

# 57th NATIONAL TRACTOR PULLING CHAMPIONSHIPS



A Special Supplement to

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Scott W. Grau | Sentinel-Tribune  
Jason Bentzer, of Edwardsburg, MI, drives the John Deere 4555  
"Plastic Money" tractor during the National Tractor Pulling  
Championships Super Farm competition on August 18, 2023 at the  
Wood County Fairgrounds.



# Puller nation depends on Wood County's sled quartet

**By J. Patrick Eaken**  
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Without dozens of workers behind the scenes, the 57th Annual National Tractor Pulling Championships on Aug. 15-17 at the Wood County Fairgrounds would be dead in its tracks.

With an estimated crowd of 65,000 for the weekend event, and over \$250,000 in purse money and contingency prizes, the Northwestern Ohio Tractor Pullers Association boasts a membership limited to 225 led by nine directors. But

without one four-man quartet, the show could not go on.

They are the sled team quartet, Tom Schaller, Don Schaller, Brian Schaller, and Dan Sheldrick, who make sure the "dance" between the pulling vehicle and the sled that carries the weight is coordinated smoothly.

Today, the Wood County quartet's reputation as a sled team extends across the country and into Canada.

Sheldrick, a 1977 Rossford High School graduate, has watched sleds evolve since he was a kid

and his father, Ron, was a member of the early sled teams.

Sheldrick has been a member of the NWOTPA for 48 years, but he and his late father combined have been "sledding" for over a half century.

His father began a tilting business in 1965, but if there was a pull to go to, they put everything down and went. His father even pulled Dan out of school if necessary, and sometimes Dan went and Ron stayed home and worked.

"He was very supportive of me traveling with

the sled while he stayed home and put in tile because he loved tractor pulling," Sheldrick said. "I have to give him a lot of credit for that."

## Wood County led the way

To demonstrate the importance of switching out the sled, and do so expediently, a press release from the National Farm Machinery Show website, FarmMachinery-Show.org, honors the process.

"Truck and tractor pulling in simplest terms is a dance between two partners," the release



Courtesy Keith Siler | NWOTPA  
Dan Sheldrick (above) and his late father Ron have been on the National Tractor Pulling Championships' sled team for over a half century. Now, Dan "sledds with" longtime teammates Tom Schaller, Don Schaller, and Brian Schaller.

says "There's an animated and loud partner leading the dance, the pulling

vehicle. The other partner, the sled, is

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## Puller

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in full and silent control of the path of the lead, even as it follows.”

Hooking and unhooking from the sled are among the quartet’s primary duties. Should there be any issue with the primary sled, the team brings an additional sled that can quickly be put into action.

Decades before and leading up to 1995, the sleds were owned, even designed, by the NOTPA, which puts on the BG show. The early designs were a revolution in tractor pulling.

In the fall of 1967, the NWOTPA hired a local man, Merle Grimm to build a weight exchanger or sled.

Thus, Heartbreaker I was born — a motorized mechanical weight exchanger designed

specifically for tractor pulling. It was soon to be copied by other tractor pulling groups across the nation.

As tractor pulling technology and power evolved in the early 1970s, it was determined that Heartbreaker I was too small and too light to provide the resistance for the newer and more powerful machines.

So in 1974, another local man, Chuck Ziss was hired by the NWOTPA to build Heartbreaker II which would be recognizable to many because it was used by the organization until 1995. The Sheldricks were there and heavily invested the entire time.

“I’ve been around the sled since I was a kid,” Sheldrick said. “My dad used to take me when they were building the Heartbreaker II (sled).”

“My dad used to travel with the sleds some with different guys. In later

years, myself and some guys my age traveled with the sled. We went to Canada, Michigan, Indiana, and Louisville (National Farm Machinery Show at Freedom Hall).

“There was a Heartbreaker I sled that Merle Grimm built that was used a short number of years, then the idea of the Heartbreaker II was that you could pull a light tractor clear up to the heaviest tractor, and the sled would do the whole thing,” Sheldrick said.

