

= Alan Kulwicki =

Alan Dennis Kulwicki (December 14 , 1954 ? April 1 , 1993) , nicknamed " Special K " and the " Polish Prince " , was an American NASCAR Winston Cup Series (now Sprint Cup Series) racecar driver . He started racing at local short tracks in Wisconsin before moving up to regional stock car touring series . Kulwicki arrived at NASCAR , the highest and most expensive level of stock car racing in the United States , with no sponsor , a limited budget , and only a racecar and a borrowed pickup truck . Despite starting with meager equipment and finances , he earned the 1986 NASCAR Rookie of the Year award over drivers racing for well @-@ funded teams .

After Kulwicki won his first race at Phoenix International Raceway , he debuted what would become his trademark " Polish victory lap " . Kulwicki won the 1992 Winston Cup Championship by what was then the closest margin in NASCAR history . He died early in 1993 in a light aircraft accident , and therefore never defended his championship . He has been inducted into numerous racing halls of fame and was named one of NASCAR 's 50 greatest drivers .

Kulwicki was known for being a perfectionist and doing things his own way . An engineer by trade , his scientific approach to NASCAR racing inspired the way teams are now run . Despite lucrative offers from top car owners , he insisted on driving for his own race team , AK Racing , during most of his NASCAR career . Described by his publicist as " a real hard type of person to get to know " , he remained a bachelor throughout his life .

= = Early life = =

Kulwicki grew up in Greenfield , Wisconsin , a suburb of Milwaukee known for its Polish @-@ American neighborhoods , near the Milwaukee Mile racetrack . After his mother died , his family moved in with his grandmother , who died when Kulwicki was in seventh grade . A year later , his only brother died of a hemophilia @-@ related illness . Kulwicki attended Pius XI High School , a Roman Catholic high school in Milwaukee , and received a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Wisconsin ? Milwaukee in 1977 . His knowledge of engineering has been cited as a contributing factor to his success as a driver , as it helped him better understand the physics of a racecar . He first raced on local tracks as an amateur while in college before becoming a full @-@ time professional racer in 1980 . A devout Roman Catholic , Kulwicki always competed with a Saint Christopher devotional medal in his car .

= = Racing career = =

= = = Early racing career = = =

Kulwicki began his racing career as a 13 @-@ year @-@ old kart racer . His father built engines as the crew chief for Norm Nelson and Roger McCluskey 's United States Automobile Club (USAC) racecars . Because his work involved travel , Kulwicki 's father was unable to help his son at most kart races , so Kulwicki 's resourcefulness was often tested trying to find someone to transport his kart to the track . Even when Kulwicki asked his father for advice , he typically ended up doing most of the work himself . " I showed him how " , Gerry Kulwicki said . " And he said : ' Why don 't you do it ? You can do it better . ' And I said , ' Well , if you do it for a while , you can do it better . ' "

Many local @-@ level American racetracks host their own season championships . In Wisconsin , numerous locations held dirt and asphalt short track racing . Kulwicki started racing stock cars at the local level at the Hales Corners Speedway and Cedarburg Speedway dirt oval tracks . In 1973 , he won the rookie of the year award at Hales Corners Speedway in the Milwaukee suburb of Franklin , and the next year started racing late models ? the fastest and most complicated type of stock cars raced at the local level ? at the same track . That season , he won his first feature race , at Leo 's Speedway in Oshkosh .

Kulwicki moved from dirt tracks to paved tracks in 1977 . He also teamed up with racecar builder

Greg Krieger to research , model , engineer , and construct an innovative car with far more torsional stiffness than other late models . The increased stiffness allowed the car to handle better in the corners , which increased its speed . Racing at Slinger Super Speedway , he won the track championship in 1977 . In 1978 , Kulwicki returned to Slinger ; that same year he started racing a late model at Wisconsin International Raceway (WIR) , finishing third in points in his rookie season at the track . In 1979 and 1980 , he won the WIR late model track championships .

