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Remember When: Tom Colella Tri-State Champion

Most people would only associate race car drivers with banking institutions when the driver needs to borrow money to finance the race team. During the 1980's, I was working at South Vo-Tech High School in Pittsburgh. My bank was located one block from the school. During a visit to the bank I ran into Tom Colella, a former race car driver, so we started talking about racing. After a nice conversation I inquired as to what he was doing at the bank and he explained that he was on the board of directors. Tom is the president of Brian Homes in Pittsburgh and this explained the relationship with the bank.

Tom began his racing career in 1964 on the old Heidelberg quarter mile dirt oval. He started in the claimer division driving a 1955 Pontiac. The choice of Pontiac was because his friendship with Bud Leroch one of the successful drivers in the claiming division. Bud campaigned a Pontiac to multiple wins with the Pittsburgh Racing Association. Colella paid his dues in this division until mid 1966, when he decided to move up to the late model race cars and run with the drivers like Herb Scott and Joe Mihalic. Tom won a feature race that first year at the Greater Pittsburgh Speedway driving a 1957 late model Chevy.

When the 1967 season began, Pittsburgh racing was entering a new era, as Heidelberg was changing from dirt to asphalt. Colella, as well as all the other Pittsburgh Racing Association drivers were all facing a new challenge. Most of the drivers, including Tom Colella, began looking for other tracks to run. Paved racing was a new experience for the local drivers. Tom didn't really like dirt racing but was hesitant to try the new racing surface.

Heidelberg was the premier dirt track in the area, and it quickly became the premier paved track as well. Colella knew he had to make a major decision on which type of racing he was going to pursue. Over the winter of 1967, he decided to concentrate on the asphalt.

The owner of Brian Homes was not in a bind for money to finance his racing so he decided to go to Alabama and visit the Bobby Allison shops. He had his asphalt car built by Allison. When the 1968 season began, the fans expected much from Tom, but it just didn't happen, as he had continual handling problems and was very disappointed. Colella had Bobby Allison fly up to Pittsburgh to check the car over.

The blue number 40 Chevy Chevelles that were all the rage on the asphalt in the Tri-State Area in the late 1960's and early 1970's have been all but forgotten by most local race fans. I was at Heidelberg the day that Bobby decided to try the Chevelle. He spun on the first lap, was sent to the back, and proceeded to win the feature from the back of the pack. This did not enhance Tom's confidence. Colella finished out the year, but without much success, and was starting to believe it his driving ability and not the car. The next spring another Allison, Bobby's brother Eddie agreed to move to Pittsburgh to wrench Tom's car. Things finally got turned around, and Tom began winning some races.

By the end of the summer, Eddie Allison decided he wanted to go back home to Alabama. By this time, Tom decided to set his car up himself and suddenly, things began to fall into place. At season's end, Tom won the Tri-State 150 at Heidelberg as well as the Pittsburgher 200. He won the Dapper Dan Sports Award of the year, which turned a hard luck season into a superb season. The years 1970-71 were good years, but 1972 was Tom's next big year as he traveled to Canada and won the Maple Leaf 250 as well as many weekly features at Heidelberg and Sharon Speedway.

In 1973, Tom Colella expanded his racing endeavors and took over the promotional chores of the Heidelberg Raceway. He made many improvements to the track and continued to drive. It was the most successful year at Heidelberg since it was paved in 1968. This is where the story

takes a funny twist. As the 1974 season started, Tom decided not to renew the lease, and the black curtains fell on Heidelberg Raceway forever.

After a few races at some of the local speedways early in 1974, Tom just climbed out of his blue number 40 race car for the last time, and a great career came to an end. Tom Colella deserves to be remembered in Pittsburgh Auto Racing. Tom is a very successful businessman today, as well as a pretty fair golfer. Colella was very helpful when I was gathering information for the Heinz History Center and Sports Museum in Pittsburgh. He is another great driver that helps us “remember when”.