

History in a 'Jiffy'

Holmes gears up to headline CAHS dinner, lecture

By Janet Ogle-Mater, Special Writer

Chelsea Milling Co. President Howard S. Holmes Jr., better known as "Howdy," will be the honored guest speaker at a dinner and lecture fundraiser for the Chelsea Area Historical Society on July 18.

Holmes will talk about his successful 20-year racing career and his family's more than 100-year-old business, Chelsea Milling Company.

Holmes is the fourth generation of his family who has presided as President and CEO over Chelsea Milling Company, known to most as Jiffy Mix. However, Chelsea Milling is not his first career. From the late 1960s until 1988, he raced all over the world, including in six Indianapolis 500s.

"I was about 16 years old when I announced I was going to be a race car driver," reminisced Howdy, now 60.

"My father had a friend whose uncle got us tickets to the Indy 500 in 1957, and it started an annual tradition.

"It's a real American event with lights, fast cars, and over 400,000 in attendance. I suppose any young man exposed to it for a few years would want to race."

Unlike other young men, though, Holmes went after his dream by enrolling in the newly opened Michigan International Speedway School of High Performance Driving in 1968.

"I was one of 13 who enrolled in that first class," Holmes recalled. "I drove a Formula Ford and that was it - I knew I had to do this. I finished 13th."



Above: Identical twin brothers Howard and Dudley Holmes. Below: Prior to becoming the fourth-generation president of his family business, Chelsea Milling Co., Howdy Holmes had a career as an Indy car racer from 1971 to 1988.



Undaunted, with no formal background in racing Holmes put together a homemade trailer, bought some tools, and assembled a Formula Ford race car.

"I bought a manual for my engine at an Ann Arbor bookstore. It took me 19 hours to take apart and put back together that engine," Holmes recalled.

"I think a real mechanic could have done it in about six. But I just figured things out by doing it and making mistakes."

That philosophy, along with his unwavering desire and determination, seem to have worked for Holmes.

He completed 19 races of 21 starts in 1971, which was his first year of racing.

"My pit crew were my buddies from school," he chuckled.

He was named Sports Car Club of America Central Division Champion in 1972 and 1973. He placed fifth in the International Formula Ford Series in 1974, and in 1978 won the series title, North American Formula Atlantic Champion.

In 1979, Howdy started in his first Indy 500 and finished in seventh place. He also captured the honor of "Rookie of the Year."

Naturally, his family was in the stands.

"They were thrilled. We still have the tickets from that year," said Holmes.

Howdy went on to compete in five more Indy 500s between 1982 and 1988, and placed in the top 10 four times.

He compiled the best average finishing record of any Indy 500 driver who started in more than four events.

"I was 32 years old when I won 'Rookie of the Year;' an old man in a young person's sport. I was 41 years old at my last race, then I was considered a really old man," he laughed.

The racing was only part of his impact on the world of motorsports. Holmes also founded marketing and advertising companies that served racing enthusiasts for 18 years.

Furthermore, he authored an award-winning book, "Formula Car Technology," and was a contributing writer for a number of

newspapers and racing magazines. Holmes was also a racing commentator for ESPN.

With such a successful and varied racing career, it's difficult for Holmes to single out just one fond memory of his racing days.

"Every day for 20 years I was lucky enough to do something I was passionate about," he said. "Everyday was a blessing."

When pressed, he acknowledged 1988 as a particularly good year.

"It was the year of my last race and the birth of my son." It is his 1988 Indy 500 ring that he proudly wears today.

Howdy continues the family tradition of going to the Indy 500. For years he has shared the day with members of his business "family" from the Chelsea Milling Co.

His son, 19, joined him in the pits last year.

"He didn't want to go when he had to sit in the stands, but at 18, he could get into the pits. It was great fun to share this experience with him," said Holmes.

To hear more of Howdy Holmes' racing career, join the Chelsea Area Historical Society at 7 p.m. July 18 at Silver Maples of Chelsea. Tickets are \$30 and on sale at the Gourmet Chocolate Café.