

PRESENTED BY:



Father Dale Grubba

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- *Place of Birth*
Portage, Wisconsin
- *Date of Birth*
August 24, 1940



My dad was a farmer; my mom a teacher. There weren't a lot of frills up here in Wisconsin. I remember our grade school—one room with 14 kids. My mom went there one day asking the teacher if she was having trouble with my brother, Bruce. "Actually, it's Dale," she responded. Guess I was a handful even then.

By the second year of high school, I began to find my groove. I was working in a poultry-processing plant 70 hours a week. That

gave me the work ethic. Somehow, I also became consumed by the need to help others. That same year I joined a seminary that was run by Germans. They certainly stressed that work ethic, too.

One day back then a friend invited me to Dells Raceway. It was just incredible. I started going as often as I could.

My final four years of seminary training were at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. The place was really strict, but

how I wanted to see a NASCAR race! There weren't any in Wisconsin. So, one Saturday morning during morning meditation, I took an unnoticed, meditative walk to my car and drove to Rockingham. I paid the scalper for my ticket with a check and slept in the car. My friends covered for me, and later I went to another race in Martinsville.

Then I was ordained. It was back to Wisconsin to a parish and to teach at a seminary. There were two choices—to try to develop a career in the church and become a bishop or to be content to serve the people. I was definitely into the latter. And I came to live by Bishop Ireland's saying, "You should not confine yourself to the pews of the Church." Over time, the racing community became my second parish.

On Jesus' trip to Jerusalem, he met a prostitute, a tax cheat, and the woman at the well. Instead, I met Dick Trickle, Tom Reffner, and Marv Marzofka. It has been amazing. Normally during their lives, priests are moved from parish to parish, but with my racing parish, it has been the same people for half a century.

My racing ministry actually started when I was asked to do invocations at Dells. It was an unusual practice up in the northern part of the country. Perhaps the promoters wanted me to do it to help calm down the rough-and-tumble crowd. Then I was asked to do Capital Speedway, and Golden Sands, and weeknight specials. That's how I met so many people.

Racers are so busy they can't ordinarily enjoy the benefits of weekly church devotions. I never pushed myself on anyone. But, if they needed to go behind the trailer and have a conversation, I was there for them.

One day Bobby Allison made an appearance at a car dealership in Wisconsin. We really hit it off, and that night he said, "I want to go to confession." This friendship is rock-solid still today. He has introduced me to so many Southerners; not easy for a priest from up North.

Over the seasons, racing in Wisconsin has been superior. To make it to the big time, guys like Rusty Wallace and Mark Martin

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Quote Worthy

"I was a race fan long before I was a race driver, and I'm still one."

Kenny Wallace
Speedway Illustrated
November 2014

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

had to prove themselves up here. After they made it, they helped me expand my NASCAR base as well.

I began doing photography after meeting Peter Luongo and Peter Lyons in Daytona. I hid under a rug in the back of their van and got into the infield. Next I started writing for John and Doris Quinn of *Checkered Flag Racing News* and for Dick Berggren at *Stock Car Racing* magazine. In those days I could make enough money freelancing to pay for my travel, while my racing parish expanded.

In Daytona I would always stay with a friend in Room 127 at the Holiday Inn by the track. The evening after Dale Sr. passed away, I kept the door open. People began filing into the room continuously. They would linger quietly. There was a common bond of sorrow, and my ministering needed no words.

Of course, I had my own special moments. I had to try it—the Buck Baker Racing School at Rockingham. I remember going into the turn thinking this car is going to launch into the universe. I will never forget it, the greatest sensation I have had in my whole life. And on a more regular basis, the invocations I've been doing for 40 years at the Sun Prairie midget races mean a lot to me. There is something about open-wheelers. Kevin Olson is a dear friend.

I can't describe how fulfilling my racing priesthood has been. I spent so much time with Humpy Wheeler. I remember clearly him telling Alan Kulwicki to be spectacular above all else. I listened. I often host fireworks after a midnight mass. I bring race cars and Paul Stender's jet cars to our Catholic school. You can bet that gets us in the papers. I'm the only priest around who can draw more men than women to our functions.

But some things in racing have changed. I have refocused my efforts on preserving the deep history of racing through writing books, the first being the "Milwaukee Modified Era 1959 - 1973."

My most recent book, "67: Trickle and Reffner," is about each of them winning 67 features in a year. What they did was amazing. By today's standards, anyone would

say they had next to nothing to work with. Reffner had invested a total of just \$5,000 or \$6,000 in his car. What they *did* possess was the equivalent of one of today's stacker trailers full of adrenalin.

The racing is still good in Wisconsin, the crowd remains the same and is driven by driver loyalty. Guys like Ty Majeski are captivating, but I don't believe what we saw back then will ever happen again.

In addition to two parishes here in Princeton and Neshkoro, I am principal of a school and can't get to all the shows I used to. But that doesn't mean I'm on the trailer. I know something about adrenalin myself.

One day, approaching age 40, I was going to Daytona and picked up a copy of *Runner's World* at the airport. Somehow, I knew I shouldn't! Because of it, I ended up celebrating my 40th birthday by running the Mayfair Marathon in Milwaukee. In the course of time, I ran 63 of them, including Boston 11 times and 18 in New York. A knee replacement stopped my running but opened the door to hand cycling. Now I've done 15 more marathons by hand cycling—and am currently training for New York.

I've been so blessed. I believe life is well lived if you are willing to accept the challenges that come up along the way. What if I hadn't gone to seminary so early once I knew I wanted to help people; what if I said I had no interest in going to Dells that night; what if I hadn't accepted the challenge of the Quinns to write a column or sent an article off to *Stock Car Racing* magazine; what if I hadn't bought that copy of *Runner's World*?

St. Paul said, "You must persevere until the end of the race." Whether it is a 100-lapper or the race of life itself, rewards come to those who are open to possibilities and have that work ethic. Most good racers operate that way. Dick Trickle certainly did—though once he asked me whether if I blessed the water in his radiator, that would give him a winning advantage.

I suggested that might be a bit of a stretch. ☩