

# Steve Park

*In His Own Words*

As told to **Low Boyd**



- Born August 23, 1967, in East Northport, New York
- Highly popular winner in every regional and national NASCAR series he raced
- Current owner/operator of Batteries Plus Bulbs in Mooresville, North Carolina

Thinking back on my racing experience, you could say there were three separate times that I let out one of those big ol' life sighs. The first time came early—in a U-Haul headed south on Interstate 95.

You see, I was born to a family through-and-through into racing on Long Island. If you go by the site of the old Islip Speedway, there's a sign that says my dad, Bob Park, won the last show there. That makes me so proud.

Sometimes, though, it got to be a little too much. On Thanksgiving we'd go to my grandmother's house for dinner, and there'd be three modified drivers at the table—Dad, Uncle Bill, and me. Along the way, we all traded bumpers, so the conversation could get a little thick. Fortunately, my mom always took my side.

I had started in pro-four cars and won a few, but was not spectacular in any way. One day I told my dad I wanted to go modified racing. He said, "What makes you think you can do that when you're not performing well at the local level now?" That made me think. I took it as guidance rather than criticism. That's the moment I really stepped up my game.

By 1996 I was living in Connecticut, now fully focused on the modified tour, but I had this group of friends who were quite the characters. I thought it was one of them joking around when I got these phone messages from Dale Earnhardt about driving his Busch car. When it dawned on me that this was real, I flew down to North Carolina to see him. Then, in no time, I packed up all my stuff and headed south.

Along the way, I actually pulled over, my mind was so full of what was happening. Confidence is something I thought I had, but what I was facing then was just plain fear. I knew it was time to check my gut and perform. You work to get to Carnegie Hall—and, when there, you'd *better* perform. And I was going right onto the world's stage in front of NASCAR's greatest driver. Here goes!

It was no easy road on the superspeedways, but I do feel proud of myself, kind of the same way I do about my dad and that Islip

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marker. In 1997, my first full year with DEI, I got three wins and Rookie of the Year. Then it was really off to the races. I ended up winning not only in NASCAR's modified regional tour, but in the former Busch North tour—and in all three NASCAR National Series, Cup, Busch and Truck. I'm sure that Kyle Busch has outdone that, but maybe not many more.

But along the way, especially early on, there were some crashes—hard ones. I was seriously hurt after a tire failure in Cup practice at Atlanta in 1998 and again in Darlington three years later under caution in a Busch car.

There is no question I was aware of the dark side of the sport. I've seen so much. I remember my dad chugging out onto the track wearing an ancient military tank helmet and a tee shirt with a screwdriver tucked inside so he could adjust the carburetor in the infield. Later, when I got into the modifieds, it was the dusk of that awful period when Corky Cookman, Richie Evans, and Charlie Jarzombek were killed. I was at Stafford when Tony Jankowiak crashed. And you can only imagine what it was like to be racing in the Daytona 500 in 2001 when my car owner died.

You know, this is just not a safe sport. It's like the NFL—it's dangerous. Non-racing people can be freaked out to the core about it, but race car drivers just can't compete if they fear the worst. Over the years, I've been through a revolution in safety and I certainly hope it will continue. But, when I drove, I accepted the risk I took as an athlete in order to get that thrill of victory. Frankly, I never lived with the fear that something could hurt me. I felt undefeatable every time I climbed into that car.

But, when I did get hurt, it became clear that there were issues I hadn't counted on. I did manage in time to recover fully from my injuries, but my persona—my brand—as a race driver did not. I found that I was being passed over for the better rides because I had been hurt in the past. It was so hard to hear people carry on, saying "when will you get back to winning?"

I realized I was going to have to up my game again and find a team that had full confidence in me. That came along when

Brendan Gaughan moved over to Cup and left the seat in the Orleans Racing truck open. Those guys were great, and, as we went to California in 2005, I had my second big sigh. I had won in the past; I just had to win again. And we did that day. I proved to everyone else that I had fully recovered. Deep inside, it felt so good.

I raced for another five years or so in various divisions—and just a few events after that. The last was a one-off modified race on a little temporary track on the Daytona backstretch. Nothing seemed to go right that day, but I did win.

I'm 52 now. I'm still in good shape and I think physically I could get right back into a race car now. But you know, when you race, you race to win, to be unbeatable, not just to drive a car around in circles. I just don't *feel* that urge anymore.

Bottomline, I became too old to really race, but too young to retire. Can you imagine how many racers have faced that?

I struggled deciding what to do. I knew I didn't want to work for anyone else, so I went out and bought a job.

I looked around and came up with the idea of a Batteries Plus Bulbs shop in Mooresville. I had zippo experience in business, in retail, or anything like that. I dug in, worked hard, and took all the training very seriously.

Racers are so competitive. I've been able to switch that energy to the business. I still wake up each morning thinking about how I can do better, how my business can be more successful.

So, back when I unlocked that front door and we opened the business, I let out my third big sigh. There was no room for failure! Would the customers come?

They have, and it goes really well. I am now happily settled in.

As for racing, I'm not exactly the senior statesman type, but I'm still engaged in the sport, supporting it, helping it stay alive. Just this week we had Stocks for Tots come by the shop. About 25 families came by. I just loved it. ♡