

Snowmobiler rides to another victory

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Owner Russ Lemke works on one of his snowmobiles Wednesday at Russ Lemke Enterprises in Kronenwetter / T'xer Zhon Kha/Daily Herald Media

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The snowmobile whizzed around the snowy trail's corner, moving much too fast to complete the turn. It flew over an embankment, sending its rider, Russ Lemke, on a 40-foot freefall straight toward the unforgiving ground below. Lemke left the hospital four days later with 57 stitches and a cast covering his shattered knee.

But for Lemke, it wasn't the end of his snowmobile career. It was only the beginning.

The accident occurred during Lemke's first year of racing snowmobiles in 1966. Despite calling it quits on the racing business after another serious accident in 1969, Lemke has transformed the snowmobile industry in remarkable ways during the past 48 years — an accomplishment that will be recognized by some of the most prominent pioneers of the snowmobile world.

A selection committee from the World Snowmobile Headquarters in Eagle River has chosen the 71-year-old Kronenwetter man to be inducted into the International Snowmobile Hall of Fame this September. Lemke's close friends nominated him in May for a lifetime of work improving the parts and performance of snowmobiles.

"Russ will definitely be known for being an innovator in the manufacturing part of snowmobiles," said Russell Davis, former vice president of sales for Bombardier Recreational Products and a close friend of Lemke. "He took snowmobile engines to another level in a unique way that other manufacturers hadn't. He's more than a mechanic, he's a person that could detect problems and solve them almost instantly."

Lemke and four other 2013 inductees were invited to a Sept. 14 ceremony at the World Snowmobile Headquarters in Eagle River to celebrate their induction to ISHOF, which currently has 92 members. Davis, who became a member of ISHOF in 2012, said the formal reception usually brings together a couple hundred snowmobile enthusiasts and involves a presentation of the large photos of the inductees that will join other famous snowmobilers on the wall of the ISHOF room at the World Snowmobile Headquarters facility.