In 1979 , Kulwicki began competing in regional to national level events sanctioned by the USAC Stock Car series and the American Speed Association (ASA) , while remaining an amateur racer through 1980 . When Kulwicki raced against future NASCAR champion Rusty Wallace in the ASA series , the two became friends . Kulwicki 's highest finish in the ASA season points championship was third place , which he accomplished in both 1982 and 1985 , with five career victories and twelve pole positions .

= = = NASCAR career = = =

= = = 1980s = = =

Kulwicki raced in four NASCAR Busch Grand National Series (now Xfinity Series) races in 1984 . At the time , the Busch Grand National Series was considered NASCAR 's feeder circuit , a proving ground for drivers who wished to step up to the organization 's premiere circuit , the Winston Cup . Kulwicki qualified second fastest and finished in second place at his first career NASCAR race , which took place at the Milwaukee Mile , several city blocks from where he grew up . Later that year , he finished seventh at Charlotte and fifth at Bristol . The following year , Kulwicki placed sixteenth in the season @-@ opening Busch Series race at Daytona . Although he won the pole position at that year 's event in Milwaukee , he finished fourteenth because of engine problems . Kulwicki 's Busch Series successes caught car owner Bill Terry 's eye and he offered Kulwicki a chance to race for him in several Winston Cup events .

In 1985 , Kulwicki sold most of his belongings , including his short track racing equipment , to move approximately 860 miles (1 @, @ 380 km) to the Charlotte area in North Carolina . He kept only a few things ; his pickup truck was loaded to tow a trailer full of furniture and tools . An electrical fire two days before he left destroyed his truck , so Kulwicki had to borrow one to pull the trailer . After arriving in the Charlotte area , he showed up unannounced at Terry 's shop ready to race . Veteran NASCAR drivers were initially amused by Kulwicki 's arrival on the national tour : He was a driver from the northern United States when the series was primarily a southern regional series , he had a mechanical engineering degree when few other drivers had completed college , and , with only six starts , had limited driving experience in the junior Busch Series . Kulwicki was described as very studious , hard working , no @-@ nonsense , and something of a loner . He frequently walked the garage area in his racing uniform carrying a briefcase . Kulwicki made his first career Winston Cup start at Richmond on September 8 , 1985 , for Bill Terry 's No. 32 Hardee 's Ford team . That season he competed in five races for Terry , with his highest finish being 13th .

Kulwicki started his rookie season in 1986 with Terry . After Terry decided to end support for his racing team mid @-@ season , Kulwicki fielded his own team . He started out as essentially a one @-@ man team in a time when other teams had dozens of people in supporting roles . Initially the driver , owner , crew chief , and chief mechanic , Kulwicki had difficulty acquiring and keeping crew members because he found it difficult to trust them to do the job with the excellence that he demanded , and because he was hands on in the maintenance of racecars to the point of being a " control freak " . He sought out crew members who had owned their own racecars , believing they would understand what he was going through : working long hours and performing his own car maintenance with a very limited budget . Notable crew members include his crew chief , Paul Andrews , and future Cup crew chiefs , Tony Gibson and Brian Whitesell . Future crew chief and owner , Ray Evernham , lasted six weeks with Kulwicki in 1992 . Evernham later said , " The man was a genius . There 's no question . It 's not a matter of people just feeling like he was a genius .

That man was a genius . But his personality paid for that . He was very impatient , very straightforward , very cut @-@ to @-@ the @-@ bone . " With one car , two engines , and two full @-@ time crew members , Kulwicki won the 1986 Winston Cup Rookie of the Year award . He had competed in 23 of 29 events , with four top 10 finishes , three races not completed (DNF) , an average finish of 15 @.@ 4 , and had only one result below 30th place . Kulwicki finished 21st in the Winston Cup points standings for the season .

