



BILL VENTURINI

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- **Born 2/14/1953 in Chicago, Illinois**
- **Bill Venturini was an unusually talented competitor, with two national ARCA championships. Retiring from driving, he and his son, Billy, launched a highly regarded, innovative, driver-development company that has shaped some of the finest racers in the country today. With Bill the dad in a total racing family, Billy now leads Venturini Motorsports, while daughter, Wendy, is a popular broadcaster for NASCAR's Cup Series.**

KARL FREDRICKSON

It didn't work out the way I expected. You see, my dad raced and had a gas station where I worked. It was natural that I would, too, and, it was on my honeymoon that we bought my first race car. Cathy was fully supportive, as she's always been, but I'd seen what racing can sometimes do to families. I said I would run for three to five years at places like Rockford, Illinois, and that would be it. I was not going to get addicted. But, when I announced I was done in 1977, I found I just couldn't just stay home.

I really wanted to go USAC racing, but there was no way we could afford it. Enter Cathy. She happened to be talking with her doctor, John Belucci, at an appointment in 1978, and he said I should come see him. Bottom line, he sponsored us in a \$60,000 deal, we bought a Sal Tovella Chrysler Kit Car, and it was off to Milwaukee. We won our 25-lap qualifying race on the last lap, my first time there. I was hooked again.

After three seasons, Dr. Belucci backed away when his wife said "no more money on race cars." But he gave us everything—a couple of cars, engines, and it really got us started.

I wanted to try Daytona, and in 1982, Cathy and I drove down with an ARCA car. On that 18-hour ride home to Illinois, I carried on about how much I loved that form of racing, especially at places like Daytona and Talladega. But we just couldn't afford it. We got talking about how there were maybe 500 to 1,000 drivers in Florida in February seeking sponsors. How could we make ourselves stand out? My dad always said whatever you do—good or bad—do it so you get noticed. He had the first self-serve station in Chicago and had gimmicks like kids' pony rides and an eight-hour session offering free gas. Cathy and I always had nice-looking race cars and everyone uniformed, and we thought we could back that up with an all-female pit crew. Cathy put it together. It sure attracted attention, but after a couple of seasons racing mostly in the Chicago area, we were going to disband. It was just too expensive, even though Cathy and I now owned three gas stations ourselves.

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Then a call came from *Sports Illustrated*. They wanted to do a feature on us and the female pit crew. Permatex was sponsoring ARCA, so we sent them a proposal to take our all-girl operation to their series. They agreed in about a half-hour, and off we went ARCA racing, the girls in tow. It went well. Working out of a garage in back of our house, we won the championship in 1987 and 1991. It was a family effort, me as driver, Cathy as right-front tire changer. We also became the first ARCA team to qualify at over 200 mph, setting records at both Daytona and Talladega. One thing began to lead to another. We were in touch with George Brunnhoelzl about jacks for the girls, and he designed real light aluminum ones. That became a good business for them.

But, by 1993, we were ready for a change. We had three stations, a towing operation, lots of employees, long hours—and those Chicago winters were feeling cold. And, without question, we needed a bigger race shop. We decided to move to Charlotte. I'll admit to being a little scared about how we'd make it down there, so I bought a gas station as security.

Our son, Billy, was racing Legends cars by then. One day at an ARCA show at Kentucky the field was very thin, and we had a backup car in the truck. Billy took it out and didn't he look really good! Then in 1994, we went to I-70 in Missouri, and he out-qualified me. I began to back down on my own driving to support him, while getting into some commercial real estate.

But racing was getting more and more expensive. At that point an older gent, Tom Berte, asked us to maintain his equipment. That kept us afloat for a couple of years. Billy was doing really well racing and wanted to keep going. He approached me, saying that working with other teams was good business and we should continue it. I agreed and made Billy partner.

Billy and J.D. Gibbs had raced Legends together in the past, and we began maintaining cars for their young drivers in one of our buildings. Joey Logano was first, not even old enough to run in NASCAR. So, we went to Rockingham with an ARCA car, and he won—first time out. That really put him on the map, and us, too.

Then Joey won Pocono, and everyone was really happy. When Gibbs switched to Toyota, we followed.

That's when our driver-development activities really started. Toyota Racing Development was being fed all these very racy midget drivers, but they had no way to be groomed to run full-sized cars. For us, it was meant to be. Venturini Motorsports just grew from there. Here we are 20 years later with 25 employees.

We—I should say Billy—built a business model focused on the ARCA Series, offering bundles of training in four areas: on-track coaching, media training, sponsor relations, and core fitness. We've worked with over 140 drivers so far, including Erik Jones, William Bryon, Alex Bowman, Ryan Blaney, Daniel Suarez, Brandon and Erik Jones, Christopher Bell—and Joey Logano. We have a specific program with a set fee, paid by a sponsor or the driver and his/her family.

For on-track coaching, we use Dartfish performance software, race-film analysis, and closely watched single and group drafting training sessions. Billy oversees it all and has become amazingly perceptive. Toyota knows everyone we work with. Our incoming drivers have already seen success. They're not grabbed right off the street. But, actually much of our work is helping break their habits. They might have been good at what they did—like midgets on dirt, but that's not what they need to do now. A real hard part is getting them to give good feedback on what this type of car is doing.

With the media training and sponsor relations, we want them to appear human, personable, but completely honest. Their futures loom, so they must be really careful. Social media is so dangerous—and negative. I find myself constantly defending racing. I'm more into print media, frankly.

COVID has been a big factor in the last couple of years, because racing entertainment has decreased so much. However, it remains a factor in sponsor relations that successful drivers need to understand and appreciate.



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Dr. Joe Mattioli, Voice of Experience
Speedway Illustrated
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Even someone who's not a natural can become a good race car driver, but it's two to three years to really get the hang of it. We urge everyone to stick closely to our program. I've seen it again and again.

Toyota has unbelievable training centers in nearby Mooresville and Salisbury, North Carolina. They even have core fitness trainers, nutritionists who sit down with drivers and crew chiefs—and a phenomenal simulator.

Some guys—like William Bryon, Christopher Bell—seem like naturals. And I smile thinking about Ryan Blaney. We took him first to Winchester, where he looked so strong. His dad called me the next week to see what I thought. “You’re f*#*ked, Dave,” I said. “He’s so good you could go broke, but he’s going to the top!”

Even someone who’s not a natural can become a good race car driver, but it’s two to three years to really get the hang of it. We urge everyone to stick closely to our program. I’ve seen it again and again. If someone moves up the ladder too quickly, they can fall right off. It can be from running out of money or losing their confidence—or both. End of career.

At this point, I can’t quite believe what’s happened. We’ve run north of 140 guys and girls through our program. Thirteen of them are currently in Trucks or Xfinity and 11 in Cup. We won the ARCA show at Daytona this year, fifth time in a row. It’s our 80th win, making us the winningest ARCA team ever.

Cathy and I credit Billy with all of this. Sure, I still love going to the races and being involved, but he says with a smile, “Dad, why don’t you just take your check and go home.”

I’m fine with that. 🏆