

PRYCE, THOMAS MALDWYN (1949-1977), racing driver

Name: Thomas Maldwyn Pryce
Date of birth: 1949
Date of death: 1977
Gender: Male
Occupation: racing driver
Area of activity: Sports and Leisure Pursuits
Author: Gethin Matthews

Tom Pryce was born in Denbighshire, on 11 June 1949, and brought up in Nantglyn. He was the second son of Jack Pryce (died 2007), a police constable and later a sergeant, and his wife Gwyneth (née Hughes, died 2009), a district nurse. His older brother, David J. Pryce (1947-1950), died at the age of three. There were signs early on that he would be involved in the world of motoring: as a young boy, Tom travelled with his father to watch the British Grand Prix at Aintree, and his boyhood hero was the Scottish World Champion Jim Clark. It is said that he first drove a van (off the highway) at the age of 10; at the age of 12 he told his parents he wanted to be a racing driver.

He was pursuing a course in agriculture in 1970 when he won the Daily Express Crusader Championship for young drivers, the prize for which was a Formula Ford car, with support for a year's racing. He moved to lodgings near Brands Hatch and spent the next four years learning the ropes in the junior formulae, winning the F100 title in 1972 and impressing in Formula 3, Formula Atlantic and Formula 2. His break into Formula 1 came in 1974 via the tiny and underfunded Token team: the car's debut was at the International Trophy race at Brands Hatch, where he qualified in last place and the car only lasted 15 laps in the race. The Token team next competed in the Belgian Grand Prix, where Pryce qualified 20th out of 31, ahead of some established drivers: this time his race lasted for 66 laps before being ended by a collision. Then, due to the sport's internal politics, Pryce was refused entry for the Monaco GP, so instead he competed in the Formula 3 race, which he won by an astonishing margin of 21 seconds. As a result, Pryce was offered a seat with the Shadow F1 team, and made his debut in the Dutch GP in June 1974. The Shadow generally competed in the middle of the pack, but given the right circumstances Pryce showed that it could be driven to a podium place. In his second GP for Shadow at France's Dijon circuit he qualified in third position; in his fourth race at the legendary Nurburgring he scored his first Championship point with a sixth place finish.

Pryce's talent came to the fore in wet conditions: he moved up the grid whenever the rainclouds gathered. His best result came on his adopted home track, Brands Hatch, at the 1975 Race of Champions (a full Formula 1 race, though its result did not count towards the championship). In the drizzle he qualified in second position (a performance described as 'pure magic' by *Autosport*). He fell back at the start but battled his way back to second and was beginning to challenge for first place when the leader retired with engine trouble, leaving Pryce to drive his way unchallenged to the chequered flag. He won by over half a minute: his fastest lap equalled the circuit record. He could have matched that victory with another at the Austrian GP on 17 August 1975: in the heavy rain he advanced from 15th position on the grid to third place after 29 of the scheduled 54 laps, but then the race was stopped. However, it was Pryce's first taste of the podium in a F1 championship race.

Off the track, Tom was shy and undemonstrative, a world away from the playboy image of 1970s racers. Indeed, when he met his future wife, Fenella (Nella) J. Warwick-Smith (born 1955), he told her he was a mechanic so as not to appear boastful. They married at Otford, Kent, in April 1975. He preferred the company of the team mechanics to the glitz of the Formula One circus, and there are stories of his team manager having to tell him not to get oil on his overalls. On the track, his spectacular driving style brought him a legion of fans, who thrilled at the way Pryce threw his car against the kerbs, using every inch of the track.

The 1976 season proved frustrating for the Shadow team, who lacked the financial muscle to be able to develop the car to compete with the major teams. Despite there being talk of Pryce being head-hunted by a more competitive team, he remained loyal to Shadow where he was respected and trusted. Pryce's best finish came in the first race, at Brazil, when he progressed from 12th place on the grid to third, to claim his second podium finish in a F1 championship race. His next best position was a fourth place at his home Grand Prix at Brands Hatch, but for most of the season Tom was battling against his car's limitations. At the final race of 1976 in Japan, the championship decider and a famously wet race, Pryce was running a strong second before another mechanical failure brought his season to an end.

The 1977 season began with two races in South America, where Pryce's Shadow failed to finish, although he had been running in second place in Brazil. The next race was to be held at Kyalami, South Africa, on 5 March. The first practice session was held in the wet, and Pryce posted the fastest time; however, in the qualifying session his Shadow could only manage 15th place. At the start of the race, for reasons that will never be known, Pryce slipped back to the rear of the field, but he then proceeded to charge through the back-markers and was challenging for 11th place at the end of the 22nd lap. A young under-trained fire marshal ran across the pit straight carrying a fire extinguisher to deal with a minor incident; Tom, unsighted behind another car and travelling at 170mph, could not avoid a collision. Both were killed instantly.

Tom Pryce was buried at Otford, but his memory is treasured in the wider world of motor racing and most particularly in Wales. As there have been no Formula 1 drivers from Wales since his day, the loss is felt all the more. A sculpture was unveiled in his home town of Ruthin on what would have been his sixtieth birthday.

Author

Gethin Matthews

Sources

Autosport, 20 March 1975

Western Mail, 5 March 1997

David Tremayne, *The lost generation: the brilliant but tragic lives of rising British F1 stars Roger Williamson, Tony Brise and Tom Pryce* (2006)

Further Reading

WalesOnline: [The Welsh F1 star 'destined to be world champion' who died before he could realise his dream](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Tom Pryce](#)

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