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Racing: A Need for Speed at the Mercer Museum

Exhibition Examines the History & Culture of High-Velocity Sports

DOYLESTOWN, PA: (April, 2018) – As participants and spectators, Americans love racing. We race to compete and win, to improve ourselves, to find community with others, and simply for fun, thrills and the love of spectacle. ***Racing: A Need for Speed***, an original exhibition presented by the Mercer Museum, examines the history and culture of racing in Bucks County and the Delaware Valley across four different sports – foot racing, horse racing, bicycle racing and motor sports. The exhibition will feature the personal stories of former local racers, like auto racing legend, Mario Andretti and Villanova track coach, Marty Stern. Hundreds of racing-related artifacts will be on view including the cars that once raced on local tracks, vintage cycling gear, harness racing sulkies, trophies, and more. *Racing: A Need for Speed* opens on Saturday, May 12 in the museum’s Martin & Warwick Foundation Galleries and will run until Sunday, September 9.

Racing: A Need for Speed showcases hundreds of objects and images from more than 50 public and private collections including the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Eastern Museum of Motor Racing, Harness Racing Museum and Hall of Fame, Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame, Library Company of Philadelphia, and Philadelphia Museum of Art.

“The exhibition will take visitors on a fascinating journey, from the footraces of Native Americans to the horse tracks and fairgrounds of the 1800s to the auto speedways and bicycle velodromes of the 20th century,” said Cory Amsler, the Mercer Museum’s Vice

President for Collections and Interpretation, and the exhibition's curator. "The Delaware Valley has such a rich history and tradition of racing sports."

Foot racing in the Delaware Valley can be traced back to William Penn's alleged races with the Lenape. The later rise of scholastic track competitions in the late 19th through mid-20th century is highlighted with artifacts from the George School, one of the first schools in the area to have a track & field program. The exhibit also features an NCAA Championship ring and coaching jacket of "Uncle" Marty Stern, who led the Villanova women's track & field team to five straight national titles from 1989-1993.

Horse racing added an additional element to racing sports – gambling. Although Pennsylvania outlawed horse racing in the 1800s, authorities often looked the other way at harness racing at local fairs and private tracks. Thoroughbred racing re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, with the establishment of nearby tracks like Liberty Bell Park and Keystone Raceway. The exhibit features an advertisement from 1792, touting the stud services of the horse "Messenger." Messenger, an English thoroughbred was imported to Philadelphia and stood for stud in Lower Bucks County. Messenger never trotted but his offspring include many future thoroughbred and trotting champions, including the undefeated "American Eclipse."

The sport of cycling originated in the 1800s. Cyclists formed wheeling clubs and leagues, and raced on roadways, horse tracks and specially built "velodromes." But the sport peaked and went through a rapid decline, until a revival in the 1970s. The exhibit features the story of Bert Smith, a one-time amateur cyclist and racer who helped keep the sport alive for youth by founding the Doylestown Wheelmen in 1956.

Racers who craved higher speeds celebrated the invention of the gasoline engine. Locally, the Langhorne Speedway was a major hub of the auto racing world from 1926-1971. Racing at the Speedway is explored in numerous artifacts, historical images and

archival footage. Mario Andretti recounts his beginnings on the dirt track circuit, and offers his memories of Langhorne Speedway (a silver trophy from his 1966 win at Langhorne is on view).

The exhibit also includes the stories of local drag strips, drag racers and racing entrepreneurs. Among them are Billy Young, the first black Pennsylvanian to race a “slingshot” dragster in competition, and Leonard Miller, a local driver and entrepreneur who helped break the color barrier in motorsports. Both raced at Vargo Dragway in Bedminster Township. Also featured is George Hurst, founder of Hurst Performance Products, who invented the “jaws of life.”

Three vintage race cars will be on view including a circa 1954 dirt sprint car once driven by Andretti, a restored Gerhardt-Ford Indy car driven by Gordon Johncock in 1966, and an early drag racing “funny car” nicknamed “The Honker.” Also on exhibit are a c. 1960 youth quarter midget race car, a 1940s Indian Scout racing motorcycle, and even a 1970s soapbox derby racer.

Visitors can test their own speed and skill in two racing “try-its.” A high wheel bicycle sprint interactive lets competitors race against the clock, and “drag racers” can challenge each other to see who can be the quickest off the starting line.

The Mercer Museum will also be hosting a series of special *Racing*-related programs including *Black American Racers* on June 23 at 2 p.m., *Drag Strip Memories* on July 15 at 2 p.m., *‘The Greatest Show on Dirt,’ Automobile Racing at the Langhorne Speedway* on July 28 at 2 p.m., and *Kids Who Race Day* on August 11, from 11 a.m., to 4 p.m. All programs are free with museum admission.

Mercer Museum admission is \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors (65+) and \$8 for youth (6-17).

Racing: A Need for Speed is generously sponsored by: Univest, Visit Bucks County, Bucks County Foundation, Thompson BMW, Penn Color, Millham Insurance Agency, Brian and Louise McLeod and Tom Thomas.

About the Mercer Museum

The Mercer Museum, one of Bucks County's premier tourist attractions, offers visitors a unique window into pre-Industrial America as seen through the implements used in everyday life. The Museum's collection includes more than 50,000 objects exhibiting the tools of more than 60 different crafts and trades, providing one of the world's most comprehensive portraits of material culture in America. The Mercer Museum is located at 84 South Pine Street in Doylestown and is open for self-guided exploration 7 days a week. For more information, call 215-345-0210 or visit mercermuseum.org.

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