



LEGENDS OF THUNDER VALLEY

JEFF BYRD

Perhaps no one had as much to do with the revival of Thunder Valley as Jeff Byrd, the former track president and general manager, who passed away after a lengthy illness in October 2010.

The dynamic Byrd, one of the most respected and admired leaders in racing, had been at the helm of Bristol Motor Speedway and Dragway since Speedway Motorsports, Inc., purchased both facilities in 1996.

Having promoted NHRA Drag Racing through his job in the sports marketing department at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., Byrd was passionate about the sport and led the charge to have Bristol Dragway transformed into the ultimate showpiece after the SMI acquisition of the track.

Under his leadership, NHRA returned to Bristol in 1999, after a more than 30 year hiatus, for the running of the inaugural No Bull Showdown. The revolutionary event offered a large purse and pitted Top Fuel Dragsters against Funny Cars for the first time on a national stage.

After two years of hosting the Showdown exhibition race, Bristol Dragway held the first NHRA Thunder Valley Nationals in 2001. During Byrd's reign, the event became one of the most popular stops on the circuit.

Prior to his move to BMS, Byrd served 23 years at R.J. Reynolds, departing as vice president of business development. He began his career as a sportswriter at the Winston-Salem Journal.

A 35-year veteran in the sports marketing profession, Byrd was involved in the development and implementation of a multitude of sports and event marketing programs across the sports spectrum. He was an integral part of the NHRA Winston Drag Racing Series and NASCAR Winston Cup Series.

Known for his reputation of putting fans' needs first, Byrd's motto became "Exceed Expectations." It is a mantra used by all employees during any event in Bristol.

Byrd was extremely active in numerous civic organizations and had made a tremendous impact in the Tri-Cities community, as well as his church, First Presbyterian in Kingsport, where he was a longtime member. He was involved with a number of charitable groups and he and his wife Claudia organized and spearheaded the Bristol Chapter of Speedway Children's Charities, a non-profit agency dedicated to aiding children in need in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia.

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A native of Winston-Salem, N.C., Byrd received his B.A. degree in history and politics from Wake Forest University.

For his part in forever shaping the history of Thunder Valley, Bristol Dragway has dedicated the control tower to Byrd's memory. The tower will now be known as the Jeff Byrd Tower. Dragway officials also have inducted Byrd into the Legends of Thunder Valley.