For the 1987 season , Kulwicki secured primary sponsorship from Zerex Antifreeze and changed his car number to seven . He picked up his first career pole position in the season 's third race , at Richmond . Later that season , he again qualified fastest at Richmond and Dover . Kulwicki came close to winning his first Winston Cup race at Pocono , finishing second after winner Dale Earnhardt passed him on the last lap . With nine top 10 finishes , eleven DNFs , and an average finish of 18 @.@ 2 in 29 events ; Kulwicki finished 15th in the Winston Cup points standings for the season .

In 1988 , Kulwicki hired Paul Andrews as his crew chief after Andrews was recommended by Rusty Wallace at the 1987 NASCAR Awards banquet . That year Kulwicki won his first NASCAR Winston Cup race in the season 's second @-@ to @-@ last race at Phoenix International Raceway after race leader Ricky Rudd 's car had motor problems late in the race . Kulwicki led 41 laps and won by 18 @.@ 5 seconds . After the race finished , he turned his car around and made , what he called , a " Polish victory lap " by driving the opposite way (clockwise) on the track , with the driver 's side of the car facing the fans . " This gave me the opportunity to wave to the crowd from the driver 's side " , Kulwicki explained . Andrews recalled , " He had wanted to do something special and something different for his first win and only his first . "

It 's been a long road and it 's taken a lot of hard work to get here , but this has made it all worthwhile . When you work for something so hard for so long , you wonder if it 's going to be worth all of the anticipation . Believe me , it certainly was . And what do you think of my Polish victory lap ? There will never be another first win and you know , everybody sprays champagne or stands up on the car . I wanted to do something different for the fans .

He finished the 1988 season with four pole positions in 29 events , nine top 10 finishes including two second @-@ place finishes , twelve DNFs , and an average finish of 19 @.@ 2 . Kulwicki finished 14th in the Winston Cup points standings for the season .

Kulwicki started his own engine @-@ building program for the 1989 season . He had four second place finishes that season and held the points lead after the fifth race of the season . The team dropped from fourth to fifteenth in points by suffering nine engine failures during a sixteen @-@ race stretch in the middle of the season . In 29 races , he had six pole positions , nine top 10 finishes , and finished 14th in season points . The team had a new workshop built during the season .

== == 1990s == ==

Junior Johnson , owner of one of the top NASCAR teams , approached Kulwicki at the beginning of the 1990 season to try to get him to replace Terry Labonte in the No. 11 Budweiser Ford . Kulwicki declined , stating that he was more interested in running his own team . He won his second Cup race at Rockingham on October 21 , 1990 , and finished eighth in points that year , his first finish in the top 10 points in a season . In 29 races , he had thirteen top 10 finishes and one pole position .

Before the 1991 season , Zerex ended their sponsorship of Kulwicki 's team . Junior Johnson came calling again , looking for a driver for his revived second team that had last seen Neil Bonnett behind the wheel in 1986 . Kulwicki turned down Johnson 's \$ 1 million offer thinking that he had secured a sponsorship deal with Maxwell House Coffee . Johnson then went to Maxwell House himself and obtained the sponsorship for his new car , which Sterling Marlin was hired to drive instead . Kulwicki was forced to begin the season without a sponsor , paying all of the team 's expenses out of his own pocket . At the opening race of the season , the 1991 Daytona 500 , five cars raced with paint schemes representing different branches of the United States military to show support for the American forces involved in the Gulf War . It was the first use of special paint schemes in NASCAR history . Kulwicki 's car was sponsored by the United States Army in a one @-@ race deal . After running the second and third races of the season in a plain white unsponsored car , Kulwicki 's luck

finding a sponsor changed for the better at Atlanta Motor Speedway .

At the time , Hooters was sponsoring a car driven by Mark Stahl , another owner @-@ driver in the Cup series . Unlike Kulwicki , Stahl was a part @-@ time participant who had trouble making races . The Hooters car failed to make the field for the Motorcraft Quality Parts 500 and the Atlanta @-@ based chain , desiring a spot in the race , approached the sponsorless Kulwicki to gauge his interest . The principals agreed to at least a one @-@ race deal , which became a much longer term deal when Kulwicki recorded an eighth @-@ place finish in the race . Later in the season , Kulwicki won the Bristol night race for his third career win . In 29 races , he had eleven top 10 finishes , four poles , and finished 13th in the points .

