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# Legendary Businessman, Philanthropist and NASCAR Hall of Famer Bruton Smith Passes Away

*Smith had trailblazing careers in motorsports, philanthropy and automotive retail, serving as Founder and Executive Chairman of Sonic Automotive, Speedway Motorsports and Speedway Children's Charities*

**Click here for high-resolution photos of Bruton Smith through the years.**

CHARLOTTE, N.C.--(BUSINESS WIRE)-- A visionary and transformative figure in both business and entertainment, Ollen Bruton Smith, the founder and executive chairman of Sonic Automotive (NYSE:SAH), Speedway Motorsports and Speedway Children's Charities died today of natural causes. He was 95.

Born March 2, 1927, Smith was the youngest of nine children and grew up on a modest farm in Oakboro, North Carolina. As a member of the Greatest Generation, Smith learned the value of hard work early in life. With an inspiring determination and relentless optimism, Smith built a business empire through the automotive and motorsports industries and left a legacy to inspire generations of his family, friends and colleagues.

"My parents taught us what work was all about," Smith said in 2008. "As I look back, that was a gift, even though I certainly didn't think so at the time. A lot of people don't have that gift because they didn't grow up working. But if you are on a family farm, that's what you do. Everything is hard work."

Smith founded Speedway Motorsports by consolidating his motorsports holdings in December 1994, and in February 1995, he made it the first motorsports company to trade on the New York Stock Exchange. Today the company owns and operates 11 motorsports entertainment facilities: Atlanta Motor Speedway, Bristol Motor Speedway, Charlotte Motor Speedway, Las Vegas Motor Speedway, New Hampshire Motor Speedway, Sonoma Raceway, Texas Motor Speedway, Dover Motor Speedway, Nashville Superspeedway, North Wilkesboro Speedway and Kentucky Speedway.

Speedway Motorsports also owns and operates subsidiaries SMI Properties, U.S. Legend Cars International, Performance Racing Network and zMAX Micro Lubricants.

In January of 1997, Smith founded Sonic Automotive and took it public on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE:SAH) in November of the same year. In just a few years, Smith grew Sonic into one of the nation's largest companies, and in 2000 it was first officially recognized as a Fortune 500 company based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Sonic Automotive is now a Fortune 300 company and one of the nation's largest automotive retailers with over

160 retail dealerships in over 23 states, representing 25 automotive brands. Since inception, Sonic Automotive dealerships have received many nationally recognized awards and accolades for exceeding customer satisfaction and automotive retail brand performance standards.

In 2014, Smith's passion for automotive retail continued with the creation of EchoPark Automotive. A subsidiary of Sonic Automotive, EchoPark Automotive is the company's high growth segment rooted in providing high quality pre-owned vehicles, while delivering a world-class guest experience. The company currently operates over 40 EchoPark Automotive locations nationwide.

Smith's first job outside the family farm came at age 12 when he went to work at a local saw mill. Two days after graduating from Oakboro High School, Smith took a job in a hosiery mill, before he eventually made a purchase that would lead him to two successful business careers.

"I bought a race car for $700. The whole idea at that time was that I was going to be a race car driver," Smith once explained. "I learned to drive, but that career didn't last long." Smith's mother had other ideas and prayed to a higher authority. "She started fighting dirty," laughed Smith in a 2005 interview with Motorsport.com. "You can't fight your mom and God, so I stopped driving."

Smith sold his first car, a 1939 Buick sedan, for a small profit and continued to sell cars from his mother's front yard. The young entrepreneur also promoted his first race before he was 18 years old.

"There was a whole lot of unrest with the drivers and car owners at that time," Smith continued. "We had a meeting and I was unlucky enough to be appointed a committee of one to promote a race. I had never done that, but I promoted a race in Midland, North Carolina, and I made a little bit of money, so I thought I'd try it again."

