

Benny Parsons won the hearts of racing fans

by Bill Center

Like everyone else even remotely involved with stock car racing, I have a personal story about Benny Parsons.

Eight years ago, I collaborated with a friend on a book about the drivers NASCAR had picked to be the 50 greatest at the golden anniversary of the sport.

Benny Parsons, who scored 21 wins and captured the 1973 Winston Cup title during his career, was justifiably one of the 50.

But he accepted the honor with the good humor that was a mark of the man.

"Write fast," he said during an interview, "because if they take this poll again a decade from now, I won't be on the list."

Well, a decade has passed and Benny Parsons is still on my list, and will be there forever.

If not just for his driving skills - which, incidentally, were underrated - then for his contribution to NASCAR as a television commentator.

Many of NASCAR's more recent aficionados learned the sport from the likes of Parsons, Ned Jarrett and Darrell Waltrip, former drivers who were able to put the viewer in the cockpit and turn the technical into the entertaining.

In my mind, none did this better than Parsons, who died Tuesday at the age of 65 from complications caused by the chemotherapy treatment used to combat lung cancer.

Parsons delivered his message with a folksy wit and just a touch of southern twang to his voice. He taught racing to people, even though they didn't realize they were in a classroom.

I remember Parsons working a short-track race several years ago where he noticed something about Jeff Gordon's car. He offered that Gordon was edging ever so closer to the wall each time he came off the fourth turn and opined that something was amiss inside the car.

His cohorts immediately said there was no mention of a problem on Gordon's radio. One said it looked like Gordon had it under control.

Two laps later, Gordon brushed the wall. Several laps after that, Parsons noticed Rusty Wallace was following the same path. Dang if Wallace didn't smack the wall in almost the same spot where Gordon had his brush with concrete.

I really liked Benny Parsons - as a commentator, as a driver and as a man.

At the track, he was one of the first faces you'd see in the morning. The man had few airs. He liked to hang around the media room not because he was doing interviews to promote NBC's coverage. He just liked talking racing.

Born to poverty in rural North Carolina - he was raised by his grandmother in a home that was without electricity or running water - Parsons was one of NASCAR's dying lot of grass-roots racers.

His start in racing was financed by full-time jobs as a cabbie and gas station attendant in Detroit. Even though he won two straight ARCA titles in the late 1960s, he didn't get a full-time ride on NASCAR's premier circuit until 1970. At that, he spent much of his driving career with struggling teams.

Parsons' championship in 1973 was a tribute to his tenacity plus the respect he earned from other drivers.

David Pearson dominated the season with 11 wins, but started only 18 races in the Wood Brothers Mercury. Cale Yarborough had returned from IndyCar racing to begin the association with car owner Junior Johnson that would result in three straight championships (1976-78). Richard Petty was coming off two straight championship seasons and would follow with back-to-back titles in 1974-75.

"I don't know how I won that championship," Parsons said years later.

Consistency was the key. Parsons finished among the top three in a quarter of the season's 28 races and finished among the top-10 75 percent of the time.

Still, going into the last race of the season at Rockingham, N.C., Parsons and car owner L.G. DeWitt were flat out of parts, a situation not improved by a practice accident.

Rivals, including those in competition for the championship, banded together to find the parts necessary to rebuild Parsons' Chevrolet.

Parsons would never win a second title, although he won the 1975 Daytona 500 and became, in 1982 at Talladega, Ala., the first driver to qualify at faster than 200 mph. He also finished in the top five in points for nine straight seasons.

More importantly, he won the hearts and ears of fans.

Even before he retired as a driver, Parsons was doing commentary for ESPN and winning fans for the sport with both insightful and offbeat pieces.

Parsons knew cars as well as drivers. And he could do personality pieces on both.

"Benny always brought out the human element," said driver Michael Waltrip. "These cars are nuts and bolts, but he talked through that. He was passionate about the sport and did a great job of explaining to people what they were seeing."

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