

NEWS

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Black Label® RACING TEAM



Tony A-to-Z, the Presidency, and Racing

Nearly everyone who was old enough to understand what happened that day remembers what he was doing when President John Kennedy was shot to death in downtown Dallas.

But, for race car driver Tony Adamowicz, the shots fired almost 10 years ago altered the course of his life. Adamowicz, now one of America's leading international road racers and driver of the Carling Black Label Lola in the L&M Championship series, was a young Army communications specialist. He was assigned to the White House during the Kennedy years and says he might still be there if the assassination had not occurred.

"Those were great years under Kennedy," says the 33-year-old-bachelor, who now lives in California. "I never thought about doing anything else. There was no reason to think beyond what I was doing."

Adamowicz, a former winner of the L&M Championship, began his White House service late in Eisenhower's second administration. He left soon after Lyndon Johnson took over, but Kennedy was the only President he worked with whom he knew on a personal basis.

"They (Eisenhower and Johnson) just weren't the sort of personalities you could get close to," Adamowicz says. "Kennedy was. He wanted to know everybody who was around, the custodians, the gardeners, people like me."

Adamowicz went on most of Kennedy's trips, but says he really became close with the President during retreats to Camp David in Maryland.

"He liked to take walks and just talk about things like hobbies," Adamowicz says. "His thing was boats and sailing and mine was racing. He didn't know very much about the sport but he asked a lot of questions. He was always interested in what other people were doing."

On November 23, 1963, Adamowicz and others on the communications staff at the White House were in Texas setting up telephones, radios and teletype gear at the LBJ ranch for a big press function later that day. "We were not prepared for what happened, obviously," he recalls. "We were numb."

As for Adamowicz personally, interest in a government career vanished in Dallas.

"After that, everything was kind of a long downer," Adamowicz says. "I couldn't face reality, couldn't face people or anything. Racing was one good way of forgetting."

Adamowicz received his discharge from the Army in 1964 and left Washington looking for a way to make a living with race cars. To that point, he had only competed in amateur races near the capital and says he had never considered anything bigger than that before.

After several years of semi-professional racing, notably with the Group 44 team in national championship competition, Tony hooked up with Connecticut businessman Marv Davidson for a try at the highly competitive Trans-American Championship. Adamowicz and mechanic Mac Tilton drove their Porsche 911 on the highway from race to race, unheard of in this highly professional series. They had a colossal year, winning six races, taking second place twice and setting five lap records. They won the Trans-Am Championship for under-2-liter cars for Porsche in 1968.

Davidson moved on to the professional series for Formula 5000 cars in 1969, then called the SCCA Continental Championship. He bought a new Eagle from Dan Gurney for Adamowicz to drive.

It was the first time Adamowicz had driven anything other than closed cars, but Adamowicz won two races and edged out Englishman David Hobbs by one point to win the championship in a furiously competitive series. That was the last time an American won the series.

"A funny thing happened on my way from the championship," says Adamowicz. "Davidson decided to pull out of racing but my momentum gave me a couple of good opportunities -- and they very surprisingly fell through. The defending champion and nothing good enough to defend with."

A good shot at the Indy 500 did come through. Adamowicz qualified for the field but officials erred in slowing him down one lap. His time was just poor enough to get him bumped on the final qualifying weekend.

Adamowicz launched himself into the World Manufacturers' Championship races in Europe, South Africa and the United States -- an interim career that was to span the next three seasons. He drove Ferraris, Corvettes, Porsches and Mirages to a series of high finishes including second place in the Daytona 24-hours, third place in the Le Mans 24-hours, and fourth place in Johannesburg. He had occasional Trans-Am rides in a Dodge, a Javelin and an Alfa Romeo. The Canadian-American Challenge Cup saw the Polish-American driver finish seventh overall in 1971 driving a Jerobee McLaren in just six of the 11 events.

Ironically, Adamowicz had become as well known by this time as a co-founder of the Polish Racing Drivers of America, a tongue in cheek organization formed with Oscar Koveleski and Brad Niemcek.

Adamowicz' achievements as an endurance driver in Manufacturers' Championship races were recognized when he was granted 'graded driver status' by the FIA, world motorsports authority. The international honor is shared by just four other Americans, Mario Andretti, Al Unser and Peter Revson.

Had he lived, Adamowicz says, John Kennedy would understand that Tony A-to-Z thinks quite a bit of that.