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Hall of Fame To Honor Longtime Official Gaston Salvas

By Gary Spaid

Longtime DIRTcar official Gaston Salvas, who was instrumental in helping to establish the dirt Modified in Canada, will receive the Leonard J. Sammons Jr. Award for Outstanding Contributions to Auto Racing on Monday, July 10, when the Northeast Dirt Modified Hall of Fame honors its Class of 2017 in Weedsport, NY.

Salvas started out more than 50 years ago as a driver and car owner in his native Quebec, but by 1973 he found himself waving the checker rather than racing for it.

When Autodrome Drummond promoter Gilles Lacroix first asked Salvas to accept a position as flagman, he was hesitant. "At that time, no one respected the regulations governing the competition. Intentional accidents, fist fights in the pits — it was literally mayhem!" Gaston recalled. "At Autodrome Drummond, a flagman would remain in place barely a month before getting either evicted or beaten up."

Nonetheless, Salvas, a career police officer, climbed onto the stand and took control, at both Drummond and St-Grégoire. He went on to officiate racing at NASCAR-sanctioned Sanair, Sorel and other ovals as well, and became an integral player on the Canadian stock car scene.

Salvas brought radio communications to the flagstand, worked alongside Réjean Bergeron to negotiate sponsorships with Sport O'Keefe, and established the first point championships at the Quebec tracks. He served as liaison between URC's Bob Miller and Canadian promoter Jacques Lambert, which resulted in the URC Sprint Cars making their Canadian debut in 1976.

"The project was an expensive one, but they guaranteed 24 cars," Salvas said of URC's inaugural Canadian swing. "Jacques Lambert once shared with me that the most important contribution that I brought him throughout his career as a promoter was the coming of Sprint Cars to Quebec."

Later, with Gaston coordinating, the World of Outlaws Sprints followed suit.

Salvas also reached across the border to form the successful Canadian-American Challenge Series, which brought U.S. drivers like Will Cagle, Jack and Alan Johnson and Jimmy Horton into Quebec each year with the French-Canadian racers invading Fonda Speedway, after Labor Day.

It was at Fonda in the mid '70s that Gaston met DIRT promoter Glenn Donnelly, and there was an immediate rapport.

The bilingual Salvas became DIRT's spokesman in the region, bridging the language barrier to communicate policies and rules at the French-speaking tracks. He was invaluable to DIRT's entrée into Canada — advising, interpreting, orchestrating and officiating, to ensure success for every promotion.

Quebec's first Super DIRT Series race was a non-point show at St-Grégoire in 1978. Salvas worked hard to make it happen. "The response of American racers was exceptional — we had 51 Modified cars in the pits! On regular race nights, we were welcoming eight to 10 cars," he recounted. "The next evening, the circus moved to Autodrome Drummond. The wheel was rolling, and has never stopped since."

By 1988, both Drummond and nearby Granby were fully DIRT-sanctioned.

He also worked for DIRT on the other side of the border, as a longtime official at Super DIRT Week and on the Florida and Texas tours. Certainly, Salvas was an essential player in putting together DIRT's 1989-92 asphalt series, and actually co-promoted the series event at Sanair.

In addition, Gaston worked with the Canadian government as they explored using non-leaded fuels for auto racing, and was able to keep leaded fuel available for the racing industry for a number of years. Once the lead ban took effect, he headed efforts to convert the Quebec Modifieds over to 358 motors, more capable of running without the lead additive.

In 1989, Donnelly named Gaston Northern Vice President of DIRT Motorsports — quite a distinction as he was the only DIRT VP who didn't own a speedway. Part of Salvas' job was to translate the DIRT rulebook into French, further linking the two countries and encouraging a number of Quebec drivers to compete at Syracuse.

After serving as Super DIRT Week head flagger in 1990, Salvas was moved into the role of competition director for DIRT's 358 Modified series, a position he held until 2010. During his tenure, Gaston and chief technical inspector Pat Ciolfi count as a proud accomplishment the introduction of the Brodix aluminum cylinder head in the 358 division.

Following his retirement as a Montreal policeman in 1986, Gaston started a company called Formation Routière Professionnelle, specializing in teaching emergency driving techniques and defensive anti-terrorism. His company has trained drivers in more than 90 countries worldwide.

"Throughout these years, I have known great people. I met legends from the world of racing — the Allison's, the Pettys, the Waltrips, A.J. Foyt, Jeff Gordon. With my friend George Smith and Jimmy Horton, I was able to set foot in victory lane at Daytona. I was a flagman or race director at 47 different tracks in two Canadian

provinces and seven U.S. states. I have been active in this fast-paced world for almost 50 years,” Salvas reflected.

“Through it all, I have to thank two people: My wife and companion Rachel, who has not only supported me but also developed her own passion for auto racing.” Rachel Salvas previously received the Hall of Fame’s Outstanding Woman in Racing Award in 2004.

“And my friend Glenn Donnelly, who had confidence in me and allowed me to realize my dreams.”