

# **VAN MAY**

## ***In His Own Words***

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- *Born August 3, 1950, in Seminole, Texas*
- *Prolific winner in sprint cars, character supreme, and wildly popular charter member of the Pennsylvania Posse, despite his Texan roots.*

I got into racing go-karts at eight back home in El Paso. Our dad was into cars with his repair shop, and my older brother Dub was becoming quite a racer. The local track was Horizon Speedway, a dirt third-mile. They ran the newer sprint cars, mixed with the older injected super-modifieds.

In time I got a hand-me-down super from Dub. I sure had my hands full keeping up with guys like Ed French and Dub, but when a hot outsider like Buddy Taylor came to town, he'd blow us all off.

I operated on the cheap, even towing with my dad's Jeep. I remember fooling around with it and almost flipping while doing mud-packing. I believe I actually won a race or two, but I wasn't really competitive. I didn't think of anything other than having fun, but, at the same time, I was really getting into racing. Then, in 1970, Horizon suddenly closed.

There is a lot of land in Texas. At most tracks there, there weren't a lot of guard-rails. If you got out of control, you could just run off the track. And if Horizon rained out, it was a long way to reach the alternative. Albuquerque was about 280 miles, and it was 600 over to Lanny Edwards' track in Mesquite. Needless to say, when we went there, the Jeep wasn't too good, so we used my mom's Caprice.

By then, Dub had moved up to Hanover, Pennsylvania, at the suggestion of Bobby Allen—they'd met at races out in Ohio.

With no place to race locally, I put a hitch on my Corvette—all I had—and took off with my car on a two-wheel trailer to join him. I was throwing fate to the winds, but I knew I could live cheap. And there were so many local tracks that I could run three or four nights a week.

Bobby's garage was something. He and Lynn Paxton worked out of the front part, and Dub and Jan Opperman out of the back. That left me outside, but I had access to tools and what I needed to get started. The fastest guys in Pennsylvania were right there, and I looked up to all of them. It worked out well—no grief with anybody.

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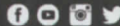
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Not that it was easy going. My springed sprinter was not up to bringing me the big money, but I was in a little apartment, and gas was 36 cents.

I didn't win until 1973. That came when Dub was hurt, and I jumped in his car at Williams Grove. Afterwards I built a coil car with parts donated by Walter Dyer. We won a ton of races with it. Things were looking up, especially when I went out to Ascot (California) for Turkey Night and met my wife, Lynn.

In 1977, actually the last time I raced my coil car, we won the National Open at the Grove. I thought we were the fastest, but I timed poorly and had to run the B-Main, which I won. It was a long day, but at lap 138 of the 150, I took the lead. People apparently went nuts, but that's not what I remember. I was into myself and kind of tickled to have won from the back. We did celebrate later, though, and would have done Bentley Warren proud!

It was \$3,000 to win, giving me the cash to take on the Western Open at Manzanita, near Phoenix. At a race at Albuquerque on the way there, I unloaded the coil car, and it immediately dropped a valve. It was done. I went on to Manzy and this time jumped into Opperman's car. He was supposed to drive, but was hurt. And we kept right on going out to the Pacific Open at Ascot.

The next year, I hooked up with Ben Cook for what seemed like forever. A major race was scheduled for the Syracuse mile for sprinters and Oswego-type supermodifieds. Lots of folks were nervous about it, but to me it was just another race—and fun while it lasted. But there was trouble, and it caught everyone's attention big-time.

Chuck Ciprich spun his super in turns one and two, and everyone scattered. I moved up, got into the marbles, and then the wall. I flipped along it very hard. The cage was ripped completely off. Somehow, I landed upright on all four. For a second I was dazed, but then I climbed right out. I realized it was a frightening scene, and except for that bit of good luck, it could have been real bad. To my way of thinking, though, it was no big deal. It was over, and I just drove home.

## *The biggest race I did win was an Ohio Speed Weeks finale at Zanesville for \$10,000.*

By the 1980s, the World of Outlaws was coming to Pennsylvania. It got to be a big deal because a Williams Grove official named Harold Lockwood came up with the marketing idea of a rivalry with the locals he labeled the "Pennsylvania Posse." Did that ever work!

And PA fans really loved it early on when the Outlaws got their asses kicked. You see, back then Posse guys like Lynn Paxton had the advantage of big blocks. I had an aluminum big block in 1984 with Ben Cook, and finally it seemed like I could beat anybody. If anyone bobbed in front of you, you'd just stand on it and fill up that hole.

The big blocks' advantage did not last long because WoO quickly reduced their allowable cubic inches, making them relatively heavy and lazy. I never actually won an Outlaws race, but I had some seconds and led one at Williams Grove right up to the end before dropping out. I always say I was able to beat all of them, just not on one night.

The biggest race I did win was an Ohio Speed Weeks finale at Zanesville for \$10,000. Racing is like gambling. At the beginning of the night, you never know how things will work out. When I won the National Open, I went traveling. After Zanesville, Lynn and I put a down payment on a house.

Steve Kinser obviously had the best record, with Karl Kinser's flyweight cars and monster motors. Wolfie was the same, and so was Sammy with the best of everything. But to me, it's much more amazing what Kyle Larson has done—with nothing trick in his car, same as everyone else, with those new weight limits. I think he's the most fluid, adaptable driver there's ever been.



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I had a tough crash at Port Royal in 1985. After a fuel stop in the Tuscarora 50, traffic jammed up on that narrow frontstretch. I rode a wheel, flipping wildly and taking out the starter's stand. I knew I was hurt. My collar bone and forearm were busted, but it looked much more serious because I had some bleeding from the mouth. That earned me a helicopter ride.

Big wrecks like Syracuse and Port Royal will happen. It's not your fault. You just have to ride them out. It does bother me that I will be known forever for those two crashes. I suppose sometimes I ran faster than I should have, but I won some races in cars that shouldn't have. It will all come down to this: People who liked me will have their version, and those who didn't will say what suits them.

What really changed my life, though, came in 1987 at age 37. Coming back from Syracuse, we popped into Selinsgrove. We had removed the rock screen on the mile because it made my helmet buffet in the wind, and hadn't yet reinstalled it. I don't know what hit me there—a rock, a part, but my eye went black. Before I even got to the hospital, I knew I was blind in one eye.

You have to keep moving on. I knew I was screwed as far as more racing was concerned, but, once again, at the same time I was feeling lucky. Earlier in my career I hurt an eye at Eldora. If it had been the good eye that I injured this time, I would really have been in trouble.

I've learned to deal and have pretty much a normal life. I dabbled as a car owner for a while and in 1994 developed a tool for rear-end work on open-wheelers. I've sold thousands of them at the track and elsewhere.

My wife, Lynn, and I still go to the races. I'm also restoring that coil car I built myself and won the National Open with. I have to admit, though, that sometimes with this eye situation I just know a little bit less about what is going on. I have to turn my head a lot.

I don't think I'd be a very good taxi driver. ☹

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