

Eastern Motorsport Press Association reveals nominees for EMPA Hall of Fame and special awards

(HAZLE TOWNSHIP, PA) The Eastern Motorsport Press Association (EMPA) has sent out the ballot to members for voting on for its 2026 Hall of Fame inductees and special award recipients. All awards will be presented at the organization's 53rd annual convention on January 16-18, 2026, at the Holiday Inn in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

The EMPA Board of Directors evaluated the nominated candidates for the Hall of Fame and other special awards, subsequently categorizing them for the voting process.

Eight well-known and respected individuals have been nominated and four will be elected to the HoF. The HoF ballot includes perennial NHRA champion Kenny Bernstein, dirt Modified kingpin Frank Cozze, national championship winning car owner Chip Ganassi, the late open-cockpit star Kevin Gobrecht, Pocono Raceway CEO Nick Igdalsky, asphalt Modified standout Jan Leaty, renowned motorsports television/radio announcer Paul Page and former dirt and asphalt Late Model racer Jeff Purvis. Sprint Car legends Rick Ferkel and Steve Smith Jr., are entering into the EMPA HoF also as automatic lock-ins.

The organization will also honor National and Northeast Driver(s) of the Year. Youth is recognized with the John Blewett III Young Gun Award presented by New England Race Fuels. Other awards go to the Newsmaker of the Year, Promotional Effort of the Year and Spirit of the Sport.

EMPA also presents two members – one each – as Writer of the Year and Photographer of the Year along with awards in writer and photography contests.

World Racing Group has named Kolten Gouse of BAPS Speedway the recipient of the Jerry Reigle Dedication to Sprint Car Racing Award winner.

Members will also vote on two seats up for election on the EMPA Board of Directors, which will be three-year terms each.

Ballots must be received by Sunday, November 30 and winners will be announced after tabulations are completed.

The annual three-day convention begins with a Friday evening Salute to the Champions presented by The Wire Guys of Hazle Township, and a membership welcoming. A select group of local and regional driving titlists will be on hand to network with the press. Saturday consists of press conferences, workshops and award presentations. The formal Hall of Fame dinner and awards ceremony takes place later that evening.

Noted motorsports radio announcer Dave Moody will be the keynote speaker on Saturday prior to the Dover Motor Speedway luncheon.

The Mission of EMPA is: to acknowledge excellence in motorsports and those who have excelled; to foster an atmosphere to improve the quality of motorsports reporting through fellowship and interaction of veteran media with less experienced members in a welcoming atmosphere where tips, techniques and ideas are exchanged.; and to increase positive interactions between race tracks, sanctioning bodies and the working motorsports media.

Additional information can be found at: <https://empamedia.com/>

Founded in 1969, the Eastern Motorsport Press Association is an organization of professional writers, broadcasters, announcers, videographers, and photographers working in the motorsports industry. It also includes associate and corporate members Dover Motor Speedway, Pocono Raceway, Bill Brice, Wanick Construction, The Wire Guys, New England Race Fuels, Evergreen Raceway, Grandview Speedway, Big Diamond Speedway, Elite Custom Awards, Speedway Illustrated, World Racing Group, Himmer Graphics and Snyder Web Design, who are among the supporters of the organization.

2026 EASTERN MOTORSPORT PRESS ASSOCIATION HALL OF FAME AND AWARD NOMINEES

EMPA Hall of Fame

Inducted will be the following two, no vote needed:

Rick Ferkel and Steve Smith Jr.

Four of the following inducted by vote: Kenny Bernstein, Frank Cozze, Chip Ganassi, Kevin Gobrecht, Nick Igdalsky, Jan Leaty, Paul Page, Jeff Purvis

EMPA John Blewett III Young Gun Presented by New England Race Fuels (one winner): Luke Baldwin, Paulie Hartwig III, Tristan McKee, Alex Payne, Steven Snyder, Jr.

EMPA Richie Evans Memorial Northeast Asphalt Driver of the Year (one winner): Austin Beers, Justin Bonsignore, Jon McKennedy, Matt Hirschman, Otto Sitterly

EMPA Richie Evans Memorial Northeast Dirt Driver of the Year (one winner): Briggs Danner, Danny Deitrich, Anthony Macri, Matt Sheppard, Mat Williamson

EMPA Al Holbert Memorial National Driver of the Year: Write-in one name per member

EMPA Chris Economaki Memorial Newsmaker of the Year (one winner): Andretti F1 Team, Darryl Cuttell/IHRA, Halmar-Friesen Racing, Jason Makarewicz/Shangri-La II Speedway, Daison Pursley

EMPA Promotional Effort of the Year (one winner): Chris Kearns/Wild West Shootout, Eagle Raceway 305 Sprint Car Nationals, Jim Bernheisel/Clash Motorsports Appalachian Mountain Late Model Speedweek/Fall Clash, Kolten Gouse/BAPS Motor Speedway, Super DIRTcar Series

EMPA Junie Donlavey Memorial Spirit of the Sport: Rex Merritt

EMPA Jim Hunter Memorial Writer of the Year Award (one winner): Ken Bruce, Linda Mansfield, Jack O'Connor, Thomas Pope, Scott Walsh

EMPA Ace Lane, Sr., Memorial Photographer of the Year (one winner): Dan Anderson, Debbie Gastelu, Rick Ibsen, Michael Jaworecki Sr., Walt Smith

EMPA Board of Directors (two winners): Debbie Gastelu, JR Kennerup, Pete MacDonald, Mike Mallett Dino Oberto