



MIKE GARVEY

In His Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- *Born on September 13, 1962, in Muskegon, Michigan*
- *Popular, entrepreneurial Mike Garvey raced his way out of Michigan to win all across the nation and become one of the most successful late model builders and drivers.*

All I ever wanted to do was to race, and you could say that's all I ever did. It started early. As a little kid, I was drawing pictures of race cars in school rather than paying attention, and by the time I was 11, I was handling all the tires. You see, my dad, who once raced, was flagging then and building and maintaining cars for Thunderbird Raceway in Muskegon—and they were fast. I was all over it, learning everything I could.

We were blue collar as could be. Thunderbird was dirt, and my dad liked that. It was before Howe cars, and they ran low-cost, home-built Chevelles. Often, though, we'd go up to Berlin Raceway in Grand Rapids and watch Senneker, Sweet, and those guys. I was in awe—it was like the Daytona 500 to me.

My mom insisted I finish school before actually driving. So I waited and waited and started the day after graduation. I won the first time out.

This was on Ludington Speedway's dirt, but, in the background, Port City Racecars had opened, and Harley Boeve was building these amazing asphalt cars for guys like Butch Miller. That was the coolest thing I had ever seen. I started hanging out at Port City and became a broom-pusher. Harley gave me my chance: He hired me as a trainee, leading to every aspect of building race cars. Right then I learned it's all about the people you meet. And I was willing to work, so I met a lot of people and would never have a job outside of racing.

One night racing at a dirt track a couple of years later, I broke the rear and was repairing it—in a mud puddle. I'm a clean freak, and I knew I was done with dirt. I built a nice clean pavement car, like the ones I was working on at Port City and started running Berlin and other local paved tracks.

It went well; I was winning. But I was so busy at Port City I could only race 10 or 12 times a year. I had become too valuable in the shop, and I knew I would have to leave there if my driving career was going to grow. I'd had to turn down offers to drive cars. So, I gambled and left in 1988. I had nothing lined up but I knew that somehow, I had to get South, closer to the action.

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It's funny how sometimes things come together. At a show at Nashville, after I qualified third, John Arnold, a Port City client, asked me to join him in Kentucky. I'd build our own cars, maintain them, and go on the road with the NASCAR All American Challenge Series. I was Rookie of the Year in 1989 and champion the following season.

We raced a lot, even in Busch. That didn't go so well, because I didn't have any experience in that kind of racing. On the short tracks, though, those four seasons with John were strong enough that my name began getting out there nationally. That time in Louisville was also significant because it set the stage for the next couple of decades. My life became one of accepting opportunities that came along with owners to build and run their cars. It seemed that I moved around the South about 10 times. If things didn't work out where I happened to be, I would just move on.

When I left for Kentucky, I had no help except for my good friend and honorary younger brother, Tony Barclay. He continued on with me to the next stop, a short one in Atlanta with Herb Murrath. We won the All American 400 at Nashville. But, better than that, I met Lisa Huffman, Miss Georgia World in 1980, and we married in 1992. One of our first dates was at Martinsville at an All Pro race. I was alone, so I asked Lisa if she'd score for me. She said, "What's that?!" but brave soul, off to the tower she went. I won, and she's been my scorer ever since. She's become highly sought-after by other teams as well. Meanwhile Tony set out and did really well, working with Jeff Gordon in a championship year.

Lisa was with me from then on. The next locale was Titusville, Florida, with LaWarre Racing. A highlight was setting quick time at Daytona in the Busch car. It was unlikely but fun. It's such a different kind of racing. When you are in a group of cars drafting it can be interesting, but it is almost lonely out by yourself. Though I would continue doing some superspeedway racing when opportunities arose, I knew by then that I really preferred the short tracks. The racing was so much more exciting—and the big advantage was that I could do it by myself with one other person. The teams necessary in superspeedway racing are so

complicated. If you lose one person, you are really screwed.

In 1995, I bounced back to Atlanta with Herb and then the Kevin Horton Homebuilding operation. I won three Hooters Pro Cup shows, was their most popular driver, and we continued up front in NASCAR All Pro. Then, in 1996, came a fortuitous race at Lakeland, Florida, with ASA cars. Iowa's Dan Hodges arrived with a new team, but it looked like they weren't going to qualify. I ended up in his car and led a bunch of laps. It was my start in ASA, the beginning of my best seasons ever. This form of racing really suited me. It was so professionally run. The money was good, there was TV, and sponsorship was readily available.