= = = = 1992 NASCAR Winston Cup Championship = = = =

Kulwicki passed Dale Jarrett with 27 laps left at the Food City 500 race on April 5 at Bristol to take a narrow victory . It was his fourth Winston Cup victory . After that race , he never left the top five in season points . Andrews attributed Kulwicki 's consistently strong finishes to the steady performance of newly adopted radial tires throughout their lifespan . He said , " It was hard to control them , and the driver 's ability to work with that car during practice in order to get the car set up meant so much more than it ever did . " Kulwicki 's second victory in the season was at the first race at Pocono . Discounted as a contender for the season championship during the year , Kulwicki was expected to fade from contention . He qualified on the pole position for the Peak AntiFreeze 500 race on September 20 at Dover , but crashed early in the race and finished 34th .

Kulwicki was quite vocal that his 278 @-@ point deficit would probably be his undoing , and that the Dover race result would keep him from contending for the season title . He was quoted as saying , " This probably finishes us off in the championship deal . " On October 11 , Mark Martin had a narrow victory over Kulwicki at the Mello Yello 500 at Charlotte . For the second race in a row , points leader Bill Elliott had problems , which left six drivers within reach of the title with three races left to go . Elliott had problems again at the second @-@ to @-@ last race , and his cracked cylinder head allowed race winner Davey Allison to take the points lead , with fourth place finisher Kulwicki second in season points and Elliott third .

The 1992 Hooters 500 , the final race of the 1992 season , is considered one of the most eventful races in NASCAR history . It was the final race for Richard Petty and the first for Jeff Gordon . Six drivers were close enough in the points standings to win the championship that day . Allison led second @-@ place Kulwicki by 30 points , Bill Elliott by 40 , Harry Gant by 97 , and Kyle Petty by 98 and needed to finish sixth or better to clinch the championship . Kulwicki received approval from NASCAR and Ford to change the " Thunderbird " lettering on his bumper for the race to " underbird " because he felt like the underdog in the contention for the championship . During Kulwicki 's first pit stop , the first gear in the car 's transmission broke . Andrews said , " We had to leave pit road in fourth gear , because we had broken metal parts in there , and only by leaving it in fourth are you not going to move metal around as much . We could only hope that the loose piece of metal didn 't get in there and break the gears in half . We had three or four pit stops after it broke . I held my breath all day long . " Allison was racing in sixth place , closely behind Ernie Irvan , when Irvan 's tire blew with 73 (of 328) laps left in the event . As a result , Allison ran into the side of Irvan 's spinning car and his car was too damaged to continue . Kulwicki and Elliott were left to duel for the title . While leading late in the race , Andrews calculated the exact lap for his final pit stop so that Kulwicki would be guaranteed to lead the most laps and would gain five bonus points . Kulwicki made his final pit stop only after leading enough laps to guarantee the bonus points . To save time , the pit crew did a fuel @-@ only pit stop . Not changing tires allowed them to be available to push the car to prevent it from stalling , since the car had to start moving in a higher gear . Because the team 's fuel man hurried to add the gasoline during the quick stop , he did not add the desired amount into the tank . As a result , Kulwicki had to conserve fuel to ensure that his car was still running at the end of the race . Elliott won the race and Kulwicki stretched his fuel to finish second . Kulwicki won the 1992 Winston Cup Championship by maintaining his 10 @-@ point lead over Elliott . He celebrated the championship with his second Polish victory lap . Always conscious of his

appearance for potential sponsors , Kulwicki combed his hair , making a national television audience wait for him to emerge from his car .

