

# Racing Past the Finish Line



by Aaron Yeo

**E**ver since he was five, Sam Schmidt's attention was always focused on the fast and furious world of motorsports. Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, he was no doubt influenced by his drag-racing father, who brought the entire family to the tracks on a regular basis.

"I didn't play basketball, football, baseball, soccer or hockey," he explained. "I didn't do any of that stuff, I just liked to race."

"I got into road racing when I got older, and eventually the dream was Indy cars."

A graduate of Pepperdine University in California, Schmidt became a prosperous businessman which helped him fund his passion for racing. He bought his dad's auto parts business and soon found himself competing in regional racing events in 1992.

He scored his first professional race in the USAR Hooters Pro Cup Series at the age of 31, unusually late for pro racing. In 1997 he made it onto the Indy Racing League, competing three times in

the Indy 500 with a best starting position of sixth and best finish of 21st.

"I was fortunate to race Indy Cars for three years and had some dreams fulfilled," Schmidt said. At the end of the 1999 IRL season with the Treadway Racing team, Schmidt ranked fifth overall, only seven points away from the podium.

On January 6, 2000, Schmidt was running preseason laps at the Walt Disney World Speedway near Orlando, when he lost control of his vehicle.

"I was just testing for the upcoming season, and I backed into the wall at 180," he said. "It sounds like a lot, but it's not out of the norm for an Indy car." He was immediately

airlifted to the hospital, where he was told he had suffered a spinal cord injury at the C3-C4 level and would be quadriplegic. Nevertheless, he soon made it out of bed, off the ventilator, and into a power wheelchair. But he still wasn't certain what he would do.

"Basically after racing for eight years, you have this high level of an injury, you're not really sure what you

can do after you're out of the rehab hospital."

"Now it takes two to three hours to get up every morning, and I had to find something that I'm passionate about doing enough to make that effort worthwhile. For me, it came back to racing." With his successful business background and passion in racing, it didn't take long for him to start his own team: Sam Schmidt Motorsport.

"I've never been a team owner per se, but it was the next best thing to driving," he admitted. "It was a reason to get up every morning."

Sam Schmidt Motorsports has been very successful in the IRL scene, focusing mostly in the Firestone Indy Lights Series, accomplishing 39 race victories and 4 championships. While he is the man who started it all, Schmidt humbly attributes the team's success to the racers and pit workers.

"It's all about the people you put around you. You've got to hire the right people," he explained. "You've got to put together the right chemistry with the right group of guys."

"Really, I just work on the market-

**“It was a reason to get up every morning.”**

ing and logistics side of things. I've got to raise all the money and they spend it!" he added with a chuckle.

With the accomplishments of his team and the attention he was receiving, he soon followed it up with the Sam Schmidt Paralysis Foundation.

"The foundation was a natural fit, because we had all these supporters in motorsports who wanted to help me and my situation in the industry," he explained. "So that gave them a conduit to do that. The first couple of years were all about [finding a] cure, and then I realized that was a pretty big project." Nevertheless, the organization still funds research projects as well as providing many services in support of people with disabilities.

Currently, the foundation is primarily based in the United States, providing research grants and sponsoring other smaller foundations and organizations. It might not be long until the Sam Schmidt Foundation becomes a household name here in the Great White North.

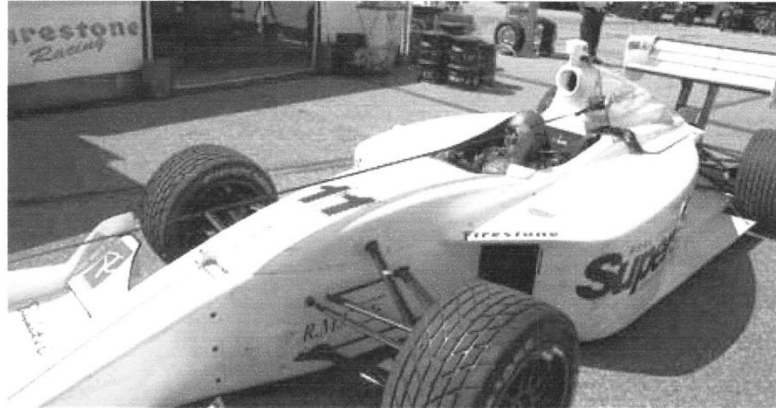
"We'd like our impact in Canada to be larger," he said. "I think there's a lot of good science going on here; a lot of smart minds as well."

Schmidt has always looked at his accident with great optimism—it gave him the chance to be in a place where he never would have dreamed of being. Owning a professional Indy-calibre racing team and assisting those with disabilities couldn't make him happier.

"I've got hundreds of stories in my head that are pretty spectacular of people who have done more with their life after paralysis than they did before."

For Sam Schmidt, it took a strong heart and a healthy dose of determination.

"In my life," he explained. "There's a direct correlation between effort and results." **SC**



Sam Schmidt Motorsports fuels his racing passion, and has been competing for almost a decade.