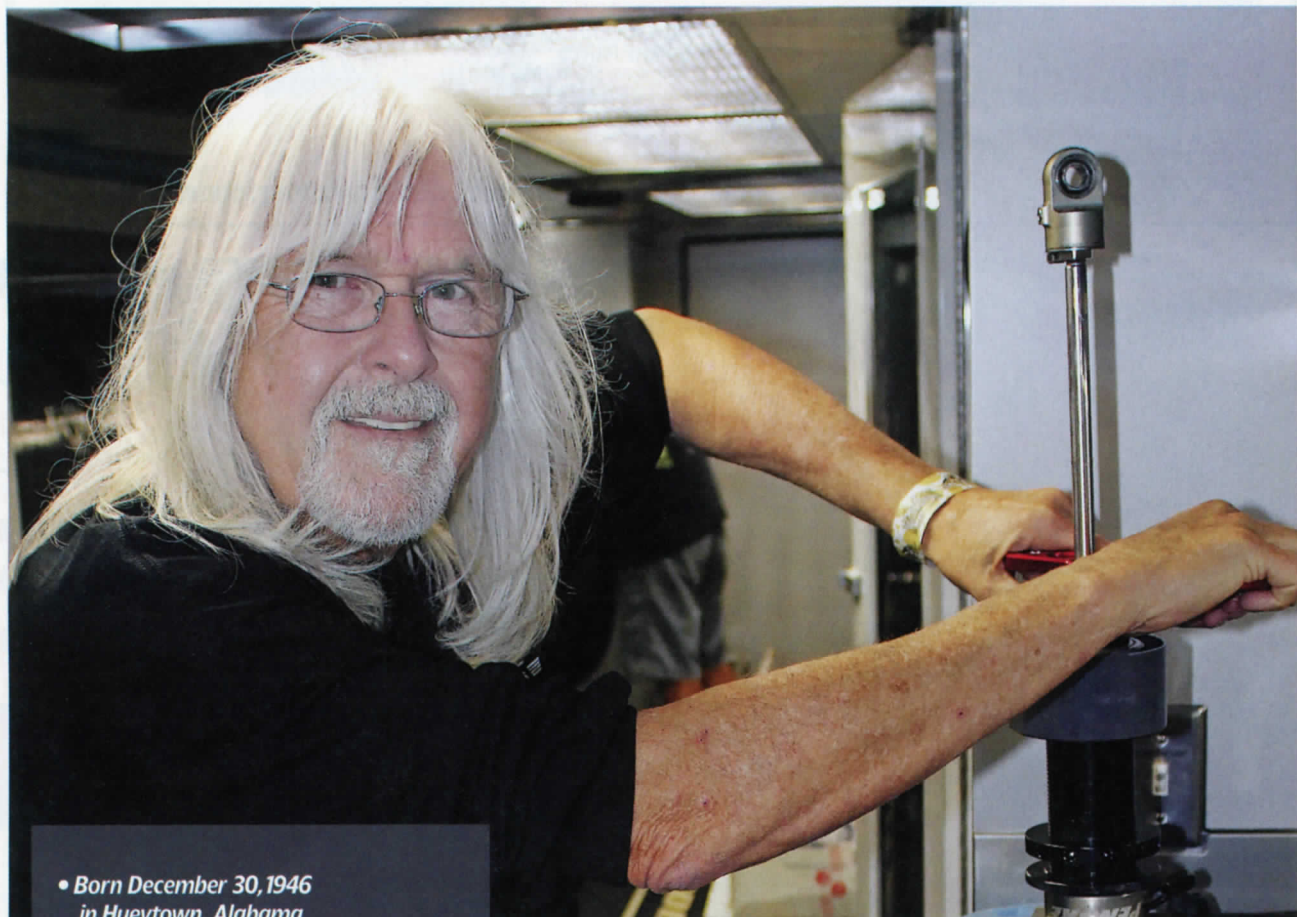


PRESENTED BY:

Ronny Crooks

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**



- *Born December 30, 1946 in Hueytown, Alabama*

- *Race technical representative, Penske Racing Shocks; NASCAR Cup Series championship-winning shock specialist*

- *A lifelong learner of the sport, who's seen the ins and outs of motorsports*

I was lucky. I'm from Hueytown, Alabama, and, as you can imagine, racing was kind of popular down there. I came along at the right time. I could start interviewing for a job in racing while in high school.

Hueytown, of course, was the adopted home of the Alabama Gang, Red Farmer, Donnie and Bobby Allison. Bobby was especially involved in the community—a new softball field, whatever was needed. He'd always come

around school on career days to answer our questions. The kids loved him, and you bet I asked him a lot. He really listened and answered. There was no question about what I was going to do with my life.

At age 19 I got drafted and when I got back, I met Lee Hurley at a race. He was an engine builder and tuner on the road with Bobby Allison. He started a race-engine shop. I went to work for him. It was unusual because so few guys back then were full-time on racing or with a company that relied on racing, actually making a living from it.

