

JON BACKLUND

In His Own Words

As told to **Low Boyd**

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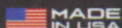


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- Born September 21, 1940, in Kansas City, Missouri
- One serious racer wrapped with a seriously joyful cover. The very definition of a utility driver, Backlund performed all across the nation for an unimaginable number of owners, winning championships in midgets, sprint cars, and stock cars. He's a member of the Central Auto Racing Association, Big Car Racing Association, Belleville High Banks, and Knoxville Raceway Halls of Fame.

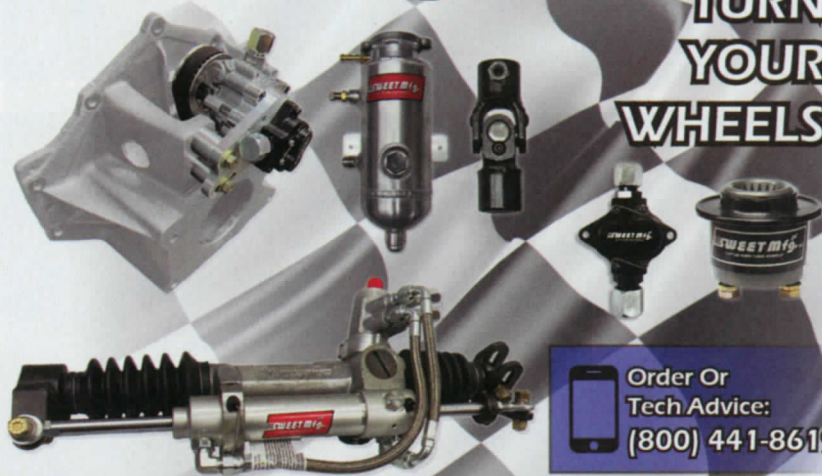
Guess I just couldn't get enough of it. If you include everything like demo derbies and vintage races, I've run in eight decades and won in seven.

In 1965, I got my first open-wheel win at Olympic Stadium in Kansas City. Now that was something. What a fabulous place, the best college in the world if you wanted to be a race car driver. There were 50-60 open-wheelers in the pits each week. It was a fifth-mile dirt, fast cars starting in the back. You learned how to drive in traffic in a real confined space. If you did that, you could be competitive anywhere. I honestly believe that, if you start your career on dirt, pavement will come easily to you later. It takes a while. In my first open-wheel season, I flipped four times. But, you know, I was willing to drive it hard enough that the guys began to give me rides the next year.

In 1968, Kenny Weld moved over to Pennsylvania, and Pappy Weld put me in his Supermodified. Man, did I ever get hurt over at Saline County in Marshall, Missouri. When I got to the hospital, I didn't know if I'd fallen out of an airplane or what. With a broken back and a severe concussion, my worst racing injuries ever, they said I couldn't drive a race car for a year. They were right. I found I couldn't even drive a road car.

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Quote Worthy

"Our formula at Speedway Illustrated is simple. We respect short track racers."

Karl Fredrickson, Column
Speedway Illustrated
September 2012

Over the years, I did manage to win the first night out for 12 different owners. [Historian] Bob Mays says I drove for 200 different guys. I think it was a lot more.

When I finally got back to racing, Pappy let Jay Woodside go and put me back in. Damn, if I didn't get messed up going into the turn, almost wrecking it again. Then I realized what had happened, both times. You see I was a little bigger than Kenny, and I was smacking my head on the roll bar when I pitched it. Pappy did widen out the bars for me, but I was spooked by that car by that time. I went on my way. So did the car. It's in the Knoxville Museum these days, back with the narrower cage.

A guy like Ray Lee Goodwin was good—real good. He drove good machinery and he was careful about that. I wanted to drive so badly that I got into anything that had four wheels. I was the designated driver, waiting for someone to get hurt. I never had the huge success of a Greg Weld or a Roy Bryant, and I think I actually became kinda known as a driver of bad cars. But I raced a lot for a long time. I always had to find jobs that would let me go off and race. And I quit a couple of real good ones 'cause they didn't. Heck, I even worked once for Mike Edwards, Carl's dad, as a VW mechanic. Mike had some truckin' VW race cars himself. Over the years, I did manage to win the first night out for 12 different owners. [Historian] Bob Mays says I drove for 200 different guys. I think it was a lot more. Sometimes I'd drive for three or four guys in one weekend. But, when I drove for myself, I was awful. I couldn't see because I was always looking at the gauges.

One of my favorite days came at Belleville [Kansas] in August of 1971. I was running for the Big Car Racing Association title, driving the old Joe Saldana roadster built by Don Brown. I damaged the front end

warming up. Then Harry Ivers, out from Denver, offered me his car, and we won the slow heat. And surprisingly, we were able to go on and win the B feature. Then, really surprisingly, the guys had the roadster back in shape for the feature, and I won in that.

Silver Crown, modifieds, late models, I drove them all. But I liked the midgets the best. You wrestle a stock car, drive a sprint car, but a midget you slip on and it becomes a part of your body. Bill Darnell had a midget that was my favorite. I drove it for 10 years. Never wrecked it, never flipped. Just one bent nerf bar. There was something magic about it. I won the first night with it and the last night on the same date ten years later.

Kenny Schrader and I went down to Florida to race one year. We both had rides but not really even enough money for the gas to get down there. We stopped at a motel one night goin' down. It was Kenny, his wife, and me. Kenny slept in the middle.

Darnell was something. He paid me 40%, 50% for a win. We could just scrape by. He made everything himself. Filled tubing with sand and bent it up right in his garage. I wish we'd run some USAC shows, but he had no interest in buying a fuel bladder. He had a Chevy II, but had a box on the front of his open trailer. He kept an Offy in there. One time at Winchester it was 35 degrees out. We blew up warming up because we didn't get the engine up to temperature. Bill actually changed engines between warm-ups and qualifying. I pulled out, though. Winchester was the only track that intimidated me.

Gosh, we raced everywhere. Very often three or four nights in a row in different states. Coast to coast. Sometimes we'd have chartered flights. Sometimes things were

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Racing is what saved me. I just had to be a driver. I had to excel at something. I've had a lifelong desire to please people. I found that if I ran well, I pleased the owner, and I pleased the fans in the stands.

But of all the places we went, I have to say Belleville remained my favorite destination. I loved those high banks and the speed. My first time there was in a cageless sprint car, and I pulled down a fourth. That gave me confidence for the future. And over time, the folks there were always so supportive and enthusiastic, helping out with places to stay or whatever we needed.

Back when I was growing up, my dad, my hero, used to take me down to Riverside Stadium in Kansas City. Somehow it grabbed me immediately. I was horrible at school work, and everyone was saying I would never amount to anything, so I grew up with real low self-esteem. Racing is what saved me. I just had to be a driver. I had to excel at something. I've had a lifelong desire to please people. I found that if I ran well, I pleased the owner, and I pleased the fans in the stands.

I loved racing so much—the adrenalin rush, the speed, the wins—that it became more important than life. The one form of racing that I wanted to try but never did was Can-Am. Some time ago I came across a burned-up Kelmark Engineering chassis and front end, and I spent 25 years building it up—for the street. I went everywhere with it. I have to admit that, as well as for racing, I have a deep affection for the fairer sex. I'm fairly widely known for my habit of kissing ladies' hands. I was very pleased that this car pleased them, too. 🙌

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