

Showman Richmond back adding theatrics to victory



MOTOR SPORTS

By Michael J. Marrer

Richmond is one of the most animated and entertaining drivers on the NASCAR Winston Cup circuit today.

Richmond was the media darling last year, having won the Busch pole award and more races (seven) than any other driver. The press focused on the contrast between the flamboyant driver and his more conservative crew chief Harry Hyde, and dubbed them the 'Odd Couple'.

Richmond was on top of the sport, and the fans and the sponsors loved it.

In the past he made no secret that he had hoped to parlay his good looks and charm into a Hollywood career. However, a bout with double pneumonia in December — one that came close to killing him — put both his racing and acting on hold.

Ironically, while he was out of commission, two very interested race fans began hanging around the shops of his car owner, Rick Hendrick— actors Paul Newman and Tom Cruise.

One would have thought that that news would have torn him up.

Especially when he found out that the two were taking turns driving the Hendrick shop cars at Daytona and Road Atlanta with teammate Geoff Bodine. Surprisingly, Richmond dismisses the notion.

"I didn't have a career started anyway, so I'm not missing anything", he said.

Hendrick agreed with him.

"I think Tim's gotten over that Hollywood deal," Hendrick said. "He's not that way at all anymore. When he started winning races last year it seemed to satisfy him, and that's not really an issue anymore."

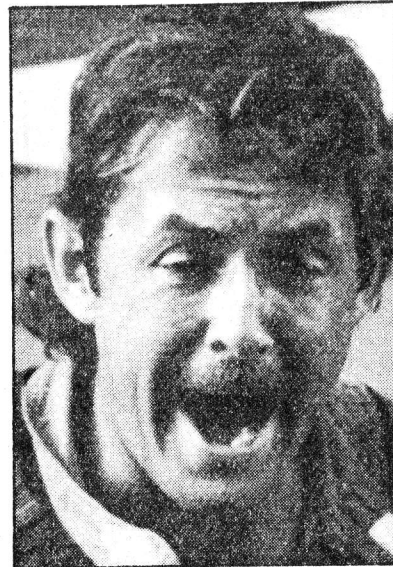
A testament to Richmond's status could be found in all the unfounded talk that was circulating this spring. The nature of the rumors concerning his illness were usually reserved for the major stars in the entertainment industry. That Richmond was lumped in that category truly amazed him.

"I didn't think my name was big enough in the sport of auto racing to warrant those kind of rumors," he said. "I was more or less callous to it, and laughed about it. I was more surprised at it than anything else."

And yet, even after he made his return to driving in The Winston at Charlotte and announced his schedule for the next few months, the rumor mongers still hounded him.

"I read in a paper a couple of weeks ago that I was losing my ride at Hendrick Motorsports," he said.

Richmond, known in the past for a rather hectic lifestyle and sched-



Tim Richmond

Celebrates Pocono victory

ule, is uncharacteristically laid back at this point. The July 4 race at Daytona is as far ahead as he is looking. Credit Hendrick for that.

Hendrick knows he has a very valuable commodity on his hands, and is working hard to protect it.

"I said in the beginning, when he was sick, that I felt that he was a franchise, like a Michael Jordan is to a basketball team," Hendrick said.

"That's why I'm trying to take it a little bit slow. I want to make sure that I don't break him down. I can pick the races that are really good for him and he really does well at and run those. Then we can get ready for '88.

Hendrick smiled as he watched Richmond continue to field questions from the press, and knew the magic was back.

"He's a special breed of cat," Hendrick said.

Marrer is a free lance writer whose motor sports column appears every Friday in the *Press and Sun-Bulletin*.

The master of ceremonies was still in the process of making the introduction when the star staggered into the room.

He was holding an enormous champagne bottle, the contents of which had just been showered on his entourage and the photographers outside. Playing the role of the drunk perfectly, the star stumbled onto the stage and began his act.

"Why did I start out here?" he said. "It was either here or Dover, and I ain't no dummy." (Laughter.)

"As far as Folger's Decaf (coffee) goes, I'm a red man myself, and I don't drive green race cars." (More laughter.)

"Did I bump Earnhardt just to let him know I was back? No, I just figured it would be best if I got him before he got me." (Wild laughter, and applause.)

No, this isn't the Catskills or Las Vegas. It's the media center at the Pocono International Raceway in Long Pond, Pa. What the crowd was participating in was a continuation of an act that had played seven successful engagements last season.

Tim Richmond was once again holding court with the press after a race victory, and loving every minute of it.

As most press conferences and winner's interviews are restricted to members of the media, the average fan probably has never had the opportunity to see a Richmond performance. He mugs for the cameras, insults himself, and gestures frequently.

There is little doubt that Rich-