

Racing icon, 70, dies

By CRAIG KAPITAN
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For nearly three decades, entrepreneur Richard Conole owned and operated Texas World Speedway - a College Station racetrack that for a while was known to race fans across the country.

But cars were only one of the intrepid businessman's many interests, friends recalled Saturday. Conole died Wednesday at the age of 70.

Conole arrived in the Bryan-College Station area in the mid-1970s, when he and two partners bought the 7-year-old track after selling their stakes in Pennsylvania's Pocono Raceway - one of six other 2-mile-long "super speedways" in the country.

With the exception of a three-year period in the early 1990s when a Japanese company bought and then ceded control of the track, Conole would continue to run the operation and promote events until his death.

"He was my guide, for sure," said track manager Rusty Rush, who had known Conole since he came to Texas. "He had a lot of savvy. He knew how to promote stuff."

Texas World Speedway was the first super-speedway in Texas to host big-time auto racing, according to San Antonio resident Neil Upchurch, who helped Conole run the annual Texas Race of Champions for nearly two decades.

"Under Conole's leadership, Texas World Speedway was the site of many major races," Upchurch said. "Nearly all world-famous drivers came to College Station to compete in these races. Many of the events were televised live nationally."

These days, the aging track is used for smaller events such as training drivers and races for vintage car, motorcycle and go-kart clubs. But for a while, major racing groups such as NASCAR and ARCA brought events to the site.

"He meant a lot to the Texas racing scene, in my opinion," Upchurch said. "He could have invested his money on municipal bonds, of which there would be no risk, but he chose to do this.

"Because of his willingness to invest in it, he affected a lot of Texas race car drivers and plain old spectators."

According to Harry Wharton, a close friend who also served as vice president of the track over the years, Conole loved motor sports. And he was probably ahead of his time when it came to promoting them, he said.

But the workaholic had many other business interests around the globe, he said, including a passion for breeding greyhound dogs. In fact, Conole spoke so often at breeding conventions that people sometimes mistook him for a veterinarian, Wharton said.

"He had so many different sides to him," Wharton said. "He wasn't just a car racer. I don't even know all of the things he's done. I don't think anyone does except him.

"I kept telling him to slow down and take life easy, but he was always looking for something to do. He was a very amazing man."

Conole was also known for his sense of humor and his impressive collection of vintage cars that included models by Aston Martin, Maserati and Ferrari. Just before his death, he bought three old Rolls Royces that he planned to restore, Wharton recalled Saturday.

Telling jokes was another thing he'll be remembered for, Rush said.

"He could be chewing me out deservedly in the morning and in the afternoon telling Irish jokes," he recalled. "He was a guy that was difficult not to like. It was infectious."

Conole is survived by his wife, Sharyn, of Bryan. Services are set for 11:30 a.m. Monday at Memorial Funeral Chapel in College Station.

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The following eulogy was given by one of Dick's many friends, LSR past president Steve Olsen.

It is my honor to be able to speak a few words about my very good friend, Dick Conole. In life we are blessed a precious few times with knowing truly special people. Dick Conole was one of those and I can only hope that in some meager way I am able to articulate the great admiration I had for him and a sense for the kind of human being that he was.

I first met Dick at Texas World Speedway when I came to the track for a car club driving school. I was immediately taken by his effervescent personality. He had a special twinkle in his eye and a gift for spinning tales that could keep you mesmerized for hours. There was a seemingly endless catalogue of jokes with Irish jokes being his specialty. After knowing him for years, I came to really admire Sharyn for never giving up the punch lines that she knew were coming for she'd heard those same jokes many times over. We've all known somebody that can hold a conversation with a fence post but that very few people could actually make it talk back and crack a smile. Dick was one of those very few. He was in a word ... charming.

To me Dick was a Renaissance Man. He was incredibly bright as well as personally captivating. He had such a wide variety of diverse interests, from motorsports and cars to breeding greyhounds to a wide range of various business ventures and a deep knowledge of a long list of topics. While most of us associate Dick with motorsports, he had become a world-renowned expert in breeding greyhounds and had traveled about the world giving seminars and lectures on the topic. You could never accuse him of being one dimensional.

Dick was also a living dichotomy of terms in many ways. He was generous but frugal, tough but fair, stubborn but flexible, funny but serious, appreciative but not beholden. He loved dogs but wouldn't let them into TWS. He collected and loved nimble sports cars but drove big American station wagons and sedans. But there was one thing for which Dick had a single purpose of mind: if he gave you his word he was

going to keep it short of divine intervention. He was a man of character in world that seems to have been overrun by characters.

Some years ago my wife's great-aunt passed away. Like Dick, she was the life of the party, always quick witted with a saying for almost any circumstance. My son was about 5 at the time and at her funeral he blurted out the perfect epitaph: the nut is gone but the shell's still here. In closing, I'd like to read an Irish prayer for Dick and his family:

*May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.*

*May God be with you and bless you:
May you see your children's children.
May you be poor in misfortune,
Rich in blessings.
May you know nothing but happiness
From this day forward.*

*May the road rise up to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the warm rays of sun fall upon your home
And may the hand of a friend always be near.*

*May green be the grass you walk on,
May blue be the skies above you,
May pure be the joys that surround you,
May true be the hearts that love you.*

Life is a fire created in God's special spark between a man and a woman. Some fires flounder or are snuffed out, but some fires flourish and rise to a roar. As Dick's fire returns to ashes, I will always remember fondly how I warmed my hands and my heart on his fire. God bless him for sharing that fire with me.