“They called it a weight exchanger — they didn’t even call it a sled back then because it exchanged the weight from the wheels to the pan, so they called it a weight exchanger for a long time, but they are largely known as sleds anymore.

“The heartbreaker II was used widely throughout the United States because there just



Sled team member Dan Sheldrick after a late night at the track.

Courtesy Keith Siler | NWOTPA

weren’t that many sleds around,” Sheldrick said. “That is how we got into Louisville with it and pulls in Canada. We just did lots of pulls with it.”

Sheldrick often was personally involved, assisting with maintain-

ing those early sleds.

“I spent hours working on the sleds with my friends,” Sheldrick said.

### Continuing the tradition

Since 1995, Vaughn Bauer and his team have provided the sleds.

Bauer’s Ironman sleds are a prominent part of national pulling events across the United States, with four sleds in action at 200 events annually.

Dan and the Schallers

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## Tradition

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still help the Bauers operate the sleds, and they still travel to help not only the Bauers, but other sledders around the country. They are recognized and welcomed to any show.

Their reputation as a sledding quartet extends well beyond BG and they have friends and associates as far away as Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri — anywhere you can find the roar of a modified tractor or truck

pulling a dead weight.

“That’s probably the best thing about the whole thing is all the people that we’ve met throughout the nation,” Sheldrick said. “By traveling with the sleds, we got to meet so many people who are friends of ours.”

The quartet continues today, even though it is not on them to build and maintain the sled, and they may not have the primary role of switching the sleds out.

“The Bauers, they are in the sled business, they build sleds and they operate sleds,” Sheldrick

said. “We go to some of the pulls, like at Louisville, we helped hook and unhook the sled at Louisville.

“Ever since our sled left there, we’ve done that for the Bauers now, or with the Bauers. So we still enjoy being down on the track and being able to help out. At Bowling Green, I still unhook a lot of the sleds. There are two tracks up there and I hook on the south track.”

Today at 65-years-old, Sheldrick says he “considers it the best seat in the house right between the tracks.”



Courtesy Keith Siler | NWOTPA

Dan Sheldrick (far right) and his late father Ron have been on the National Tractor Pulling Championships' sled team for over a half century. Now, Dan “sleds with” longtime teammates Tom Schaller, Don Schaller, and Brian Schaller.



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# 'Blue Shirts' have raised millions for Make-A-Wish

Make-A-Wish of Northwestern Ohio and the Northwestern Ohio Tractor Pullers have a most unique relationship. You might be wondering what those two entities have in common and the answer is...a lot.

For over 30 years the National Tractor Pulling Championships have invited Make-A-Wish families and staff to attend their pull. Families come ready to watch and listen and leave exhilarated and exhausted.

Volunteers run the stadium with collection buckets and the generous pullers, patrons and blue shirts fill the buckets with cash. All of this money goes directly to area wish children waiting for their wishes to be granted.

The highlight for many of the wish families is the Saturday afternoon auction. The pullers and vendors donate items for auction and everyone gets involved.

In the 20th year of the partnership the auction alone raised \$124,000

and with running the stands, T-shirt sales and general donations \$190,002 went directly to Make A Wish after expenses.

That allowed for 24 area children to have their wish granted. This partnership between Make-A-Wish and the NTPC is a special one and a long one. Since then, total donations have exceeded \$1 million.

"The Make-A-Wish local office would not be able to do what it does without the tractor pull. We never forget that," said Cherie Chatreau-Grifo, then-senior development officer for the Make-A-Wish Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

"We also realize what a generous group of people we get to work with while this is going on. The kids love it. The parents appreciate it. Our staff is humbled by it."

For instance, during the 28th year of the partnership, the Northwestern Ohio Tractor Pullers Association and Make-A-Wish Ohio Kentucky and



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An oversized bottle cap that drivers will sign rests on the top of a concrete barrier during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.

Indiana (Make-A-Wish OKI) pulled together to raise money to grant wishes for children in Northwest Ohio battling critical illnesses.

The 53rd National Tractor Pulling Championships raised a record amount for Make-A-Wish OKI, more than \$400,000.

