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Brown makes WHS Wall of Fame

BY LILY TURCANY
WHS STUDENT REPORTER

A female has joined the Wilmington High School alumni wall of fame. It's the first woman's jersey to hang among legends such as Damien Anderson, Tanner Roark and Tony Vercelli. It belongs to Caitlyn Brown, the first female crew member to win the Indy 500 in 2023.

"Now that I have my crew shirt hung up in the foyer, crazy to me, but it's an incredible honor to be up there next to those names and the reputation they hold as well," Brown said.

While the town of Wilmington was illuminated by the football stadium lights, Caitlyn's family spent their nights at the race track.

Surprisingly, she chickened out on her first opportunity to race, but shortly after she began her racing journey. Her dad always made sure if they were going to race, they needed to work on their car. She began learning from her dad and grandpa and loved to work with tools and learning about the mechanics of a car.

"It's not just the man or woman behind the wheel making it go, it's a whole team of people."

Brown's journey began right in the Wilmington High School guidance office. In her junior year she met with her guidance counselor Jody, and going through the typical steps in determining her future.

She wasn't especially interested in anything, until she say the Advanced Integrated Maintenance program at JJC. As a hands-on learner Brown knew that this would benefit her, and knew deep down she wanted to do it.

To this day Brown is grateful for the opportunity to take

AIM, and she took a lot from that program to begin the foundation of her future. "I wanted to work on race cars at the highest level. Growing up in a racing family, it's all I ever knew."

Fastly approaching was Caitlyn Brown's graduation year, 2017. Along the way of figuring out her future she found out about Universal Technical Institute. The best part: The North Carolina campus had a program dedicated to learning about race cars.

She took her shot at fulfilling her dream of working on race cars. While attending NTI, she worked with a local dirt late model team to gain more expertise.

From the connections she made there she got the opportunity to interview with Team Penske as soon as she graduated. She experienced her fair share of rejection, before she heard "welcome to the team."

When she began working with Team Penske in 2019, she was a shop-based mechanic. In 2020, she was asked if she had any interest in joining the Indycar team. Beginning in 2021, she was moved to a new department building all the fuel cells for the cup cars.

Paretta Autosport, a female forward team, and Brown soon had the opportunity to make history. Her job was to change tires at the Indy 500 and make history.

The ladies of the pit crew would meet at 5 a.m. to work with the Team Penske Indycar team on pit stops. From this experience Brown fell in love with working on Indycars. Not only that, but she found her passion of changing tires.

In just five months they had to be ready to pit an Indycar on Indy 500 race day. The Indy 500 is the largest single day sporting event in the

world. IMS hosts more than 350,000 people on race day.

The team was able to secure the final starting spot in the Indy 500 in 2021. The team was primarily women, female owner and female driver. After that experience, the Indycar team wanted Caitlyn Brown on their side.

On the weekends she was traveling with the Indycar team to races, but during the week she was at her fuel cell job for the NASCAR team. When the 2021 NASCAR season came to an end Caitlyn transferred to her new job as an Indycar mechanic for Team Penske.

Caitlyn Brown says, "Not sure it I have mentioned just how cool it is to be a part of an organization like Team Penske. The boss man, Roger Penske, is a racing legend. I take just as much pride in wearing his name as I did wearing Wilmington."

After Caitlyn had achieved her wildest dreams of working on race cars for a living by 2019, just two years after her high school graduation, she set some new goals for herself. 1) become a tire changer. 2) be on a winning car at the Indianapolis 500.

"I still can't believe both of those happened in the same year! My crew shirt may be hung at our school, but it represents more than just me," Brown says.

After all her hard work, Caitlyn got the opportunity to be the inside front tire changer on the two car at the beginning of 2023. And Caitlyn still remembers the day she made history.

"We start the day extremely early. Like depart the hotel about 4:30 a.m. We got a police escort to the track, which I don't care how many times you do that, it's freaking cool!"

"We get to the garages, mill about a bit. Fireworks and cannons shoot off at 6 a.m. when the gates are opened to the public. We have breakfast and check over everything."

"About mid morning we take the cars to pit lane and eventually we grid them on the front stretch. Pre race ceremonies begin just before noon. Green flag flies just before 1 p.m. and we race for 500 miles. Typically you make around five to seven pit stops depending on the day."