Kulwicki had overcome the 278 @-@ point deficit in the final six races of the season by ending with a fifth , a fourth , and two second @-@ place finishes . Kulwicki won the championship because of his consistent high finishes . It was the closest title win in NASCAR Cup Series history until the implementation of the Chase for the Cup format in 2004 . Kulwicki was the last owner @-@ driver to win the title for nearly two decades , the first Cup champion with a college degree , and the first Cup champion born in a northern state . The song that played during a short salute to Kulwicki at the year @-@ end awards banquet was Frank Sinatra 's " My Way " . During the prep work for the banquet , Elvis ' version of " My Way " was found , but Kulwicki insisted on Frank Sinatra 's version .

= = = = = Championship honors = = = = =

Kulwicki returned to his hometown , Greenfield , for Alan Kulwicki Day in January 1993 . The gymnasium at Greenfield High School was filled and surrounded by four to five thousand people . Local television crews filmed the event . Kulwicki signed autographs for six hours .

In celebration of his championship , sponsor Hooters made a special " Alan Tribute Card " that was used at all of the autograph sessions during the 1993 season . Kulwicki did not change his spending habits after winning the 1992 championship . " The only thing I really wanted to buy was a plane " , he said , " but it turns out Hooters has a couple I can use . "

= = Death = =

Kulwicki died in an airplane crash on Thursday April 1 , 1993 . He was returning from an appearance at the Knoxville Hooters in a Hooters corporate plane on a short flight across Tennessee before the Sunday spring race at Bristol . The plane slowed and crashed just before final approach at Tri @-@ Cities Regional Airport near Blountville . The National Transportation Safety Board attributed the crash to the pilot 's failure to use the airplane 's anti @-@ ice system to clear ice from the engine inlet system .

Kulwicki was buried at St. Adalbert 's Cemetery in Milwaukee ; the funeral was attended by NASCAR President Bill France , Jr. and numerous drivers . Kulwicki 's racecar transporter was driven from the rainy track later that Friday morning while other teams and the media watched it travel slowly around the track with a black wreath on its grille . In 2008 , Kyle Petty described the slow laps as " the saddest thing I 've ever seen at a racetrack ... We just sat and cried . " Kulwicki had competed in five NASCAR races that season with two Top 5 finishes , and was ranked ninth in points at his death . In his career , he had won five NASCAR Winston Cup races , 24 pole positions , 75 Top 10 finishes , and one championship in 207 races .

His car was driven by road course specialist Tommy Kendall on road courses and by Jimmy Hensley at the other tracks . It was raced for most of the 1993 season until the team was sold to Geoff Bodine , who operated it as Geoff Bodine Racing .

Kulwicki had been selected to compete in the 1993 International Race of Champions (IROC) series as the reigning Winston Cup champion . He competed in two IROC races before his death , finishing ninth at Daytona and eleventh at Darlington . Dale Earnhardt raced for Kulwicki in the final two IROC races , and the prize money for those races and their fifth place combined points finish was given to the Winston Cup Racing Wives Auxiliary , Brenner Children 's Hospital and St. Thomas Aquinas Church charities .

= = Legacy = =

Three days after Kulwicki 's death , Bristol race winner Rusty Wallace honored his former short track rival by performing Kulwicki 's trademark Polish victory lap . Davey Allison died on July 13 , 1993 ; competitors who had been carrying a No. 7 sticker in memory of Kulwicki added a No. 28 sticker for Allison . After the final race of the season , series champion Dale Earnhardt and race

winner Wallace drove a side @-@ by @-@ side Polish victory lap carrying flags for Kulwicki and Allison . Kulwicki finished 41st in the final points standings despite competing in only five races . Seven months after the death of Allison , Neil Bonnett died at Daytona . Racing Champions issued a die @-@ cast version of Alan Kulwicki 's No. 7 car that was a tribute to Kulwicki 's 1992 title .

The USAR Hooters Pro Cup championship , the " Four Champions Challenge " , is named in memory of the four victims of the plane crash . Established in 1997 , the challenge is a four @-@ race series , with each race named after one of the four who died in the crash : Kulwicki , Mark Brooks (son of Hooters owner Bob Brooks) , Dan Duncan , and pilot Charles Campbell .