"We are blown away by the generosity of the pullers and fans who attended the National Tractor Pulling Championships," said Make-A-Wish OKI Chief Advancement Officer John Carreon.

"They have some of the biggest hearts we've

ever seen and care so deeply for our mission. Thanks to them, dozens of local children's wishes are coming true."

Every summer, an average of 65,000 people come out for the largest truck and tractor pull in the world. To date, more than \$1.5 million has been raised for Make-A-Wish OKI.

"We love helping this organization and are just so very proud of the sponsors, the pullers and the fans that give to this," said National Tractor Pulling Championships President Mike Erford.

"We're well over that million-dollar fundraising benchmark and that's an amazing feat."

That year's event honored legendary puller, Larry Koester, a long-time supporter of Make-A-Wish OKI. Koester helped make countless wishes come true and was a three-time Grand National champion in the Modified Mini division. Koester passed away at a pull in July that year.

In 2019, the association's blue shirts were honored with Make-A-Wish's Chris Greicius Award. The award is named after Chris Greicius, the 7-year-old boy whose wish to be a police officer inspired the creation of Make-A-Wish in 1980.

This honor is given to those whose giving level reaches over \$1,000,000. The National Tractor Pulling Championships –

"That's a big name and that doesn't begin to define what drives that group. The 'Blue Shirts' are the working soul of this organization and make sure every single

I is dotted, and every t is crossed," says a letter from the Make-A-Wish foundation.

"This group of people, men and women, work tirelessly to ensure that the pull runs smoothly, the fans are happy and that the pullers are pulling.

"Over the past 26 years, they have made a 'weekend home' for Make-A-Wish and our Make-A-Wish families. They invite our wish kids to experience a day of excitement, fun and fellowship. There is no need we have that they don't attend to.

"Their generosity and love of our mission has allowed us to raise over \$1,000,000 from this annual 'third weekend in August Extravaganza.' On average, that allows us to grant more than 20 wishes per year," the award letter continued.

We are honored to award the Chris Greicius Award to the Blue Shirts of The National Tractor Pulling Championships.

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# Wish

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Thank you for your support and generosity. We wouldn't be the same without you.

On Sept. 26, 2019 the NTPC directors were invited to the Make-A-Wish "Evening of Excellence" awards in Lewis Center. This is a national year-end celebration recognizing achievement over the past year for the Ohio/Indiana and Kentucky chapter.

The Blue Shirts of the NWOTPA were honored with the "2019 Reach for the Stars" award, given to one person or organization who exemplified

the art of giving and exceeded expectations for money raised and gifts granted to Make-A-Wish children for a chapter. Over \$403,000 was raised that year 2019.

Make-A-Wish creates life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses. The organization is on a quest to bring every eligible child's wish to life, because a wish is an integral part of a child's treatment journey.

Research shows children who have wishes granted can build the physical and emotional strength they need to fight a critical illness. There are currently more than 120 children in Northwest Ohio who are awaiting their wish.



Jeff Demers, of Linn Grove, Iowa, drives the John Deere 8R Series "Smokin Hot Deere" tractor during the National Tractor Pulling Championships Super Stock Diesel competition on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.

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Empty seats hold viewing spots for spectators during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



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# During 57-year history, pull has grown exponentially

Bowling Green's National Tractor Pull was founded and promoted by the Northwestern Ohio Tractors Pulling Association, the veritable backbone of the championships for 57 years. It began small and has grown exponentially.

The NWOTPA was chartered as the Wood County Tractor Pullers in the spring of 1962. There were approximately 20 members, all residents of Wood County.

In August of 1962 the first speed pull was introduced at the Wood County Fairgrounds. A special long flat bottom sled was

built that was designed for men to step on as it went by. Men were lined up on both sides of the track and stepped on the sled as it went by.

The tractor that pulled the farthest was declared the winner. Many problems occurred with this type of pulling, specifically men leaving the track during the event and the tractors going too fast for men to step on.

In 1964 the club grew in membership as men from other counties wished to join. It was this year that the name changed to the Northwestern Ohio Tractor

Pullers, and new officers were elected.

