



- Born February 24, 1959, in Sedro Wooley, Washington
- Former World of Outlaws competitor, inductee to the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame, owner of Skagit Speedway and State Fair Park in Washington, and unstoppable racing entrepreneur.

Steve Beitler

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

It had to happen. I was born into a racing family, and it was a joy. My dad, Harold, ran in the first race at Skagit Speedway in 1954, and when I came along, he took me everywhere. By the time I was in high school, I was dragging *him* everywhere—and I was rebuilding a limited sprint car as a school project with what money I could make from milking cows.

It went pretty well racing locally, then regionally; I had a big break when I spent a couple of years in Australia running late models. I was always all about fulfilling my dreams, working all the

time, except for church on Sunday mornings. Following in Dad's footsteps, I was a reserve policeman, a fireman/EMT. I was also a painter and steel worker, a bouncer at a cocktail lounge, and a rock and roll bass guitarist.

Then in 1989, I gave it all up to go racing full-time with the Outlaws—my big dream, with a used car and motor. I continued for about seven years and figured that, after driving, I'd stay on the road, working for a team.

Then came a surprise. A guy back home was selling a speed-parts business, and I found a way to pick it up. Even by then, I had become an observer of what seemed right and wrong in racing—and in business. I've developed some favorite sayings, and one is "the only way to be successful in business is to have a lot coming in and not a lot going out." That sure was working better selling parts than relying on race purses, so I backed down on my driving. Beitler Performance did real well.

Then, another opportunity sprang up: 2001, Skagit Speedway in trouble. I thought I could do a better job with the track and, after some negotiation, I managed to take it over. Over time we made huge improvements to the facility. I reinvested every dime I could. I was able to pick up a couple of cheap rental houses to keep the cash flow going.

There were serious problems with the facility itself. The surface was typical of the dirt here in the Northwest—full of silt and so hard to prepare. Eventually I found some good material down near the Gray's Harbor track, and we brought in 110 loads at \$1,000 each just for the hauling. But it was no question the biggest single improvement we ever made. The whole dynamic of the racing at Skagit changed. We also put in Musco lighting and a smooth guardrail so guys could slide along it without tearing their cars up.

The competitors were liking what we were doing, but we also put a huge emphasis on the treatment of the fans. I'm so passionate about it. All of our employees get my lecture: "Be the customer. When you come through these gates, what would you

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Layne Riggs
Speedway Illustrated
April 2019

want?" It should be right from the start—the parking attendant. They should say "hello" and be cheerful. The impression the fans get should be that they are going to a carnival. It's about fun. My business is actually called Funtime Promotions.

We also made major facility improvements for the spectators, something each year. One was definitely the bathrooms. My saying about that: "The man decides what track you're going to, but the woman decides whether you are going to go back." Bathrooms are just plain critical at a race track. Ours are bright, tiled, all with hot water.

Clean and healthy concessions are also key. After all, you go to a concession stand to eat food, not to get a disease. Our servers are uniformed and friendly.

Needless to say, especially in the earlier years, it was hard to fund all the improvements. I did that by reaching out to local businesses for sponsorships. I really worked that. Soon, like the fans and competitors, they saw how hard we were working and that things were turning around.

Back when Skagit was hurting, the management reduced their advertising to virtually nothing. As we began to grow, I ramped the marketing back up, but with a new focus—kids. Running a track is like running an orchard. Along with the harvesting, you have to keep planting. The old trees—and fans—no longer bear fruit and die out, and you have to replace them with new ones. My focus is getting five-, six-, seven-year-old kids to Skagit, so they will develop a lifelong habit. Honestly, I spend a good third of our budget on them.

We advertise on school programs and kids' Internet sites and we have all kinds of kids' promotions. For example, we go to football and Little League events and give out free tickets. And we give a family pass to the kids and their parents.

Even from back in grade school, I have been into numbers. I find that with the average person who comes through gate without paying for a ticket, you actually net \$4-5 for things they buy. So, putting families in the grandstands makes them happy, and you're making money. And we

give them special events. Our opening day Easter egg hunt will total around 11,000 eggs this year.

On our slowest night in the dog days of August, we have a candy night when drivers throw candy on the front stretch, and the green is thrown for the kids. One hundred and twenty-five of them receive Skagit Speedway backpacks for school. Then, at our big fall show, we've started giving away 50 bikes or so. That reached 256 last year.

The whole idea is to have the place seem lively and youth-oriented. We even try to play music on the PA that appeals to young fans. We constantly change banners and signage, all of which I do in-house along with our apparel and trophies to save money.

As for the show itself, it must run off quickly and be exciting. I really focus on the track surface. After all, if you don't give dancers a good dance floor, how can they perform to the best of their ability? You have to give the drivers a top, a bottom, and a middle. If the track isn't right, you've got to fix it. Mechanics tweak their cars all night, and so should promoters tweak the track.

Also, too many track—and series—promoters are much too caught up with speed. Twenty seasons ago, racing in the World of Outlaws was fantastic, even though it was two seconds slower. Racing has become single file because the cars are too locked down; passing is almost impossible. I've said for years we need a 4x4 flat top wing and some angle restrictions. We really need to put more back in the hands of the mechanics and drivers and get back to side-by-side racing. Actually, a lot of divisions—even stock cars—have aero problems and have lost sight of the fans' enjoyment.

These days I'm still an observer of the sport. I do lots of public speaking about it. What lies ahead for me? So many people have helped me that I want to pass along the torch. I really want someday to become a consultant to small tracks to keep them in business. I want my grandson to be taking his kids to the dirt tracks, just like my dad took me. ♣