In addition to Murrath and Hodges, I drove for Gerry Gundersman, Scott LaFavor, and for the last three years, my brother-in-law, Bill Plemons. We had a total of 21 wins, more than anyone else, and I was voted most popular driver in 2003. Sadly, ASA was shuttered by 2005.

After ASA shut down, it was not feasible to continue short-track racing full time, much as I wanted to. The costs to compete were skyrocketing, while purses were going down. It was becoming nearly impossible to get by just driving short tracks. The bigger money was in the superspeedways, and by now Lisa and I had a son and a daughter, Austin and Megan.

So in 2006 I listened to a call from my buddy Barry Haeefe, who wanted to build a Cup team. The only way to get started was to do some start-and-park races, but racing not to win really got to me. Frankly it seemed degrading, and it didn't last. Meanwhile, it seemed everyone I talked to at those races, even guys like Jimmie Johnson and Matt Kenseth, would come up to me and want to talk about the short tracks. That was their roots, too. In any case, Barry shut the team down in August.

Of course, I was still racing the short tracks when I could, and 2006 was also the year I met the wall at Hickory, blowing out some discs. That cut into my driving even more. I was better by the next year and ran some races with Hooters Pro Cup. But I knew that Mike Garvey Racing was changing

its course. I began doing more and more consulting, helping teams with technology, building and testing cars, being a driver coach, helping other people become successful wherever they wanted to race. I worked with guys like Bubba Pollard, Matt Hawkins, and Ryan Crane.

In 2010, Ryan Sieg hired me as crew chief to get his Craftsman trucks rocking. Along the way, I often would start and park one of them. I actually ended up making 72 starts in NASCAR's top tiers—Cup, Busch, and trucks.

Even though I was not driving as much, I was just as busy as before, traveling all over the country to races—and even moving around to be close to the teams I was consulting with. It was a lifestyle perfectly suited to me, and I loved it. I am a strange kind of bird, in that I really loved to drive, but when I wasn't, I really could focus on the task at hand.

But any way you look at it, my way has been a selfish, a gypsy way. It might have been fun for me but what of Lisa and the kids? It was only workable because of the support of Lisa's family and mine. They both bought motorhomes and followed us

to the races. It was always a family affair. When your family is behind you, you can do anything.

The only time that was a challenge came in 2012. Tracy Goodson called and asked me to come down to Pensacola to build and run Late Models at Five Flags, at Mobile, and all over the South. The problem was that Lisa was back in Georgia and our son was finishing up high school. I went down, rented a condo for myself, and the families would get together on the weekends. Lisa and the kids soon followed me south, and we're still in Pensacola today.

I really love those super late models. I was doing quite a bit of driving again and felt so much more competent in cars I'd built myself. Then came 2014. I was racing at Montgomery and a throttle stuck. This time I did some major nerve damage to my legs and actually had to stop driving during a long recuperation. I've only been able to compete in about one or two shows a year since.

I'm concentrating now on Mike Garvey Racing's consulting business and building a fully equipped shop in Pensacola. I have no regrets. Sure, it would have been nice

to be financially set through Cup racing. But I've been having so much fun the last few years, working on late models from Oregon to Maine.

The best part of it is that I don't have to do marketing. I can pick the people I want to be involved with—I just wait for the phone to ring. When it does, it's usually a friend, and the relationship often lasts for years.

Occasionally something unexpected will come along, such as last year when I served for a time as crew chief on a DGM Xfinity car driven by Mason Filippi. But I'd say I have 10 to 15 regular clients. I really do feel lucky.

In March this year, I was "Guest of Honor" at the inaugural ASA STARS Tour race at Five Flags in Pensacola, where I had won the first ASA event in 1997. That was just my second time driving for Gerry Gundersen. I'd landed the ride after Matt Kenseth went with Robbie Reiser in NASCAR.

It'd sure be cool if ASA took off again. I'm 60 now, but feeling well. I'd like to bump up my driving again. I've always found that the more you race, the better you get. **FSW**

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