

Blairsville native Rich to join Class of 2020 Racing Hall of Fame

By Todd Forrest
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Union County native Mike Rich will take his rightful place in Dawsonville later this year when the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame posthumously enshrines the former NASCAR pit crew member as a part of its 2020 class.

This November marks 30 years since Rich was tragically struck and killed at the Atlanta International Raceway – now the Atlanta Motor Speedway – while changing the right rear tire on Bill Elliott’s No. 9 Ford.

In the wake of Rich’s passing, NASCAR implemented numerous safety measures to protect team members on and around pit road.

“While Mike wasn’t around the sport of auto racing for as long as others in the Hall of Fame, his short career made a huge impact on all forms of auto racing,” the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame told the North Georgia News. “We are very proud to add Mike Rich’s name to the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame.

“Because of his tragic death, the way pitstops from NASCAR to F1 and all the way

down to the weekend warriors were changed for the better. At the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame, we wish to preserve the life and legacy of those before us that have allowed us to enjoy the sport we love so much.”

With only 28 laps remaining in the 1990 NASCAR Winston Cup season, Rich was moments away from exiting the high stakes, pressure-packed environment of pit road to spend another quiet offseason in his hometown of Blairsville.

That’s when the growing sport of stock car racing received another black eye during the closing stages of the Atlanta Journal 500, NASCAR’s championship-crowning event, just one year removed from driver Grant Adcock’s fatal accident in the 1989 Atlanta race.

While changing the right rear tire on Elliott’s Coors Thunderbird, the 32-year-old Rich was struck by Ricky Rudd’s car, which spun out when his brakes locked up on pit road.

The accident occurred under caution on lap 300 of the 328-lap season finale, when Elliott, the race leader at the time, made one last pitstop for tires and fuel. As Elliott entered his

stall near the end of pit road, Rich and his Melling Racing teammates jumped over the wall and went to work.

Tragically for Rich, who was exposed while changing the tire, he didn’t see Rudd lose control of his 3,500-pound Chevy Lumina before ultimately crashing into the back of Elliott.

After he was briefly pinned under Rudd’s car, Rich was airlifted to Atlanta’s Georgia Baptist Medical Center. According to reports, he was resuscitated at the hospital after going into cardiac arrest, only to succumb a few hours later to what Georgia Baptist trauma surgeon David Lake called “unsurvivable injuries.”

Watching from the grandstands was Rich’s wife, Teresa Kelley, who was unable to attend most races due to the hectic NASCAR schedule. Throughout the 10-month race season, Rich would usually depart Blairsville on Thursday or Friday, and depending on the location, crew members would carpool or fly privately from Dawsonville with Elliott.

But on that Sunday afternoon in November 1990, Kelley was thankful she went to the track. Instantly, she knew this wasn’t your typical run-of-the-mill racing accident and urgently left her seat to remain by Rich’s side during his final hours.

“When it happened, I was in the stands, and I was able to go down through the tunnel and get into the pits,” Kelley said. “They took me into the infield care center before he was life-flighted out to Georgia Baptist. The 11 Alive news crew was there, and they took me by helicopter to the hospital.”

Others injured in the accident were jackman Tommy Cole of Blue Ridge and Dawsonville’s Dan Elliott, older brother to Bill. Cole was taken by ambulance to Henry County Hospital and was released later that evening.

Elliott went on to finish 15th despite topping all drivers with 94 laps led.

The events that unfolded in Atlanta on Nov. 18, 1990, left a black cloud looming over an otherwise memorable season that saw Dale Earnhardt narrowly edge Mark Martin en route to the fourth of seven Cup championships for “The Intimidator.”

However, NASCAR did its best to make sure Rich’s death wasn’t in vain, instituting a pit road speed limit that is still in effect today and other safety measures before the 1991 season.

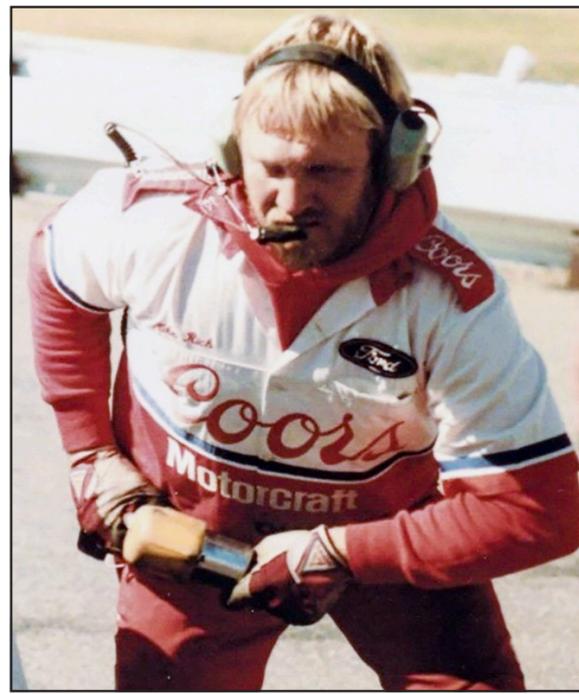
The local community honored its fallen son in 1991 when the Union County Recreation Department, under then-Sole Commissioner Glenn Gooch, named a youth baseball/softball field in Rich’s honor at the newly opened Meeks Park complex.

