

# A DRIVE TO INSPIRE

A devastating crash in 2000 left IndyCar driver Sam Schmidt a quadriplegic. Since then he has built a small motor sports empire and has been racing to find a cure for paralysis.

*By James M. Clash*



**NOT SLOWING DOWN: "GIVEN THE OPTION," SAM SCHMIDT SAYS, "I WOULDN'T BE IN THIS CHAIR. BUT BECAUSE I AM, I'M ABLE TO HELP OTHERS AND STILL PARTICIPATE IN THE SPORT I LOVE."**

**A**t the dawn of the new millennium, January 6, 2000 wasn't a particularly eventful day, but for race car driver Sam Schmidt it was life-changing. Schmidt was testing his Indy Racing League car at Walt Disney World Speedway, a 1-mile tri-oval track in Orlando, Florida, for a race later in the month. "It was going well; we were quick," he recalls. "It was the first run of the year, so it was important to get off on a good foot."

But at high speed in the middle of turn two,

the car hit a bump, bottomed out and spun suddenly, backing into the outside concrete retaining wall. Dr. William Pinsky, a pediatric cardiologist at Ochsner Health System in New Orleans, witnessed the crash. "It wasn't a particularly hard hit with a lot of breakage coming off," he says. "But as the car drifted toward the inside of the track, you could see Sam's head wasn't moving. We hoped it was a concussion, but it turned out to be a lot worse."

Schmidt's spinal cord had been irreparably

damaged between the third and fourth vertebrae, rendering him a quadriplegic for life. "It was the perfect storm," says Schmidt, who has no memory of the accident and was on a respirator for five months. "The angle of the hit, no safer-barrier walls. I'm lucky to be alive."

As is often the case with such events, when one door closes another opens. The question for Schmidt was, which one? At the time he was just 35, the father of a 6-month-old son and 2-year-old daughter. But race car drivers are competitive,

and it didn't take long for Schmidt to choose the bolder path. "My father had had a racing accident when I was 10, and I watched him rehabilitate. I guess I knew that good things were possible."

Fourteen years later, Schmidt has built a small racing empire from his wheelchair. The formidable Schmidt Peterson Motorsports team competes in the Verizon IndyCar series with the big boys—Team Penske, Andretti Autosport and Chip Ganassi Racing. His current driver, Simon Pagenaud, already has won two races this year and with just one race to go is in third place in the battle for the 2014 championship. His racing team also routinely dominates Firestone Indy Lights, the feeder series for IndyCar, having won more than 60 races. And at the 2011 Indianapolis 500, Schmidt's driver, Alex Tagliani, took the prestigious pole position from the likes of three-time Indy 500 winners Helio Castroneves and Dario Franchitti.

But perhaps the most impressive aspect of Schmidt's operation is his Conquer Paralysis Now (CPN) foundation. Since inception in 2000, the Princeton, New Jersey-based 501(c)3 charity—originally named the Sam Schmidt Paralysis Foundation—has raised more than \$8 million for spinal cord injury research. Schmidt insists no money from his foundation is used for the racing operation but admits the cross-pollination between the two does benefit the foundation.

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In 2013, CPN ([conquerparalysisnow.org](http://conquerparalysisnow.org)) saw revenue of \$1.85 million, more than double that of the previous year. Of funds distributed, 90% went to groups doing pure scientific research, the other 10% for quality-of-life grants and events. Recipients included some big names: Georgetown University School of Medicine, University of California at Irvine, Columbia University, the Mayo Clinic, Salk Institute for Biological Studies. Quality of research is foremost in CPN's selection process, but consideration is also given to niche areas within the paralysis field so the foundation's portfolio has a balanced approach.

Ida Cahill, CPN president and CEO, had worked as senior director of development for the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation until Reeve died in 2004, then came aboard at Schmidt's organization. Her first encounter with Schmidt was so memorable it was easy for her to join his team. "Sam is the most engaging individual I've ever met," she says with

obvious emotion. "He has this glint in his eye, this smile. He's very special."

Cahill points to Schmidt's sense of humor, too—something she says is critical for those rehabilitating. "IndyCar had a Halloween party, and Sam dressed as a crash dummy," Cahill says, laughing. Dr. Pinsky confirms Schmidt's self-deprecating nature. "When Sam was a driver in the late 1990s, he did hospital visits with sick children for our Racing for Kids charity. His corny Elvis imitations stole the show."

Humor is part of attitude, and a good one goes a long way helping with paralysis injuries. "It takes two or three hours every morning with bowel and bladder, shower, teeth, dressing," says Cahill. "There has to be something that makes it all worthwhile. You have to find that one thing that gets you up in the morning. For Sam, obviously it's racing."

**THE EXTRA 2.5 MILES:** SCHMIDT THRILLED RACING FANS IN MAY BY DRIVING A LAP AT THE INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY, CONTROLLING THE VEHICLE WITH HIS HEAD.



"Given the option, I wouldn't be in this chair," Schmidt says. "But because I am, I'm able to help and inspire others and still participate in a sport I love."

In addition to research grants, CPN sponsors annual quality-of-life events, including "A Day at the Races." Sixty individuals are brought together at a speedway to meet drivers, team owners, sponsors—and, of course, one another. The group typically is a mix of the newly injured, many from Iraq and Afghanistan, and older veterans.

"For some, it may be their first time in public," says Cahill. "They're self-conscious. Because it's in the track infield, we can keep an eye on them. The older ones, who've been through it, counsel them. It's a good day for everybody."

As Schmidt himself ages—he celebrated his 50th birthday in August—he is becoming less patient with the rate of progress toward a cure for spinal injuries. He often has said when his

daughter Savannah, now 17, marries, he wants to walk her down the aisle. To that end, the CPN board this summer approved in principle a paradigm-shift approach to giving—the SCI Challenge. Details will be announced in October, says Cahill, "after all the i's are dotted and t's crossed," but the collaborative program will offer a series of major dollar prizes, some as high as \$10 million, across different areas of spinal research in conjunction with major corporations.

"Great Britain in the 1700s lost an entire naval fleet because they couldn't measure longitude," Cahill notes. "So they offered a prize that Sir Isaac Newton was supposed to win. But it turned out to be a clockmaker, John Harrison. We're looking for a clockmaker, someone approaching problems in an entirely different fashion."

Some prizes will be for higher-level research—"audacious, novel ideas"—while others will involve getting animal and human research models to clinical trial. Still others will be for what Cahill calls "functional recovery," which can mean different things to the disabled. "Paraplegics say, 'I'm okay in a wheelchair. I don't like it, but I've gotten used to it. What I really want back is my privacy.'"

An SCI Challenge website will allow scientists to share successes—and failures. By putting the latter up, participants will know which paths not to take. Sharing information will also cut down on redundancies in research. Schmidt believes some may be reluctant to share failures but says it is critical.

"Everybody wants to write a paper, get funded through applications," says Schmidt. "It's all secretive, so why would you ask for help? Our method will allow researchers to approach companies and say, 'I've done this basic science, this particular prize is what I've been doing the last ten years. Help me win and we can both share the results.'"

This past May, Schmidt tried something novel himself, an activity he never thought he would do again: He drove at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. This time it was not in an Indy car but a Corvette Stingray specially prepared by Arrow Electronics, which allowed him to control the vehicle with his head.

To the delight of racing fans and viewers on ABC network television, he roared down the front straight at 106mph—not 225mph like in the old days but more moving to the millions watching, and to Schmidt. "I wanted to break 100mph," he beams, "and I did." **FL**