

# Mike King

## *In His Own Words*

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- Born on March 16, 1952, in Nyack, New York
- A joyful, ultra-popular 68-year-old big block DIRT Modified racer known as "Kingfish," who mastered the art of running on financial fumes and "good used."

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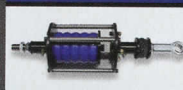
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racing dictionary

**Understeer / 'ən-dər-, stir/**

The tendency of an automobile to turn less sharply than the driver intends. In racing this is often referred to as "tight." A tight car hits the wall with the front of the car. A loose car hits the wall with the rear.

My parents "bought" me when I was three days old. My adopted mom was Bob Hart's sister. He was one hard-working open-wheel racer who taught me the way and helped me build my first car under a canvas by the house in Nassau. It was a sportsman for nearby Lebanon Valley—a 289 with all used parts and lots of gas-welded water pipe on a '54 Chevy frame.

## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

I didn't have a lot going for me. Certainly no money, so it was tough. I remember my stomach flip-flopping before the races, but I was hooked. By 1975, I was racing a big block modified, even though I was in the consi every week.

Those self-made cars were something to drive. You'd use whatever parts were available when you were putting them together, so each car was different and not so user-friendly. You'd get so banged around inside that it would be Thursday before you could straighten out your knees and elbows.

By the 1980s, I could see the manufactured cars were so much better and safer, with new steering and seats and things, that I did have to buy a chassis. I've been with Pete Chuckta at PMC for years now. His chassis seem to last and not to flex. Most guys will switch when one doesn't work. I always work with it until it does.

Other than that, I was still doing everything else on the car myself—like motors. You do what you gotta do. At one Lebanon Valley 200 I dropped a valve in the heat, and it put a hole in a piston. Someone shot back to the farm for a bag of old valves, while we found a self-tapping screw and wound it into the piston and ground it down so it wouldn't hit the replacement valve. We picked the best valve in the bag and popped it in, even though the stem was too narrow. By now, everyone was watching, and when we fired it up, Rich Eurich warned "Everyone better move back." But it was okay, and off we went into the consi.

Then, in 2005, I had blown up every motor I had, and Matt Quinn offered me a spare—a good built motor—for a Monday-night special at the Valley.

It felt so good in the heat that I called Nan, my wife, who was camping, to come to the track. I knew I would be starting up front. I did and settled into second spot behind Donnie Ackner. He was fast, but all of a sudden, I saw a puff of smoke, and he pulled off.

I assumed the lead and thought, "What am I going to screw up now?" But I managed not to, and after the checkered flag I took two cool-down laps because I was crying. It was my first win in 33 years. It was quite

*I've never been a guy with big sponsors. I've had to live on 'good used.'*

a scene in the frontstretch afterwards—all the way till dawn. They say it was one of the biggest celebrations in track history.

I knew then it was time to upgrade my motors. Lebanon Valley is famous for its big blocks, and the promoter, Howie Commander, is behind them all the way. But, like Middletown, New York, the half-mile at Lebanon is tough on them. One of the problems in trying to compete with your own pieced-together motors is that they just don't last.

And, of course, there is the issue of power. When I made a mistake racing with one of my motors, it would cost me two or three spots. But with Matt's—or a motor I borrowed from John Flach—I'd just jump on the throttle and I'd be fine.

So, I started working closely with Dan Bedell, who builds motors. I have a couple of good sets of heads, and we put new parts in them when really needed. I spend maybe \$8,000-10,000 a year on motors. A new one costs \$60,000. Most of the strong teams have two or three and build a new one each year, so they might be putting out something like \$80,000.

Even with some newer stuff, though, I still have to be careful. The top guys will run their motors at 8,100-8,300 rpms at the Valley. I keep it at around 7,700 for endurance, but I know it costs me spots. Last year at a big fall show, I got racy and geared it to 7,900. What a blast that was!

I've never been a guy with big sponsors. I've had to live on 'good used.' I can't commit to running around, trying to help someone else grow their business. After my farming days, I joined a service center and am busy day and night working the shop and doing towing. All I can commit to is getting my car ready and being at the track on Saturday night.

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## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

There's a great group of guys around me, though. Garry Waters has been piecing together transmissions and rears for me for years. I will admit that last year I did buy a new rear for the first time in 46 years. Social Security—on top of my job—allowed me to do that.

And I've had a great friend in Mike Thoma, who had a tire shop up Route 20 from the track. He even has kind of a billboard out front where he puts up funny messages wishing me good luck each week. He has bought my right rears for a long, long time.

As for my driving, I'm okay still. I just don't feel anywhere near retirement. When my car is good, I know my reactions are as quick as anyone's. And when I'm racing, I look way ahead, trying to sense the race. I know I sometimes lose a spot by being cautious, but I don't wreck much.

It's so interesting that this is still going on. There is a bunch of us at Lebanon now over 60. Forty years ago, you were considered over the hill by 40! You have to wonder whether we drivers could actually outlast big block racing.

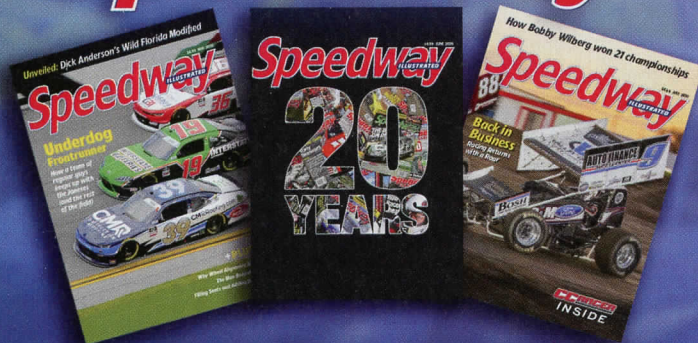
You know, it's hard for me to even leave the track. Even though we both live right nearby, Brian Berger and I started this thing called Phase 3 Racing. Phase One of the evening, of course, is the racing. Phase Two is going to the Clubhouse, greeting fans, and getting the payoff. Phase Three is when a lot of us competitors go across the street to the parking field with our campers. We socialize till the early hours.

Racing always will have its surprises, though. Keeps you on your toes. We opened for the season last night, and I have a new PMC chassis. After three seasons, my 2017 PMC was cooked. The new one is a four coil with a left-side Panhard bar. It's fast, but it's also one violent animal. You have to drive it like you hate it. It slams you around inside as the weight transfers. The previous torsion setup with the Panhard bar on the right was the smoothest ride ever.

Last night was a real awakening for me. But I'm not going to give up on this car. You can bet I'm going to work and work on it until it makes me go. 🍀

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