I learned a lot from Lee, not only about racing technology, but about communicating with people, about organizations, and the correct way to be a race car mechanic. You could say I was a student of the sport. I learned how important it was to learn. I was never interested in stick and ball. I was always racing, which was very complicated to me. I was fortunate enough to be able to work around knowledgeable and successful people. That helped *me* a huge amount and tended to make me look smarter than I may have been.

I was more of a generalist at first, learning how to do things the right way—how to fit in with a team, doing everything from sheet-metal work to overall mechanics. But, as it turned out, I spent quite a bit of time with motorcycle racing back in the 1970s and '80s and got to know my way around bike shocks. That soon would become useful to me. Surprisingly, bike shock technology seemed to be 20 years more advanced than the stock-car shock technology I was familiar with back then.

Then I got into NASCAR and superspeedways. Stanley Smith was hurt in a Talladega crash and had to cut back on his racing. His was the only full-time NASCAR team in the area, and that meant relocating, but I was sure that it was going to be my way of life. I went into it 100 percent.

I enjoyed working along the way with RCR [Richard Childress Racing], JGR [Joe Gibbs Racing], Bill Davis, and Stanley Smith. It was different at that time. Teams, drivers, and owners socialized together much more—it was fun times. Even then,

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Coated
13" & 15"

Matador
15"-17"

Small Car
11"

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Quote Worthy

"You have to be as good a salesman as a driver, and I would rather just race."

Bobby Pierce on the prospects of racing NASCAR, Speedway Illustrated, October 2016

it was seven days a week, four days working and learning at the shop and then three days racing and learning at the racetrack. For someone like me, racing is really about problem-solving. It was all so interesting—it consumed me.

Things began to change in the shock-absorber area around 1988, when Penske Racing Shocks was formed in Reading, Pennsylvania, to build higher-quality shocks for Indy cars and even some F1. Soon Penske went into NASCAR, especially after Derrike Cope's win on Penske's in the 1990 Daytona 500. At the time, other teams had been just using factory shocks like Monroes and Bilsteins.

By 1993, I was working with the HS Die team out of Michigan, owned by Harold Steele and driven by Tim Steele. I was free to experiment, to try to see what works and what doesn't. I guess you could call it early R&D. I began to develop shock curves. In a way, it was adapting motorcycle shocks to cars. These were great days for me.

Eventually I came back to the Southeast with NASCAR. I ended up spending nearly 15 years with Tony Stewart. I remember interviewing with Joe Gibbs. By 10 minutes into our talk, I could see that his passion was just as deep as mine. He's a learner. He wanted to win.

One day just sums up what racing was like for [Gibbs]. We were looking at a new shock dyno design Kurt Roehrig wanted to build. In return, we would be receiving the first updated production model when it was done. Joe asked me if I thought it could make us faster. I said I thought so, and he replied, "In racing, if there's something that makes a car faster, you have to buy it immediately. You will have to buy it eventually and you will just be that much farther behind benefitting from it or knowing how to use it."

No one else has ever told me that. Years later, even though I had left his team and was working for Tony Stewart's team, we bumped into each other at a race. He shook my hand, and said thanks for the years at JGR, and told me to call him if I ever needed anything. You don't see that all the time, either.

Then it was to Stewart-Haas from 2011 to 2014. It was fun being part of that organization together with Tony, Danica Patrick, Kurt Busch, and Kevin Harvick—and seeing Kevin win the championship in 2014 and Stewart winning in 2011. But, I got bored. Everything became so restricted, rules changed so often, and you had almost no impact on the car's performance.

I don't know what has happened with NASCAR. The 2008 economic downturn had a lot to do with it. NASCAR seemed to be going a different direction from the original fan base. Earlier, most NASCAR competitors were blue-collar guys. Red [Farmer] was an electrician. Neil Bonnett was a card-carrying pipe fitter. Harry Gant put roofs on residential homes. Dale Sr. was a factory worker. That was really NASCAR's fan base. You see people like that at the dirt late model races these days. That seems to be gaining in popularity. It would be nice if some promoters could understand this and maybe learn by it.

So, I went over to Penske Racing Shocks. To me dirt racing may be a blonde, drag racing a redhead, IndyCar a brunette, and so on. Once I started to work on drag cars, winged sprint cars, etc., I could see how different and complicated they all are. I was all in, fully involved, with a ton to learn again.

Right now, I am on my way to a \$50,000-to-win Lucas Oil Late Model Dirt Series race in Florence, Kentucky. I'm psyched. It's like the 1970s, '80s, or early '90s again. I feel that I can really have some impact, big or small, on how a car runs this weekend, and that's so neat.

I am still out on the road a lot of the time, happy, and have a good life. Rhonda takes care of the house, all the messes I generate, and the dogs. I'm not really sure what we would do if we had a real vacation, but it would probably be in Charleston, Savannah, Sonoma, or Napa Valley. You see, we have a nice wine supply. In fact, I would prefer a nice pinot noir or cab to a Bud Light. That's Childress' and Earnhardt's fault. They were really into it and I did a lot more sampling with them than I did on my own.

Now that I think about it, it ended up costing me a lot of money. 🍷