

JIM LOWREY

In His Own Words

As told to Lew Boyd

- Born April 27, 1960 in Lowell, Massachusetts
- Jim Lowrey is different. A respected, personable, and uniquely talented entrepreneur who built a highly prized auto-restoration business serving domestic and international customers. Amazingly, at the same time, as a self-funded racer running only on weekends, he's won in every major open-wheel division in the Northeast.

I'm probably better known for my restoration business than my racing. It's been a major balancing issue. I don't want to think how many big races I missed because of car shows I had to attend.

My dad had a body shop in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and was very active in local racing. I was there every day after school and I've continued working on cars all my life, first for Dad and then myself. Right away I preferred restoration and beauty over collision repair. At 14, I restored my first coupe in the garage at home.

When Dad sold the business in 1987, I switched to restoration full time while Dad stayed involved as an engine builder, specializing in his full race flatheads. Things went well with the business, and my wife and I soon bought an old farm in Tilton, New Hampshire, and reconfigured several barns for work areas. We've done hot rods, roadsters, high-end collector cars, everything—and won at national shows in California; Detroit; Hershey, Pennsylvania; and Amelia Island in Florida. A lot of our referrals came from word of mouth and, curiously, from racing, especially after I restored two dry lakes roadsters for Kirk White, a Penske team member. I have four employees today, and we're flat out with domestic and international orders.

To get back to racing, in my school days, Dad always had race cars he traded. I was fascinated. He'd let me try them out, getting the feel for them, in parking lots until the police chased us off. Then he bought a midget to campaign, and I studied the racing very carefully, especially the styles of Dave Humphrey and Nokie Fornoro, who was so aggressive. We won the 1981 Northeastern Midget Association title with Lee Smith at the wheel.

At that point, everyone knew how much I wanted to drive that midget, and Dad let me hop in. Somehow, it seemed strangely familiar. I thought I could do this. My first win came at Hudson, New Hampshire. Telling myself to be smooth, I managed to hold off Drew Fornoro for many laps. Surprised, Drew congratulated me saying, "The second win will come harder." The very next week we ran Unity, Maine. I got out front again, Drew hot on my tail, and he did sneak by at the end. I walked over to

congratulate him, commenting "Yup, the second one *will* be harder."

We won races over a ten-year period but no championships, because work prevented traveling to distant events. I knew I wanted to continue racing, but I also was determined not to be 60 and known only as a midget driver. It was totally unrealistic, but I actually considered going to Pennsylvania on weekends with a sprint car. Instead in 1988, Dad and I ended up with a used Clyde Booth big block supermodified. We reworked it and I made it beautiful.

It seemed I'd already made a thousand laps in legendary Ollie Silva's car, I watched him so intently from the grandstands. I loved his technique and I'd learned about the outside and about being just a little loose. The sensation of speed just wasn't an issue for me as long as the car was right. I learned a lot about the technology and setups from Brian Allegresso. I worked all winter with him building a super I was supposed to drive; he has *no* idea how closely I was watching. The driving deal fell through because of money, but we were ready for wins and a track championship in our own car in 1990.

I began to realize I was really lucky about something: I was a natural athlete—basketball, baseball, whatever. I used to love pitching because on the mound I was in charge and I would get into what they call "the zone." The same thing began happening in race cars, giving me total concentration—and confidence.

We were asked to take our super to a Goodyear tire test at the seriously high-speed mile-and-an-eighth in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, along with other types of cars. This was no quarter-mile, but after a few laps, I was comfortable, even with the car dancing a little on those straights. We were two seconds quicker than anyone else.

I didn't wreck often but one night I got sideways in the super and bounced off the wall. A seat brace badly bruised some ribs, and by the following Wednesday, I was still in bed. I asked Dad if he was fixing the car and told him I wasn't sure I could race that weekend. He said, "No problem, I'll put someone else in the car." Well, that really got me going. That Saturday, they



Of all the divisions Jim tackled, he was most successful in big block supers. (Jim Lowrey Collection)

had to load me into the super, but we won the feature.

Poor Dad. I got a wandering eye again and thought I should try out an asphalt modified. As usual, I found the best used one I could, rebuilt it, and, of course, made it shine. I found, unlike some stock cars, open-wheel chassis were usually well built.

We were quite successful, but our most memorable contest wasn't in a real race. At the time, there were jam-packed vintage events held on the mile at New Hampshire Motor Speedway. I would take the modified to the track, but just to see how fast I could possibly go rather than dally around. So did Ray Evernham, who brought one from New Jersey each summer.

We kinda got competitive. The third year we challenged each other to a match race. Good thing I'd had that time at Nazareth! The two of us went out solo, and all I can say is we trusted each other. Apparently, everyone stopped what they were doing to watch what have been called some of the most exciting laps ever at Loudon. I will leave it to Ray to say who was quickest.

One Friday night off we went to Canaan, New Hampshire, a little clay track. I saw those open-wheel dirt modifieds and thought it would be cool to get one and do some racing in New York and Pennsylvania. I bought a Bicknell, but sanity settled in and we just ran locally.

My first lap on dirt came there at Canaan. I took it into the turn as I normally would and ended up off the track in a field. I figured I'd have to do something different... I leaned on a clever guy, Dennis Douville, for advice about the setup, but I realized

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE



Jim Lowrey rehabilitated and burnished this once-weary sprint car from Si Allen, went right upstairs, and was soon in victory lane. (Alan Ward)

finding the edge on dirt was more complicated. I believe it requires a natural instinct about the car beneath you. You have to keep adjusting your approach until you find it—and then try to extend it. It took me six weeks to win one.

Then, wouldn't you know, one night the SCONE sprint cars showed up at Canaan, and stirred me up again. We soon got one, and I listened and learned from Donnie Kreitz and friends like Lynn Paxton we had met at car shows in Pennsylvania. I just loved those sprint cars and was comfortable in them immediately. Sprinters felt just like midgets. Wins followed.

At that point I knew there was one more open-wheel division I hadn't tried. I went to see Bobby and Eddie Witkum; Bobby is a master builder of small block supers, and I told them I really want to win in one. We got together, struggled a little at first, but soon landed in victory lane at the Ollie Silva Classic on the pavement at Lee, New Hampshire.

My final run came in the sprint car at the dirt track alongside New Hampshire Motor Speedway, but soon after that something rocked our world. Our beloved four-year-old granddaughter died. I knew what the family was going through and that they were concerned about my racing, especially now that I was concentrating on sprint cars. I felt I had to quit.

Every day I get to thinking how much I wish I could have been a professional race car driver. I'm 65 now and know I could still be competitive, but I'm careful to change the subject.

We've got that huge backlog of cars to make beautiful. **FSW**