It was a fitting tribute, as Rich, a longtime member and former president of the Blairsville Jaycees, remained active in the community, taking a particular interest in the local youth.

According to Kelley, Rich’s construction company, aka Mike Rich Construction, helped grade the area that eventually became Meeks Park. He loved the thrill of competition and attempted to provide Union County’s children with every opportunity to succeed, she said.

“He did a lot of work building those fields with his equipment,” said Kelley, who was in attendance at Meeks Park when the field was dedicated to her late husband. “So, when it came time to open the park, they wanted to honor him for everything he did.”

And while he was entirely devoted to helping Union



Mike Rich, former pit crew member for NASCAR legend Bill Elliott, will be posthumously honored by the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame for his legacy and love of the sport.

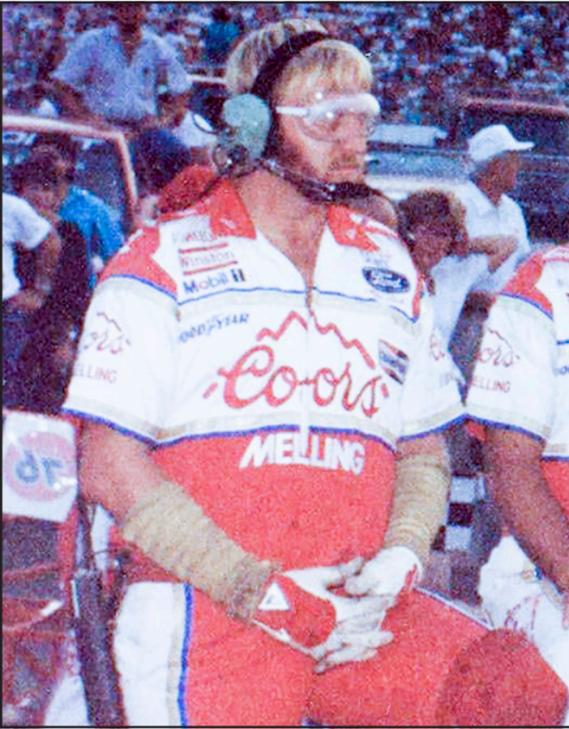
Photo courtesy of Teresa Kelley

County’s youngsters, Rich was always just a big kid at heart who wanted to go fast.

“He was extremely competitive, racing motorcycles or dune buggies,” Kelley said. “Back when the Blairsville Honda Shop was still going, he was on a team that raced

dirt bikes.

“But Mike always loved NASCAR. Even before he started working with Bill, he would go to the races with a bunch of friends that he grew up with. Everyone liked him, and he liked them back. He was just a happy-go-lucky guy.”



Blairsville’s own Mike Rich died after a pit crew accident in 1990. After his death, NASCAR implemented safety reforms that are still in place to this day. Photo courtesy of Teresa Kelley

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“I think it is a good time to be back in the action,” Bull Rider Walter Smithson said of the outdoor event. “It has been a long time, and we are looking forward to it.”

Of course, fans of the rodeo were all too happy to be part of the event and put the novel coronavirus temporarily out of mind for a few hours, including Mike Elridge, who traveled from Tennessee to catch the show.

“I am just excited that they are having this thing,” Elridge said. “I was worried that it was going to get canceled due to weather or the pandemic again. It is wonderful to see so many people enjoying themselves for the first time in a long time.

“Everything has been all about COVID and the riots; I think it is good to have something to let us have some fun. I’m thankful for those that allowed this here.”

Another fan, Jacob Holt of Alabama, came to the rodeo to revel in the Americana of it all and support some of the friends he’s made during his years watching events like this.

“The rodeo is a staple in American culture,” Holt said. “We have been doing rodeos since this country was young, and we will continue to do them for years to come. Like the announcer said at the beginning, this is a show to honor our tradition and to honor those that serve the country.

“Some people may look down on us like we are country trash or something, but this is what we love. This is American, and these are good people here that just want to enjoy a show. I know we may get some attention for not social distancing, but rioters didn’t social distance.

“People just want to do something fun and enjoy each other. Families are here having a great time, and you really can’t say anything bad about that. We know what we are risking, and we are choosing to support this event because we want to see more like it.”

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is hoping to make the rodeo an annual happening for Hiwassee and the area. For more information on upcoming shows and events, visit GeorgiaMountainFairgrounds.com.



Rodeo fans of every stripe enjoyed all the bull riding, calf roping and barrel racing competitions at the first ever Hiwassee Pro Rodeo June 26-27. Photos by Lowell Nicholson



See More Rodeo Pictures on Page 8B