In his early 20s, Smith's career as promoter and car salesman took a turn when he was drafted by the U.S. Army during the Korean War. Smith served two years stateside as a paratrooper, then returned to selling cars and promoting auto races featuring the burgeoning National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR). Through a rough era for the sport, Smith was one of the first professional promoters to pay good purses, tend to the needs of the fans and find unique ways to promote events at speedways he leased around North Carolina.

"I'm a frustrated builder who had a knack for promoting races and it's been fun to always try and push the sport to greater heights for the fans," Smith told the Associated Press in 2015.

In 1959, he partnered with NASCAR driver Curtis Turner and built his first permanent motorsports facility, Charlotte Motor Speedway. The track opened in June 1960 with a 600-mile race, the longest ever in NASCAR's history.

In the years that followed, Smith found success opening several automotive dealerships. Opened in 1966, his first dealership was Frontier Ford in Rockford, Ill, where he married and started a family. While growing his automotive business, Smith's passion for auto racing never wavered.

“I love the racing business. I want to contribute more and more,” Smith said in 2015. “You hear us preach about ‘fan friendly.’ I think that is a driver for me to just do more things. I enjoy the contributions I’ve been able to make to the sport.”

Under Smith’s innovative direction, Speedway Motorsports facilities were the first in racing to add condominiums, fine-dining Speedway Clubs, superspeedway lighting and giant high-definition video screens.

“When you think about the Charlotte Motor Speedway and Bristol, and tracks like New Hampshire and Sonoma and Atlanta, he’s been the best,” 2019 NASCAR Hall of Fame inductee and fellow automobile dealer Roger Penske told NASCAR.com in 2016. “There’s no question. He set the bar.”

“His mind is racing all the time; he’s done so much for the sport,” said Rick Hendrick, an auto dealer and fellow NASCAR Hall of Famer, in a 2016 interview with NASCAR.com. “He’s so brave to step out and try things that have never been tried before. He helped build this sport.”

Following a 2021 victory at zMAX Dragway, John Force dedicated the win to Smith.

“I love this guy and everything he’s done for our sport,” said the 16-time NHRA champion. “I’m excited I get to send this trophy home to somebody I love---a guy who built our sport.”

“I learned from my own experience that when people go to an event – like a big race – they may know who won the race, but all the other stuff they don’t remember,” Smith once said.

“I want to put something on so regardless who won the race, it will be a memorable experience. We’re here to entertain fans, and I want them to go home with a memory that will last forever.”

A true entrepreneur at heart, Smith had a passion for growing people and business. His love of the automobile and racing businesses drove him to continually build and expand, all while taking care of his family and co-workers.

Among his accolades, Smith was inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame’s 2016 class. In 2007, he was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame and he became a member of the National Motorsports Press Association Hall of Fame in 2006.

Even with his many accomplishments in motorsports, Smith often commented that the auto retail business was his first love and maintained his primary office at his Town & Country Ford dealership in Charlotte throughout his distinguished career.

“You have trophies, you have championships, you have wins, but friends are what really make the difference,” fellow NASCAR Hall of Fame inductee Darrell Waltrip said about Smith in 2019. “Bruton Smith has been one of my heroes since I started racing in NASCAR in 1972.”

In addition to his business interests, Smith founded Speedway Children's Charities in 1982 as a memoriam and legacy to his son, Bruton Cameron Smith, who passed away at a very young age. Given his experience, Smith became passionate about wanting to help children in need and Speedway Children’s Charities was created to focus on serving communities

surrounding Speedway Motorsports race tracks. Speedway Children's Charities chapters work with organizations to identify and resolve pressing issues ranging from learning disabilities and broken homes to hunger and childhood cancer.

Under Smith's leadership, Speedway Children's Charities has distributed more than $61 million to local organizations across the country that improve the quality of life for children in need.

Survivors include sons Scott, Marcus and David; his daughter, Anna Lisa; their mother, Bonnie Smith; and seven grandchildren. Information regarding funeral arrangements will be released at a later date.

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