Milwaukee County honored Kulwicki in 1996 by creating Alan Kulwicki Memorial Park , located near the corner of Highway 100 and Cold Spring Road in Greenfield (Area Map) . Hooters chairman Robert Brooks donated \$ 250 @,@ 000 to build the 28 @-@ acre (0 @.@ 11 km2) park , which features a Kulwicki museum inside the Brooks Pavilion .

Bristol Motor Speedway named its grandstand in turns one and two in honor of Kulwicki , as well as a terrace above the grandstand . The 2004 Busch Series race at the Milwaukee Mile was named the " Alan Kulwicki 250 " in honor of Kulwicki . Wisconsinite Paul Menard turned his car around after winning the 2006 Busch Series event and performed a Polish victory lap to honor Kulwicki . Slinger Super Speedway has held an annual Alan Kulwicki Memorial race since 1994 .

Kulwicki was posthumously inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in 2002 . He was inducted in the Lowe 's Motor Speedway Court of Legends in 1993 , the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame in 1993 , Talladega @-@ Texaco Hall of Fame in 1996 , Bristol Motor Speedway Heroes of Bristol Hall of Fame in 1997 , the National Polish @-@ American Sports Hall of Fame in 2001 , and the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 2010 . Kulwicki has been nominated to the NASCAR Hall of Fame .

Kulwicki 's success as an owner @-@ driver sparked a small trend among NASCAR veterans . Geoff Bodine , his younger brother Brett , Ricky Rudd , Bill Elliott , and Joe Nemechek all began racing teams shortly after Kulwicki 's death . However , none were as successful as Kulwicki 's . Sprint Cup driver Tony Stewart is the only owner @-@ driver in NASCAR currently running the full schedule , though the team is fully funded by co @-@ owner Gene Haas . . Robby Gordon frequently mentions Alan as an inspiration for him as an owner @-@ driver , and selected car No. 7 as a tribute to Kulwicki .

Slinger Super Speedway began an Alan Kulwicki Memorial night in 1993 ; it has continued the annual memorial as of 2016 . In 2010 , the University of Wisconsin ? Milwaukee created the Alan Kulwicki Memorial Student Center in their Engineering and Mathematical Sciences Building . The center , along with a scholarship for engineering students , was made possible in part by a donation from Thelma H. Kulwicki , the late racer 's stepmother , who also donated numerous items of memorabilia located in the center .

In May 2012 , the Milwaukee County Historical Society announced plans for a special exhibit celebrating the life and career of Kulwicki to open in early 2013 . The exhibit is called " Alan Kulwicki : A Champion 's Story " .

= = = Alan Kulwicki Driver Development Program = = =

In 2015 , Kulwicki 's friends began the Alan Kulwicki Driver Development program to " help worthy drivers along the way in reaching their dream ... while at the same time keep Alan Kulwicki 's memory and legacy alive . " The field is narrowed to 15 applicants and the program gives funds to support seven drivers ' career advancement . The first winner of the program was Ty Majeski .

= = Media = =

Father Dale Grubba , the priest who had presided over Kulwicki 's funeral , released a biography of his friend entitled Alan Kulwicki : NASCAR champion Against All Odds in 2009 . The book was the basis for a low @-@ budget feature film , Dare to Dream : The Alan Kulwicki Story , released on April 1 , 2005 . The film chronicles Kulwicki 's life from racing late models at Slinger Super

Speedway , through his rise to NASCAR champion , and ends with his death . The movie was created by Kulwicki 's Wisconsin fans for less than \$ 100 @, @ 000 . The star of the film , Brad Weber , was a Kulwicki fan and credits the late driver with being his inspiration to become an actor .

= = Motorsports career results = =

= = = NASCAR = = =

(key) (Bold ? Pole position awarded by qualifying time . Italics ? Pole position earned by points standings or practice time . * ? Most laps led .)

= = = = Winston Cup Series = = = =

= = = = = Daytona 500 = = = = =

= = = = Busch Series = = = =

= = = International Race of Champions = = =

(key) (Bold ? Pole position . * ? Most laps led .)