1967 marked the first year for the National Tractor Pull in Bowling Green. It offered three divisions: 5,000, 9,500, and 14,000 pound mixed, which meant that there were stock and modified tractors running in the division and the only stipulation at the time was the weight.

In 1969, the 18,000 pound free for all division was added. It would be something similar to the unlimited modified division of today. 1970

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An emergency crew member watches the action during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



An emergency crew member watches the action during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



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## History

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saw the classes further breakdown into stock and modified divisions in their respective weight classes.

Weight classes for pulling from 1967 to 1974 were 5, 7, 9 and 12,000-pound. 1975 found the first 12,000-pound open class.

It was during the mid 70's that the NWOTPA grew to around 135 members. 1977 saw many changes in the competition at Bowling Green. The stock classes of tractors were replaced by the super stock classes. That year also

saw the introduction of the 1,550 pound mini-rod (now 1850 pound), and also the first four-wheel drive trucks.

1978 saw the debut of the monsters of the midway — the unlimited modifieds. 1980s event introduced the pro-stock class and in 1984 the two-wheel drive class was born.

The late 1970s, the 1980s and early 90s provided some unique problems for the NWOTPA. Interest in the club as well as the event itself caused the organization to make some important decisions.

Membership in the club increased as a correlation to the manpower needed to present an

annual national event. As more and more divisions were introduced, there was more prize money to be given away as well as numbers of vehicles, drivers and fans.

The organization then decided to seek sponsorship, which proved to increase the awareness of the event and the club. Some past presenting sponsors included Budweiser and Busch Beers, Wrangler Jeans and Pioneer Seeds.

Another unique feature of the club included the desire to involve other organizations in Bowling Green and the area in the event. Today Otsego FFA helps with parking, the BG Exchange Club

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Dusty Price, of Wolf Lake, Indiana, watches his spotter as he backs his "Blackmail" tractor up the pull sled during the National Tractor Pulling Championships Modified Mini competition on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.

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## History

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had been involved and the club is a member of the BG Chamber of Commerce.

As vehicles became more sophisticated, so did rules and safety regulations. The NTPC have aligned the club with The National Tractor Pullers Association, TNT Motorsports and the United States Hot Rod Association as different sanctioning bodies. These organizations not only provide a fair competition for drivers, but safety regulations to protect driver and fan.

Today, with an estimated crowd of 65,000 for

the weekend event, and over \$250,000 in purse money and contingency prizes, the NWOTPA boasts a membership limited to 225 led by nine directors.

The membership is totally responsible for all facets of the annual event including lighting and electrical, track building and maintenance, sponsorship procurement, advertising, food service, media relations, security, ticket sales and the list goes on.

“We are from the country, we are from the city, we are from all walks of life with only one thing in common and that is to bring you the best show we know how,” the club states in its own written history.



Ken Veney, of Wadsworth, drives the “Funny Lil’ Farmall” tractor during the National Tractor Pulling Championships Modified Mini competition on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.

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A member of the No Mercy Motorsports team watches a pull during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



Kent Payne, of Veedersburg, Indiana, stops to sign an over-sized bottle cap after accepting his first place trophy for winning the Super Stock Diesel competition driving his International 1066 "Super Roster" tractor during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



Mark Hafner sprays a "secret" sauce onto chickens being roasted and sold by the Tontogany-based American Legion Post 441 concession stand during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023.

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The Goodyear blimp is seen floating past the north grandstands during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.

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# The National Tractor Pulling Championships Modified Mini competition on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds



Troy Arndt, of Sac City, Iowa, drives the "Back and Black" tractor



Andy Korporal, of Van Buren, Indiana, pops a wheelie as he drives his "Lil Heathen" tractor



Phil Curtis, of Leipsic, drives the "Runnin' on Empty" tractor

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Grant Theobald, of Shelbyville, Indiana, drives the "Li'l Wicked" tractor during the National Tractor Pulling Championships Modified Mini competition on August 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



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Fans watch the action during the National Tractor Pulling Championships on Aug. 18, 2023 at the Wood County Fairgrounds.



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