch's death hit home particularly hard to Glen Carter and Gerry Hafer of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club. Carter, who founded the club in 2006 and served as president/crew chief for three years, called Panch's death a real shock.

"When you were around him, you would never know that he was one of NASCAR's 50 best drivers of all time," said the Village of Summerhill resident.

Hafer, also a past president/crew chief, agreed.

"We've lost one of the great ones," said the Village of Summerhill resident, who also is responsible for putting out the club's excellent monthly newsletter. "He was a true pioneer of the sport and the kind of person you just loved to be around."

As I said before, I never got the opportunity to join Carter and Hafer for breakfast with Panch.

We were hoping to get together sometime this spring, but that won't happen now.

But what will happen is that racing fans will remember Panch as the gentleman that he was. A true racer's racer, he was one of the greats who paved the way for today's drivers to enjoy top-notch equipment that is designed not only to go fast, but to save lives as well.

Panch will be missed – but he won't be forgotten. He was inducted into the National Motorsports Press Association Hall of Fame in 1987 and was an inaugural member of the West Coast Stock

Car Hall of Fame in 2002.

Now let's hope he's awarded one further honor – induction into the NASCAR Hall of Fame, where he clearly belongs among the top drivers to ever compete in stock car racing.