

## **Willard remembered by drivers as racing pioneer.**

By Edward J. Sisson  
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Those who knew Lebanon businessman Bill Don Willard best were those that raced on the tracks he founded in southern Missouri.

Willard, 71, who owned I-44 Speedway in Lebanon and Speedway USA in Bolivar died Sunday of complications from a heart attack he had suffered last Wednesday.

Three veteran stock-car drivers--Dale Roper, Lester Friebe and Archie Griffin – remembered Willard on Tuesday as a racing pioneer in the Midwest who took great pride in his racetracks.

The Willard family also fielded a race team.

Roper, who won track championships at Lebanon and Bolivar, said Tuesday from his Fair Grove home that he had last talked to Willard about two weeks ago.

Roper, who had been racing since 1965, said he was at the speedway last Thursday testing a car when he heard Willard had suffered a heart attack the night before.

“I never, ever had a cross word with him,” Roper said. “I raced with him a lot. That’s not saying we always agreed on everything. Racing is a competitive sport.”

He said Willard occasionally would call him for advice.

“We had dinner together one day last winter in Springfield,” said Roper. “He called and said he was going to be in town,” and we went up and had dinner together.

“I considered him a good fiend. And I felt like he felt the same way about me.”

Roper described Willard’s tracks at Lebanon and Bolivar as “top-notch.”

“I’ve raced all over the Midwest and Southeast and there just wasn’t any finer racetrack facilities around,” Roper said. “A lot of these racetracks are not that slick. Even some of the ones that are well-known. The grandstands and restroom facilities, are always top-notch for a racetrack. He always took pride in how they looked and kept them up nice, that you don’t find everywhere. He didn’t hesitate to spend the money on them. He put a lot of money in his racetracks. He owned two of the finest tracks, not only in Missouri, but in the Midwest.”

Friebe, a former Lebanon resident now lives in Strafford, said he has known Willard since I-44 Speedway was built nearly 20 years ago. “As far as what I can say about Bill is all good, super-good,” he said. There was one particular time, the Old Timers (Racing Association) had built a car to come and race. The first time out the car got demolished and need all four tires. About two or three days later Bill volunteered to buy us \$400 worth of new tires so he could go back to the racetrack.” Friebe, who won numerous “hill-country” races in the Ozarks and other states in the 1960’s, said Willard “was one of the pioneers of racing in the Midwest because he built two asphalt tracks and made them into NASCAR (Winston Weekly Racing Series). And that hadn’t been done here.”

“He’s the man,” Friebe said. “And he backed people like Jamie McMurray who’s now racing Winston Cup.”

And he added, there have been racers Willard took under his wing who have moved up the racing ladder. “The results of what he has done in the past is showing what’s going on in the future with the race people,” Friebe said.

Griffin, who lives in Springfield, began racing at the I-44 Speedway nearly 20 years ago at the same time as his friend, Ozark racing legend and five-time NASCAR Winston Racing Series National Championship winner Larry Phillips.

“Me and Larry Phillips were the first two that were down there,” Griffin said.

Today, Griffin still races at the speedway.

“He (Willard) had some awful nice racetracks,” he said. “He was a pretty nice guy to talk to. He was kind of a quite man. He seemed like he wanted to make those racetracks sharp and bring a lot of people in. He was a person who really wanted those race tracks to do good.”

“He wanted to make people (spectators) happy,” Griffin said.

A news release from track officials stated that Willard’s passing, “Will leave a void at the speedways and the hearts of all that loved and cared for him.”

At Tuesday night’s Lebanon City Council meeting, Mayor Bud Allen remembered Willard as an important part of the community.

“He was very instrumental in the development of Lebanon,” Allen said. “Mr. Willard passed away and we are very deeply sorrowed for his family.”

“He has been a big community worker and been very progressive for Lebanon all of his life. We can’t say enough good about him. We are very sorry for his family and wish them all well.”

Willard, in a 1999 interview, said the idea for the I-44 Speedway wasn’t his.

“I was sitting in a coffee shop one day and some boys who had been racing at another place came up to me,” he said. “They said, ‘Why don’t you build one?’ So, I told them I would think about it.”

He said after giving the idea some thought he decided to give it a go.

“We had some road construction equipment that wasn’t busy at the time and some land that was just sitting there,” Willard said.

But as the project progressed, Willard saw it would be much bigger than he thought.

“I decided there was no reason to just swim halfway across the pond, so we decided to build it like it should be,” he said.

Willard built the I-44 Speedway on the east side of Interstate 44, near the Sleeper exit in 1983, on property that bordered the quarry he owned, as part of his Willard Construction Co.

Originally a dirt track, Willard paved it five years later and became affiliated with NASCAR, bringing national prominence.

Drivers like Roper, Friebe and Griffin, who competed on Willard’s racetracks all agreed that they were a labor of love for him.

His tracks “were his babies,” Griffin said.