

David Stuart Atlas

June 4, 1946–April 28, 2022

Ormond Beach, Florida, resident David Stuart Atlas died peacefully in the early morning hours of April 28, 2022, after a culmination of kidney disease diagnosed in 2019. He was 75. News of his death was given by his children, who spent the last days with their father by his bedside.

A father of three, and a managing member of AMA Pro Racing, David Atlas's professional accomplishments drew together a lifelong passion for racing with a successful legal practice as an attorney and advisor. In his personal life, he was a devoted parent with an eccentric sense of humor and a passion for knowledge and the laws of nature.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, at Beth Israel Hospital on June 4, 1946, David Atlas was raised in the Pelham Parkway neighborhood of Bronx, New York. His parents were Theodore and Lillian Atlas; his brother, Robert Henry Atlas, was born on April 27, 1948. The Atlas family was one of many Jewish families newly settled in the area bordering the New York Botanical Garden, where the local community often recreated.

David forged his passions at an early age: at first disinterested in school, his lifelong interest in racing was sparked by the discovery at the age of 11—while playing hooky—of a television broadcast of Juan Fangio test driving a 1957 Maserati F1 car. The on-car camera allowed viewer's a perspective from the driver's point of view. David was enthralled. He pursued his new passion by collecting car magazines and at 14 purchased his first race kart (jointly owned with his brother). Nearby racetracks in Long Island offered the first thrill of racing, albeit a brief one as the engine would often fail after a couple of laps.

Graduating P.S. 96 in 1958 and Christopher Columbus Highschool in 1963, Atlas took the difficult entrance exams for the Cooper Union School of Engineering and Science and qualified for admission with strong tests results (after being briefly waitlisted). His automotive interests lead him to enroll as a major in Mechanical Engineering. Despite this academic breakthrough, his first-year performance at Cooper Union was poor. Distracted by the joys of the nearby Greenwich Village and a drinking routine he developed with his college roommate, Atlas received an official notice of expulsion from Cooper Union at the end of the year. Distraught, David was fortunate when the Dean of Cooper Union, Mr. Ball, allowed Atlas a second chance with the proviso he begin regular visits with a therapist. Thereafter, Atlas became fully dedicated to his coursework, finishing school as an exceptional, competitive student and graduating in 1968 with a Bachelor of Engineering degree.

While a senior at Cooper Union, David met Brenda Milchman, a talented freshmen art student from Bayside, Queens. Before David and Brenda's marriage on August 31, 1969, and while U.S. war efforts escalated in Viet Nam, David took a draft-deferring job at the Department of the Navy in Washington, D.C. At the Navy Ship Engineer Center (NAVSEC), Atlas applied his engineering skills to designing propulsion systems for PBR gunboats, minesweepers and other small craft. Meanwhile David corresponded with Brenda, his bride-to-be, via telephone and mail and Brenda would often visit David on the weekends.

When Brenda joined David permanently in Washington, D.C. in 1970-'71, David's interest had turned from engineering to law, with an initial focus on the specialized field of patent law. Studying to receive a J.D. from George Washington University in 1972, Atlas then studied at Harvard Law University, receiving a Master of Law degree in 1973. In the mid-to-late 1970s, David divided his time between kart racing, competing in World Karting Association competitions, and taking exams to practice law in Washington, D.C., New Jersey, New York, and California. In 1974, he was employed by the Wall Street law firm of Fried-Frank, a position he held until 1979.

In 1977, by then a resident of Red Bank, New Jersey, a karting accident at Willow Springs Speedway in California left David with a compound fracture in his lower leg, dealing a blow to his standing with the New York law firm. In 1979, healed from the injury, Atlas met Roger S. Penske at an IndyCar race at Trenton Speedway, an event that would be a professional turning point in his career. Atlas pursued a job with Penske, contacting him with a formal letter that led to a prolonged interview process. When Atlas received a pending offer of employment from Bethlehem Steel, Penske Corporation hired David to be full time, in-house counsel to the organization, which also served Penske Racing and Mr. Penske.

Highlights of Atlas's work for Penske included some of the lawyer's proudest achievements: In 1981, he helped lead a successful eleven-month prosecution of Penske's appeal of the official results of the 1981 Indy 500. With Atlas's efforts, Bobby Unser's revoked victory was reinstated. Later for Penske, he negotiated deals with General Motors for Chevrolet's partial ownership of Ilmor and the licensing for Chevrolet branding on the Ilmor Indy engine. In 1985, he successfully defended Penske in the Mark Donaghue Wrongful Death lawsuit. Penske was a formative mentor for Atlas, who in later life cited Penske's business adages in addition to his own generous professional advice.

At 40, Atlas began an independent legal practice in 1986 based in Red Bank, nearby the new Atlas family home in Rumson. He and Brenda raised three children in Red Bank and Rumson: Lauren, born 1980, and twins Anthony and Brian, born 1984. The Jersey Shore area provided an ideal setting for the new family, who enjoyed summers at nearby Chapel Beach Club in Sea Bright, where Atlas was notorious for setting up an outdoor command station of cell phones and work computers to conduct business calls with clients.

As an independent attorney with a focus in motorsports and contract law, Atlas's client list included an outstanding number of successful drivers, race teams, and organizations, including Chip Ganassi Racing Teams, IROC, Emerson Fittipaldi, Al Unser Jr., Jeff Ward, and numerous others. All the while, in the 1990s, he maintained a dedicated passion for his own competitive racing, competing in CCS/AHRMA motorcycle races and stewarding an impressive collection of motorcycles. He also enjoyed the role of an eccentric but dedicated, loving parent, frequently driving his son Brian and his friends on skateboard missions in New York City and Anthony on weekend trips to gigs with his high school punk band. Later, Atlas would be proudly supportive of Lauren's doctoral studies in neuroscience and instrumental in advising Brian's earliest entrepreneurial ventures and Anthony's research and curatorial career in the art world.

Though a committed parent, Atlas was not always an exemplary husband, an admission he expressed later with accountability and regret. Separated from his marriage to Brenda since 1995, and later divorced, David Atlas moved to California in 2002, living in Long Beach and working in the Los Angeles area before eventually moving to Daytona Beach, Fla., at the end of that decade. In Daytona, he met Danna Kent, a schoolteacher, who would be Atlas's loving companion and partner for 17 years. In 2006, he joined the France family of racing organizations.

David often remarked on his good luck in life, citing numerous second and third chances he was given when he ran into major setbacks. In the latter days of his illness, Atlas reflected on this pattern and would quote a favorite Bob Dylan lyric: "I can't help it if I'm lucky."

In recent years Atlas's pattern of good luck continued when he settled in Ormond Beach, Florida, beginning a chapter of his life he described as serene and happy. He was devoted to his work as a founding member of Daytona Motorsports Group and in leadership positions for AMA Pro Racing, serving as Chief Operating Officer and Chief Business Development Officer before his recent tenure as a Managing Member, a position in close consultation with Jim France, who Atlas greatly admired and was proud to call a friend.

AMA's statement on the news of Atlas's passing remembered him as playing an "instrumental role in overseeing the growth and development of motorcycle racing in the United States," adding that he was also a mentor to his friends and colleagues in the motorsports world. The statement concluded: "His steadfast leadership, along with his thoughtful and gracious nature, will be dearly missed."

In addition to his brother Robert, Atlas is survived by his three children, and a son-in-law: Dr. Lauren Atlas (Ph.D.) and her husband Phil Browning (Kensington, Md), Brian Atlas (Los Angeles), and Anthony Atlas (New York).