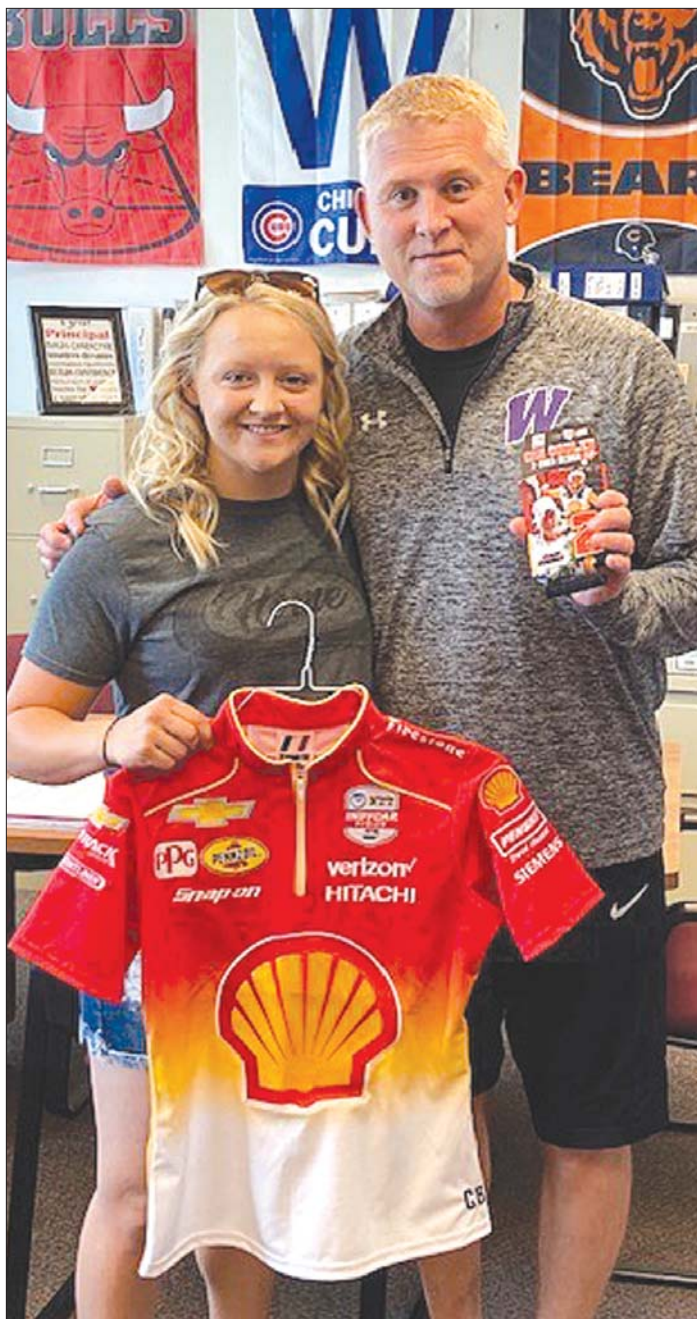
"32 drivers and teams go home defeated, and frustrated when the checkered flag flies. Only one driver and team go home happy. 2023 was the year I got to check another goal of mine: Be on a winning car at the Indianapolis 500!"

May 28th was a special day as her driver got the Indy 500 win. It was the 19th time Penske had a team win the Indy 500. The first woman to win at the Indy 500!

"To be able to not only be a part of that win and hold the role I did, but to do it all while representing our hometown is something I take a lot of pride in. So to be able to see my crew shirt from that day hanging in the foyer of our high school, is a huge honor for me. I'm up there next to legendary Wildcats."

"Seeing that red, orange, and white fade crew shirt hanging up there next to Wildcat purple is extremely special not only for me but my entire family," Brown exclaimed.

"I hope it is also something that when students and visitors who come to WHS walk by, they ask about it. And it can represent that just because we are from a small town doesn't mean you shouldn't venture out and try to go after your dreams!"



CAITLYN BROWN (LEFT) presents her Team Penske crew shirt to WHS Principal Scott Maupin to hang in the foyer of Wilmington High School, along with three other Wilmington legends.



Photo by Eric Fisher

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING—The City of Wilmington held a public open house last week inviting residents to comment on the upcoming comprehensive city plan and master parks plan. The city is updating its comprehensive plan to provide a renewed vision, goals and strategies for the future. Resident Steve Flynn (right) views a map of the city limits and spoke with Valerie Kretchmer of Kretchmer Associates who is helping with the plan. Approximately 40 residents stopped by for the open house at the high school, sharing their number of comments including connecting hike, bike and walk trails through city parks, a kayak launch on the river, less semi traffic and more senior housing, to name a few. Approximately 60 comments have been submitted online at the plan survey. Visit <https://tinyurl.com/wilmington-cp/> to share your ideas.

Ice jam near I-55 likely caused highest water level since 1930s

Maybe it wasn't the highest flood to hit Wilmington in 137 years after all.

Hydrologists with the National Weather Service said it could takes months for an official determination but is certain it didn't reach the 137-year high mark in Wilmington proper. That high mark was at the river gauge located several miles downstream from the city near I-55.

In a press release Jan. 28, Will County EMA stated that the water levels reached a record high of 15.62 feet on Friday evening due to a brief ice jam that formed near I-55. The peak level of water was the third highest level recorded on the Kankakee River in history and the highest since 1887.

Flooding was caused Jan. 25-26 by multiple ice jams along the Kankakee River, and ice jams are often localized phenomena.

"The water level crest in Wilmington will thus not correlate well with what the gauge was observing down river at the gauge. Also note that realtime river gauge

information is preliminary until reviewed and made official; the US Geological Survey will need to conduct a review for the Wilmington gauge and this will likely not occur until later this year," noted W. Scott Lincoln, GISP Senior Service Hydrologist | Cartographer with the National Weather Service.

"The best we can say is that the water level near I-55 was potentially the highest water level recorded near the I-55 bridge since 1933, when modern gauge records began. Prior to 1933, water level information is sporadic at best, and likely based upon very approximate high water marks. There is not a river gauge upstream in Wilmington, so we have to compare anecdotal reports of water levels from past events."

Lincoln added that no comprehensive research has

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