

PRESENTED BY:



Wanda Knepper

In Her Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**



- Born February 22, 1937 in St. Louis, Missouri

- A pioneering race car driver's wife, mechanic, and fan club activist.

Arnie Knepper was an old-time, hardheaded Dutchman. He and I married in 1955. He was 25; I was barely 18. He supported us, we had food on the table, we had no debt. But Arnie was a racing addict, and I became an all-in enabler.

Arnie was narrowly focused and didn't think his wife should have to work, though I had a job. A couple months after our marriage, I went on vacation and never went back. Arnie did, however, think it was perfectly okay if I worked for *him*, especially when he found I could be

useful in the garage. He was actually a good teacher. He thought I could do anything that wasn't too heavy. Soon I was changing gears, oil, and tires. He even got me filing down Offy valves when we revved them too high chasing those Sescos. I didn't want to think about my fingernails at that point.

We were racing mostly midgets and sprint cars, and before long I was out of the stands and into the pits—sometimes sneaking in and laying low until it got dark. I never wanted to cause a commotion. I was always very careful walking so I didn't surprise anyone, especially some guy who was peeing.

We ran all over, even after my children, Peggy, Art, and Tina, were born. In a way, they were enablers, too. Art often says there was no basketball growing up. When a friend would call and say he wanted to come see the race cars, Art would wonder why. Art assumed every family had race cars and that every kid was polishing mag wheels on the stand his dad had built.

It was fun, but finances were tight. We did what we had to do. We'd often travel all night. One night we stayed in a run-down hotel in Kansas that had just one bed and one dresser. The kids slept in the dresser drawers.

But we got by, and I began to understand the whole system. Sometimes some of the women would say something to hurt my feelings, but I had no problem with the guys. I realized that one night when [midget car owner] Bob Higman offered me a chew going into the pits.

In 1967 Arnie got burned really badly in an Indy car at Langhorne [in Pennsylvania]. He was initially treated in Trenton, [New Jersey,] but it didn't go well with infections. USAC and Firestone moved him down to the San Antonio clinic that had taken care of Jim Hurtubise. That was tough, but it couldn't hold my Dutchman down for long. He was back in Nomex by the end of the season.

Actually, Indy in 1972 had the greater impact on the family, even though we didn't make the show.



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Quote Worthy

"Come out of the grandstand and join us ... you don't need to maintain the most beautiful car on the planet."

Karl Fredrickson, Speedway Illustrated, March 2013

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

With a friend we had bought a Weinberger Homes Eagle for the race, and there was a lot of work to do. It had to be stripped down to bare bones. However, Arnie had been hired by Champion Spark Plugs to travel three weeks a month and preach highway safety to high schools around the country. The light was shining on me, so I had to amp up.

First I went to welding class so I could stitch parts together in the proper place so when Arnie came home he could finish it up and make it pretty. Then I went up to Alton (Ill.) Airport to learn from airplane guys how to pop rivet panels. And a friend came by to teach me to strip paint and do body preparation. As you can imagine, Arnie called every night to see what progress I was making on the list he left.

The Champion program ended April 10 so the teacher/drivers could go to Indy. We had no mechanics, so Arnie filled in "W. Knepper" on the application and told me I was going into Gasoline Alley. I said, "Fat chance! I'm going into the stands with the other ladies to gossip."

Well, he won that argument. When we walked into the office to get our pit passes, they checked everything and, [referring to another family member,] asked, "Okay, where's Walter?"

Arnie, leaning casually on the counter, responds, "Walter who?"

They point to the paperwork. "The Walter here."

"No, that's Wanda. She's standing right here."

The officials ooed and aahed. They whisked off into the corner. USAC officials always have to be in a group. They huddled, looked at each other, looked at us. They knew they couldn't refuse. They knew me, knew I had the proper licenses, and knew I knew racing—and they knew society was changing.

Finally, they came back and said okay, but there will be regulations.

First, I couldn't go to the pit-area men's room. "Sure," I said. "I'll go outside the pits. Most of the guys won't use that men's room anyway!"

They said I couldn't go over the wall,

and I responded that was reasonable—for right now.

Then they said I had to leave the pits at 6:00 pm. Every night a cop came to get me. That's when I had to sit by the restaurant and watch the pit lizards—the girlfriends the drivers snuck into the pits.

So, I became the first woman officially in Gasoline Alley. The next year, of course, it was a little more open. But even when Janet Guthrie came to drive five years later, there was still no powder room.

The actual racing turned out to be a disaster. We blew before qualifying, and it busted us up pretty good.

After that, Arnie left his mechanic jobs and began teaching at a vocational school. It was a pay cut. Christmas was coming, and May's Department Stores opened a new store nearby. I secretly applied for part-time work, but they hired me full-time. When Arnie found out, the crap hit the fan, but I stayed. It was hard because retail is so big on weekends.

Art and Tina's and Peggy's boyfriends would help Arnie when I couldn't. We concentrated more on the local midget circuit until Arnie got cancer. He worried that the medication might impact his judgment, so eventually he hung it up. He died in June 1992.

Things had changed by then. I never liked the Speedway stuff. I enjoyed the old IMCA sprint car days when we traveled like a gypsy caravan and everyone looked after everyone else. Then there was the USAC midget era, touring track to track together. On an off night the whole back row of a drive-in movie theatre would be full of midgets. Or we'd go to a swimming hole. And you could always tell who had been there from the towels and bathing suits hanging from the trailers in the pits.

But by the 1970s, the money was really pouring into racing. Motorhomes split up our community, and cars began to be locked up in enclosed trailers. Closed instead of open. And attitudes became more protective and competitive.

It was the sponsor money. It took the bloom off the rose. ☹



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