

# Lynn “Preacher” Phillips

**PRESENTED BY:**



## *In His Own Words*

As told to **Lew Boyd**

**S**o, guess I'm no different from anyone else in Alabama, except maybe for my nickname “Preacher.” I got that in high school because I prayed a lot. You see I wasn't very good at basketball, and when we went to games, I'd pray we wouldn't get so far ahead that they would make me play.

But like everyone who reads this, I got hooked on racing. For me it was at a little dirt track over in Anniston.

I did some drag racing and on ovals, both dirt and asphalt. I worked for the government at an Army depot for a long time—27 years. But I can tell you that I really went to work after I got involved in promoting. That was in 1977.

A friend of mine, Alfred Gurley, took over a little 1/8-mile limestone motorcycle track. It had been successful, but AMA was beginning to look for bigger venues—like the miles—to compete on. Alfred had the vision that the



- *Born April 14, 1950 in Talladega, Alabama*
- *Award-winning promoter of the Talladega Short Track, adjacent to the Talladega Superspeedway.*

place could be enlarged for stock cars. It was really happenstance and luck that it sat right in the shadow of NASCAR's biggest superspeedway. It is pretty amazing that if you look ahead from the grandstand today you see I-20, a major highway, and when you look behind, you see Speedway Boulevard.

I got excited about it. In college I had studied retail, and one thing I remembered clearly was "location, location, location." I went to work with Alfred and two years later became a partner. This was no big shocker for my family. My wife, Jenny, sure knows about racing. Her dad was B.J. Parker, a great Southern promoter.

Alfred had a great eye. He enlarged the oval, carving it out as it is today. It's a competitive 1/8-mile—not a motor track, wide and easy on the rubber. We've got good clay we can harvest right on the property.

Alfred and I bought the facility in 1982. I did the announcing, and both of us worked on the track, which I still enjoy today. I am definitely a hands-on operator.

We pulled together a good nucleus of dedicated people and began making improvements each year. In 1989, we put in Talladega Raceway Park, a 1/8-mile track for go-karts off the third turn.

Things were going along well, but no one should discount racing's pain in recessions. Conditions turned really tough in the 2008 timeframe and for several years afterwards. I remember coming home at night distraught at how many tracks were being set back and how much competitors were being hurt by it. If they blew up or crashed, they couldn't afford to come back. Crowds softened. Fortunately, Jenny had been through this before. She was able to keep me positive when I wondered why in the world I was doing this.

It was also really hard when Alfred died in 2014. But our nucleus holds together still, and Alfred's widow, Louise, and her son, Mike, and wife, Rita, are still very much involved.

Even aside from recessions and other issues—such as our tower burning down



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**Quote Worthy**

**"I'm not racing to look cool. I drive a race car to pay the bills."**

*Billy Moyer Jr., dirt late model driver, Speedway Illustrated, May 2013*

*With all that racing going on each night, we run one tight schedule. Three-hour shows at the maximum.*

in 2015—during these last few decades there has been a major technical challenge in stock car racing. The junkyards in this country just ran out of full frames that guys could use to make their own cars, so racers had to turn to the custom-built approach. It got so expensive.

In the meantime, our Talladega Little Track was beginning to work for us as a feeder. Lots of families began bringing their kids there, and they began to work their way up to the ½-mile track. We were beginning to see more teenagers in the pits. But how in the world could they afford it?

We developed a new entry class called Hot Shots. It is a completely stock four-cylinder class, only safety modifications allowed. It is literally junkyard to track, and it worked. We've had as many as 60 of them in the pits.

That kind of moved street stocks up a class. It was appropriate because the name street stock is now a misnomer. They are no longer stock frames; they are purpose-built race cars. We try to control the costs, and the guys have a choice between a 602 crate or a limited engine of their own.

We added further steps up the ladder in speed—and expense. We have the 602 and 604 crate late model classes. We just now formed an econo-mod division, also allowing 602 crates and limited open engines. Then there are the sportsman-class cars, the stepping stone to the super late models.

Seven classes is a lot, but we wanted a balance—the affordable crates and the racy super lates. It seems to be working.

For example, we had a great kart racer named Brett Holmes. He worked his way up through crates and set records in super late models. He now is racing nationally with ARCA.

With all that racing going on each night, we run one tight schedule. Three-hour shows at the maximum. We run eight-lap heats—bam, bam. The features start by 9:30. We always run the super late models early so all the fans can see the fastest cars, and the Hot Shots go off last.

We try to learn always. I'm in constant contact with other promoters around the country, always seeking new ideas. Stewart Doty's RPM Promoters Workshops series has been really useful, and everyone in this business should engage.

Something that really worked is an idea Jenny's dad came up with—the Ice Bowl in January. Our 27th annual was this year. It's challenging, but we are just far enough south to pull it off. We've run Sunday features at 70 degrees and sometimes below freezing, but it's always been a great, crazy, crazy deal. We average about 300 cars. January 2003 was a blockbuster—403, from all over the country.

Last year we got lucky with something. After looking at 42 tracks, the producers of a major new movie, *Trading Paint*, picked us for filming. What an experience. It has John Travolta as the good-guy driver; Toby Sebastian, from *Game of Thrones*, as the bad dude; and Shania Twain to make it all pretty. They all really got into racing. You should have seen Travolta go in a car—and he never once spun out.

There were 80 people involved in the production, and they put 21 of our drivers under contract. I can't tell you how thrilled I am to be helping expose dirt tracking to so many people. It will be good for Alabama—and good for Talladega.

I have to say I am upbeat about the outlook for this season. I'd like to take the credit myself, but did you see how full the pits and the stands were at short tracks during Speedweeks? A lot of the promoters I talk to are more optimistic than they have been in years. The time is here. We're rockin'. 🏆